

GUIDELINES FOR PLANNING NARGS MEETINGS

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STARTING OUT

Your chapter may be thinking about hosting a NARGS national meeting, either a Winter Study Weekend or an Annual General Meeting. There are many reasons to do this: well-planned meetings can be a financial success, adding funds to the chapter's coffers; the process of planning a meeting can bring chapter members together in new way, sharing ideas and goals and camaraderie that is quite different from simply attending chapter meetings. It's a period of excitement, as well as responsibility, and NARGS will do all it can to help - beginning with the following guidelines, collated from many different meetings.

Hold a preliminary meeting, with a working committee comprised of chapter officers and a few experienced NARGS members. There may be members who are no longer able, or willing, to lead another meeting, but can contribute ideas and knowledge to the initial planning.

The type of meeting to be held will dictate the dates; the Annual General Meeting will depend on peak flowering, in gardens or the wild. While the NARGS Bylaws still say that the AGM is held in May, the date can easily be changed by the Administrative Committee. Try to avoid major national holidays (Memorial Day or July 4), and work closely with the President when establishing the dates for the meeting.

Winter Study Weekends have become fairly flexible lately and can be held anytime from late January through March. Since there can be Eastern and Western Study Weekends, check with national to avoid conflicting dates.

Be aware of other local events, like large conventions, home sports games, etc., that might impinge on availability of hotel rooms, buses, and air flights. On the other hand, a local event, even one that is not plant-related, before or after the NARGS meeting can act as a further draw to prospective attendees.

The working committee can decide on the format or theme for the meeting, or leave that to the Program Chair. The number and kinds of services (raffles, sales, breakout sessions, shows, exhibits, etc.) will likely depend on the volunteers who can be recruited. The first publicity and sales job will actually be within the host chapter to raise the level of involvement and recruit workers.

Subsequent planning meetings will take place in quick succession, as the outlines of the plans take shape. Later meetings can be called as needed, with committee contacts made chiefly by email.

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POSITIONS of RESPONSIBILITY and VOLUNTEERS

Ideally, every chapter member should be involved in some way, either before or during the meeting. Volunteers can be recruited by the meeting coordinator or the various Chairs. Inducements can be in the form of reduced registration fees for those who take an active part in the work leading up to and/or during the meeting. There can be general calls for help, and opportunities for volunteering, and sign-up sheets, etc., but the most effective means of recruiting is by direct communication between Chair and prospective helper. The Chair can then define the job clearly, and answer questions.

After initial discussions, the working committee of the meeting should be comprised of the following Chairs (where appropriate to the meeting), under the general management of one leader:

- Programs
- Audio-Visual
- Treasurer
- Registration
- Hotel negotiator
- Hotel liaison
- Transportation
- Field trips
- Garden visits
- Pre- and/or post-conference trips
- Sales
- Displays, exhibits
- Printing

Publicity

Raffles, door prizes, other giveaways

Master of Ceremonies

Some of these jobs can be combined and handled by one person, others may be handled by a volunteer working under another committee chair. The chairs, in addition to being responsible for particular jobs, should also be a driving force and cheerleaders to keep the spirit of excitement and cooperation high through the long period of preparation.

The overall Coordinator of the meeting should be someone who is not only well-organized, but has attended a number of NARGS meetings. Prior meeting- or program-planning experience within NARGS or other organizations is a definite plus. The Coordinator/Chair should be able to delegate responsibilities and then maintain contact with all other chairs to see that no detail is overlooked. While it is important that the Chair not be a micromanager, it is equally important that s/he have a good understanding of all the jobs that must be completed.

While every member of the host chapter should be involved with the meeting in some way, not every volunteer needs to be a chapter member. Volunteers can be recruited from the entire NARGS membership as well as other organizations. Thanks to email, people outside the chapter can be tapped for jobs such as soliciting donations for raffles, treasurer, even registration. Any registrant can be recruited to help before or during the meeting for set-up, raffle-selling, monitor, or any of the myriad of limited but important jobs that help a meeting run smoothly. There is a long precedent of non-local NARGS members acting as field guides. Local wild/native plant and hiking or botanical societies are also good sources for field guides and knowledge of local sites.

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PROGRAMS and SPEAKERS

In planning the program, strive for a coherent theme relevant to gardening, and preferably one that is broad in scope to link all the lectures and workshops. A theme helps to determine the speakers and subjects for the meeting, and often convinces would-be registrants that, yes, this is a meeting worth attending. Brain-storming sessions are fun and useful, and can be held with previous chapter program Chairs, experienced growers, knowledgeable field botanists, and people with contacts in the wider horticultural community.

The theme for the meeting can be dictated by the local and regional flora (where the meeting consists mainly of field trips), plant cultivation (where the meeting will be based upon garden visits), a concept (plant exploration or new methods of propagation). Or, with well known speakers, the meeting can consist of a gathering of diversified experts, who will speak on their subjects without a unifying theme - in a "something for everyone" approach. Offer a good mix of hands-on workshops or other learning

activities of broad interest. If some of these workshops can be done by people who also give talks so much the better; it adds to the practical bent and increases the cohesiveness of the meeting. The program needs to be settled fairly early, so that the hotel negotiator will know what spaces and services will be needed.

NARGS meetings have followed roughly the same format over the years, but feel free to make changes to attract new attendees. However, also understand that changes will be attractive only if they are perceived by old hands to be of equal or better value. Cutting back on lectures, trips, or other events may make the price more attractive, but will not draw registrants if there is a perceived lessening of value-for-money. A full schedule of interesting events and speakers will be the best attraction, but also make sure that people do not feel rushed, vendors have ample open time and everyone has enough free time for socializing.

For field-based meetings (wild or garden), at least two full days of trips are a minimum. Winter Study Weekends generally have lectures beginning on the Friday evening and running until noon on Sunday. Simultaneous break-out sessions on the Saturday (one or two such sessions) can add variety to the program and appeal to more prospective attendees. As an alternative, one of the break-out sessions may simply be time to explore the surroundings (in the case of field-based hotels), shop the sales rooms, an expanded social hour, or the sharing of attendees' own photos.

Topics for lectures are as varied as the lecturers. However, everyone seems to have strong dislikes, whether the "single genus" lecture, travelogues, or home gardens. Be sure to have a variety of formats, even when using a common theme, to entice and engage as much of an audience as possible. Controversial viewpoints (in botany, systematics, or horticulture) can shake people up and get them talking.

In choosing speakers, reach for the experts in each field. Recognizable names (local, national, or international), with firm reputations for speaking and impressive resumé's will draw the crowds. Add new (but well-vetted) speakers for spice. And introduce a couple of your very best local experts, to save on some costs. Whatever the mix, it is important that the program be of the highest quality, and a qualitative jump over general chapter meetings. International speakers must naturally be fluent enough in English to get their information across, and interact comfortably with the audience. A pleasant speaking style and voice will help keep the audience rapt.

Following discussions with prospective speakers, a contract should be drawn up and signed by the speakers and the program chair. This should include:

- date and location of the meeting (and, if possible, the specific date/time of the presentation)
- agreed-upon topic/title of the presentation
- specific AV requirements (computer or slides, number of screens, type of microphone, laser pointer, podium, light); other props (tables, easels, etc.)
- assistance (for demos)
- honorarium (usually based upon the current NARGS Speakers Tour fees)

- meals and transportation
- other assistance (host home before/after meeting, ground transportation to and from the airport, etc.).

It is essential to be clear about what perquisites will or will not be covered to avoid misunderstandings. Full or partial registration (e.g.: meals) may be extended to spouses and domestic partners of the speaker, depending on how much they plan to participate in the meeting (as opposed to shopping or golfing); the hotel room will obviously be shared.

For speakers traveling across time zones, allow at least one full day of recovery before their lectures. Ask local members to act as hosts, even if the speakers will be staying at the hotel, providing transportation from the airport and general help and companionship. Such hosts may escort the speakers to local sights and open gardens during the extra day or two before the meeting. This is especially important for an international visitor, or someone traveling alone. A comfortable, rested, well-received speaker is more likely to give a superior presentation.

During the meeting, the Program Chair may also act as Master of Ceremonies. It is interesting to have additional NARGS members do the introductions and closings for each speaker. Choose someone with links to or, at least, good knowledge of the speaker, who can add some personal (colorful) touches to what can often be a dry, standard introduction. The introducer should also add a sentence or two at the conclusion of the speaker's presentation, to thank him and, if appropriate, ask for questions from the audience. To make things easier for the speaker and audience, the introducer should (if possible) repeat the question. At the conclusion of the question period, the introducer should lead the audience in another round of applause. This closure is very important, so that the speaker leaves the stage feeling appreciated.

Where there are multiple simultaneous break-out sessions, an introducer could be used in each room, or the speaker can introduce himself informally. However, there should be someone in every break-out room to assist the speaker, work the lights, move items for a demonstration, etc., in addition to the AV tech support. It may be preferable to write a script for the announcer, including cues for raffle sessions and "housekeeping" announcements.

As important as it is for the speakers to feel well-received, it is equally important that they stay on schedule, in consideration of following speakers and to work smoothly with the hotel staff that is planning meals. From the outset of discussions, the Program Chair should make clear to all speakers (through discussions and through contracts) the exact time allotted for their presentations, and whether that time will include a question-and-answer period. During the presentations, it will be helpful to the speaker (and reassuring to the audience) if the Chair or introducer quietly announces to the speaker that he has five (or ten) minutes remaining. Another reminder at one minute will allow the speaker to gracefully bring the lecture to a close.

If the speaker seems uninclined or unable (as occasionally happens) to conclude his remarks, the introducer or Program Chair should be prepared to step in, with deference and charm, and say that the remainder of this (no doubt fascinating) presentation can continue at the conclusion of the program (perhaps in the after-hours session), so that the other speakers can give their presentations and/or the meal can be served on-time.

After-hours programs: these should be well planned, with participants signing up on the registration form, online anytime, or at the meeting registration desk. Costs for AV equipment can be minimized by using the large lecture rooms from the evening program, or the next day's breakout session for smaller groups. For a large turn-out, either schedule a second room (budget permitting) or a second night (Friday and Saturday). Set a clear limit on time and/or number of images and have a chapter member on hand as host, tech-support, and time-keeper.

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AUDIO-VISUAL

Since slide and computer presentations are the heart of our meetings, having the right equipment and knowledgeable technical support is all-important. An experienced chapter member should head this committee and be available during all presentations.

At the outset, the AV Chair should work closely with the Program Chair, to determine the exact AV needs for every speaker and every lecture, workshop, and demonstration (this information should be included in the contracts with the speakers). For break-out sessions, there will be multiple sites to consider. For every event and room, list:

- size of the room and audience, and arrangement of chairs;
- position of the projector: front, middle, or rear of the room;
- position of presenter: front, or with the projector;
- need for stage and/or podium;
- need for light source, for the speaker with written notes;
- projection screens: number, size (pull-down screens are larger than portable ones), and placement;
- number of slide projectors and carousel trays;
- number of computer projectors and computers;
- number and type of microphones: mounted on the podium and removable, battery-operated wireless mike, or a combination of both (do not turn on both at the same time, in order to avoid painful feedback);
- pointers: plain or laser;
- any other technical equipment that the presenters require.

Also consider having a preview room, with a set-up of slide and computer equipment, so that the speakers can do last-minute run-throughs of their presentations and familiarize themselves with the equipment. Other items for the presentation: tables for demos or panel discussions, easels, etc., will be negotiated with the hotel rather than the AV provider.

Speakers presenting digital photos should send a CD of their program to the AV Chair well in advance of the meeting so that it can be tested on the equipment to be used. This can be especially necessary if the program was prepared on a Macintosh computer.

An important part of the contract with the AV provider is the stipulation that someone from the company be present at all times during the presentations, with back-up equipment and technical support (you may wish to provide a meal for that person, for good will).

Be aware that, because of the decreasing use of slide projectors, equipment is no longer being updated and replaced, so it would be wise to have one or two functional machines of your own on hand. It wouldn't hurt to have extra laptop computers, as well.

Once the AV needs for every room, during the entire meeting have been ascertained, the AV Chair will contact the hotel's in-house AV personnel and/or send out a request for bids on the contract. Choose the organization with a good price and a willingness to be supportive. Once the contract has been signed, stay in touch with the AV providers and let them know of any changes in required equipment or room set-ups. Closer to the meeting time, contact the AV provider and go over the schedule and AV needs for a last check.

During the meetings, the AV Chair will work closely with the AV provider. Extra help from chapter volunteers will also be necessary, for small but crucial jobs such as manning light switches (lately, a more complex system of programmed dimmers), adjusting focus, changing carousels, rescuing jammed slides (tweezers), or whatever needs doing.

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BUDGET

Depending on how early a Treasurer for the meeting is recruited, either the Chair or the meeting Treasurer will establish a budget for the meeting. As this will determine the registration fee, the budget needs to be completed and sent to the NARGS Treasurer about 12 months before the date of the event. The Treasurer will provide detailed comments regarding the budget based on previous experience. Once the Treasurer approves the budget, NARGS will underwrite any losses incurred by the hosting chapter, provided the hosting chapter follows the budget. The treasurer of the hosting chapter (or other person responsible for monitoring the study weekend or annual meeting budget) will contact the NARGS Treasurer as soon as possible should any unforeseen expenses arise that cannot be covered in the original budget. The NARGS Treasurer will work with the hosting chapter to resolve the budget problem.
(See Financial Policies, below)

There are many items to be included in this budget, including per-person costs, such as meals, and larger overall costs to be divided among the registrants, such as speakers, field transportation, audio-visual, and general hotel costs (not including the sleeping rooms, which are never included in registration fees).

Not all of the following items will apply to every meeting and some costs are negotiable, but all possible costs should be considered:

Program: Speakers' honoraria (often based upon the current NARGS Speakers Tours fees), speakers' transportation (including ground transport to/from airports), speakers' hotel rooms and meals - before and during the meeting.

Administrative Committee: cost of registration for five members; possible fees for hotel meeting room for AdCom and Board meetings. NARGS will reimburse the hosting chapter an amount equal to the cost of meals for the AdCom members that attend the meeting. The remainder of the registration costs will be borne by the hosting chapter.

Audio-Visual services: usually a flat fee from provider. The chapter may be able to provide some of its own equipment and tech support.

Meals: some may be optional, and not included in registration fee, such as first night dinner and breakfasts. Coffee breaks and reception (cocktail) hors d'oeuvres should be basic, until the break-even point has been reached. Be sure to include box lunches for field trips, whether provided by hotel or an outside source. State and local taxes, gratuities, and other fees will add a good 25% to the base prices given by hotel, and must be considered when estimating meal costs.

Miscellaneous items: Telephone; printing (registration flyers and brochures, meeting programs, plant lists, signage for hotel, buses); badges (more expensive than you think); meal tickets; mailings; tables (provided by hotel, at a cost); table centerpieces, giveaways (in registration bags, at dinner tables); meeting room rentals; bartenders and ticket sellers (cocktail hours); raffle tickets; plant inspectors (may be waived by state); credit card charges; easels and signs. Some of these costs may eventually be covered by donations, but that may not be known until after the budget - and registration fee - is fixed.

Field trips: Transportation (buses, vans, chase cars); box lunches (include lunch for all drivers, guides); Park entrance fees; fuel surcharge; first-aid kits; bus signs; extra supplies of water/juice, snacks, plant lists; guide identification (bandanas, badges); possible guide payments (or reduced registration fees).

Be aware that there is a \$25 surcharge for non-NARGS members, but only for the Annual General Meeting; Winter Study Weekends are exempt from this additional fee.

With the recent decline in meeting attendance, break-even points are being set at lower levels. Consult with the NARGS Treasurer for recent attendance history, and decide on

a realistic projection for number of attendees. Using this number as the break-even point will yield a reasonable registration fee. Using a lower attendance number will yield a slightly higher fee, but the break-even point will be reached sooner, allowing a possible upgrading of some items, like expanded coffee breaks and hors d'oeuvres, wine with dinner, more giveaways, etc.

The working committee must make a decision on what to expect from chapter members and key workers in terms of meeting registration. Some host chapters expect that workers will pay full registration, others offer a break in registration fees.

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HOTEL ROOMS AND SERVICES

Contracting with a venue for the meeting is of paramount importance and should be one of the first things completed. Venues can be as varied as a full-service hotel, conference center (with integrated or nearby housing), motel, inn, etc., depending on the format and needs of the meeting. Winter Study Weekends (WSW) will be almost entirely held indoors, on-site, so services must be of a broad range. Catering and Audio-Visual (AV) are especially important. The venue should be easily accessible by public transportation (especially considering the vagaries of winter travel). With the exception of a summer meeting held in the mountains, the venue should also be accessible to alternative goods and services, and not placed in a remote location, like an industrial park. Rooms must be clean and comfortable, at a minimum, with in-room wi-fi and coffee makers a plus. While registrants do not come to the meetings for the food (as we often have to remind ourselves), tasty meals do enhance everything else.

Annual General Meetings (AGM) feature or incorporate field trips, so less time is spent on site. These spring/summer meetings should be at a hotel as close to the field trips as possible, or centrally located in terms of the gardens to be visited. Travel time on the buses should be minimized for the sake of economy and the boredom of participants. Transportation to the hotel from airports and trains is a consideration, and free and frequent airport shuttles are helpful. Other things being equal, a venue on the mountain is preferable to a standard hotel in a city, since that adds a great deal to the ambiance, and gives participants something to do when lectures/trips are not scheduled – or as an alternative break-out session (which can save costs on programming).

The hotel negotiator should be someone who has prior experience and skills in dealing and negotiating with hotels. This need not be the same person who will later be the coordinator/liaison with the hotel. In fact, there is a case to be made that the negotiator can drive a harder bargain if he does not need to worry about continuing contact with the hotel.

Ideally, initial contacts with prospective hotels should be made two-to-three years in advance. The best way to clarify the planners' thinking about the needs of the meeting

and to communicate those requirements to prospective venues is to write a Request for Proposal (RFP).

A cover letter, introducing NARGS and the chapter should give generalities about the type of meeting to be held and includes all contact information (name and title of the chapter contact person, address, email, phone, fax). A clear timetable should be given: the exact date by which the hotel's response is required (including preferred format: email, phone, written); when chapter representatives plan to visit; and when the choice of hotel is expected to be made. Briefly outline the aim of the meeting, and how many yearly meetings NARGS has held and for how many years. Give specific dates of the planned meeting, possibly with alternative(s), in case there might be a lower-cost proposal for a different date. Estimate the expected attendance.

The RFP itself is based on the programs and other events that are planned, and should outline the specific requirements for:

Meeting rooms: plenary, break-out, storage, Board, display
(and how many to be securely locked)

Sleeping rooms:

- single or double occupancy; single or double-bedded rooms
(many attendees like to share rooms to share costs)
- king-, queen-, double-sized beds (how many rooms of each)
- rate per room or per person
- preferred rate (or range of rates)
extend both sides of meeting dates, for early arrivals
or late-stayers (both of which will help meet the room quota)
- room amenities: wifi, coffee-maker, safe; handicap-accessible

Meals: breakfast, coffee breaks, on-site lunch, takeaway box lunch,
cocktails (pay bar), hors d'oeuvres, dinner

- format: buffet, served, butlered

AV capabilities, specifics for each room and time (if to be provided by
hotel, as opposed to outside vendor)

Parking accommodations

Transportation to hotel from airports, bus/train stations

Inquire about:

Age of hotel, most recent renovation, planned renovations

(which can either enhance or interfere with meeting);

Other meetings that will be held at the hotel around those dates, and their expected attendance;

Length of service of current management and/or ownership;

Contacts for 3-5 other organizations of your size who have held meetings at the hotel in recent years.

The RFP can be sent to as many hotels as seem appropriate, but not all hotels contacted will be interested in submitting a proposal. Of the responders, at least 3 should be visited before making a final choice. The hotels' sales staffs should be willing

to spend ample time with the chapter representatives, answering questions, conducting tours of meeting and sleeping rooms, and inviting them to a sample meal (at the time or a future date). Check the type of basic rooms that NARGS attendees will actually be using, not top-of-the-line rooms and suites that the hotel would like you to see (and use).

Hotels base their prices for meeting rooms on the amount of other hotel services that will be used and the “room nights:” that is, the number of sleeping rooms used by the participants over the length of the meeting. Use of the hotel’s banquet services will generally offset the cost of rentals for the meeting rooms. Additional needs include tables (many more than you realize) for the sales rooms and registration, possibly AV (if in-house is available), signage, easels, water/glasses at meetings and lectures, etc. Prices for as many items as possible should be locked in at the time of the contract-signing, or with caps to the percent of increase. Some costs are fixed and non-negotiable, like service charges and taxes, but others are open to negotiation, and a chapter representative should work with the hotel to achieve the most attractive and affordable overall package. It should be understood that the hotel will need to make its profits somewhere, so that driving down the room costs too low will only result in other charges being raised or added.

For meetings involving all-day field trips, remind the hotel that the meeting rooms are available during the day, for rental to other groups. Try to include all foreseen needs during the negotiations, as later additions and changes will likely come at a higher cost.

When negotiating specific items, formulate a specific plan with alternative approaches. Be organized, and do not bargain for the sake of bargaining. Have a good, solid rationale for your counterproposal, backed by statistics whenever possible. Be honest and do not distort facts. Be respectful and pleasant, but be firm. If you, as negotiator, are armed with good data and a reasonable, logical approach, you will be more effective in your negotiations.

A standard perk given by all hotels is extra sleeping rooms or suites (“comped”) for a number/percentage of rooms booked by registrants. Basic minimum is one comped room for each 50 booked room nights, but this can be open to negotiation, depending on the economic climate. Room rates can be per-person, or the same for single and double occupancy. Make certain that all registrants’ rooms are counted toward the total, whether the reservations were made through the hotel or a third-party online service. The hotel can provide a list of all people with reservations, and this should be checked against the meeting registrar’s list. The number of comped rooms should be based on the total number of nights booked for the entire meeting, not on a per-night basis, as this will change through the length of the meeting. Parking rates can be another negotiable item.

Lecture rooms should have adequate sight lines, including a ceiling high enough to accommodate a large projection screen (no lower than 13 feet).

In planning meeting room needs, remember that a room will be needed on the first day for the Administrative Committee in the morning, and the Board meeting in the afternoon.

The negotiated price for sleeping rooms should be available for a few days before and after the meeting. This is one advantage to using a hotel in the mountains, where registrants will often check in a day or two early, in order to acclimate to the altitude, adding extra room nights to the tally. There should be a sufficient number of two-bedded rooms, as many attendees share rooms to reduce their costs.

Registrants should be encouraged to stay at the meeting hotel; it enhances their own feelings of participation and camaraderie, and adds to the revenues for the meeting, which can (once the minimum number of registrations and reservations have been met) be turned back into extra lagniappes for attendees themselves. In this regard, the mountain/woodland venue offers an advantage to the meeting planners, as there will be no other nearby hotels to lure registrants away.

Attrition clauses: Most hotels will require that the booking group guarantee that a minimum number of rooms will be booked and a minimum amount will be spent on meals. The room number is negotiated up front, and the meeting must usually meet 80% of that number of rooms, paying for the number that were not booked. However, the penalty can only be incurred if the hotel has not otherwise filled all its rooms. So have someone independently check (by calling and inquiring about room availability) to see whether the house has been filled. This needs to be done on each day of the meeting, since hotel may fill one night and not the other(s).

If, by the opening day of the meeting, it is obvious that the room quota will not be met, book one or more rooms and use them for Hospitality suites - either as a place of respite for the speakers, or for use of the attendees in general. The rooms will have to be paid for under the attrition clause, so the meeting may as well enjoy their use.

Guaranteed minimum banquet expenditures will be met by the registrants' meals and coffee breaks. Failing an adequate registration to cover these food costs, the group is still responsible for the whole sum. However, since the money will still have to be paid to the hotel, the remaining amount due should be spent on additional perks for the meeting-goers: expanded food offerings at meals, coffee breaks, and cocktail hours, or wine with dinner.

Consider drayage and storage facilities and charges. Find out what it might cost to move materials into and within the hotel (especially for plant sales), whether the hotel will accept materials that are sent ahead of the meeting (books, raffle donations, etc.), and whether secure storage for items not in use will incur costs (a good possible use for those extra booked rooms).

Negotiate credit and payment policies. Never settle for a contract that requires you to pay on-site, at the close of the meeting; you will be too distracted to go through the

master account with the necessary detail. Give yourself at least two weeks to pay so that you have the time to review the master account carefully.

When negotiations have been completed and a contract covering all possible items is proffered, have it read carefully by more than one person, to be sure that every Chair will have his needs met, and all verbal agreements have been recorded. Additionally, have the contract checked by a lawyer (preferably a NARGS member or spouse, who will do it gratis). In the interim between signing and the meeting, chain hotels may be sold and it is wise to be sure that the new owners will honor all the terms of the original contract. Major renovations may take place during this period, and it is important that these changes in configurations do not negatively affect your meeting spaces.

Typically, the hotel will place a number of rooms on hold for NARGS registrants, with a cut-off date. This is different from the guaranteed contracted minimum. After the deadline, unsold rooms will be returned to the hotel's pool and late registrants will simply have to take their chances that the hotel will not be fully booked.

After the contract signing, stay in touch with the hotel and the various managers. This will keep the relationship friendly and informal, and will also keep the chapter apprised of any changes in staff personnel, which happens on a fairly regular basis in the industry. A clear line of communication between the meeting Chair and the hotel staff is necessary, and all involved (including meeting chairs and workers) should know that all requests to the hotel (for services, items) must go through the meeting Chair.

Hotel services, in general:

Before and during the meeting, the conference Chair should have contact information for all the heads of the hotel departments, and be able to reach them – or a delegated substitute – at all times. Since staff does not work seven-day weeks, a well-run hotel will give the conference Chair the schedule of staff workers during the meeting, and their cell phone numbers. On the other hand, it should be made clear to the chapter conference workers that only the Chair (or a designee) can make requests from the hotel, as some requests will be outside the contract and incur additional costs to the chapter.

Banquet Services

Meals will be arranged with the Catering/Banquet Manager. The hotel will provide a sample list of available meals, snacks, hors d'oeuvres, beverages, etc. with prices that are current, but not necessarily guaranteed for the time of the meeting. Firm prices will be offered a year (or less) in advance of the meeting dates. Because meal costs must be estimated early in the planning, in order to prepare the budget and set registration fees, it is very often possible to decide on a cost for each meal and have the chef prepare menus that meet this budget. To estimate costs at the time of the meeting, use current prices as the base and build in at least a 10% per year increase. The contract can also stipulate that meeting costs will be no higher than X-percent over current prices.

Hotels will accommodate a fairly wide range of special dietary needs, with advance notice: diabetic, gluten-free, vegetarian to vegan, nut-free, etc.. The vegetarian meals should not simply be the regular meal without the meat, but include a substantial protein substitute. (Some way to identify those needing special meals must be agreed upon with the banquet manager). A choice of entrées for dinners is often offered, and these should be included on the registration form.

Buffet vs. served meals: Each has advantages and drawbacks. Buffets can offer a wider variety of options for selective eaters (although some diners will take portions of everything). However, unless enough serving stations are provided, there can be a long wait time and some diners will finish before others have even begun. This method works best with smaller groups and/or simpler meals (soup-salad-sandwich lunches). Served meals are more formal – for the Saturday banquet, for instance – and diners are served as a group. This is especially important where there is a tight schedule: before a full afternoon of break-out sessions or an evening with the NARGS business meeting and/or awards.

Some meals may be optional, to bring down the costs of registration. Usually, the first night's dinner is optional, to accommodate late-arriving registrants. Breakfasts can be anything from Continental to a cooked buffet, but most people can manage with something in-between. This meal, too, can be optional, especially for a full breakfast; but see that a coffee/muffin bar is available somewhere in the hotel for those who cannot begin their day without caffeine.

Determine what may be supplied from outside. Occasionally, hotels will allow chapter members to bring in extra touches that it cannot afford to purchase from the hotel: home-made cookies to accompany the hotel's coffee/tea at registration; fruit/flowers in the speakers' rooms, table centerpieces (the hotel may offer votive candles at no charge).

One issue that is slightly unique to NARGS requirements is early breakfasts, especially for an AGM with early departures for field trips. Six a.m. is not too early. Even during Winter Study Weekends, hotels may not be prepared/ or equipped to handle two hundred breakfasters between 7:00 and 8:00 a.m. Breakfast may be optional in the registration package, but many registrants will appreciate a having a small continental breakfast available for a lesser fee, in the lobby or convenient to the meeting rooms.

Not all meals will necessarily be taken at the hotel, especially for meetings based on field trips. Box lunches are a fixture of the field trips and may be part of the contract with the hotel, or purchased elsewhere. While a slightly better price for the box lunches might be available from other sources (local shops or organizations), be certain that the meeting will otherwise use the hotel's catering for enough meals to cover the free meeting rooms.

Closer to the time of the meeting, further forms - the Banquet and Event Order (BEO) - will be filled out by the chapter's meeting or banquet Chair. The BEO requires infinite

details about every event (lectures, snacks, break-outs, meals, etc.) that will utilize the hotel's facilities and services. Be prepared to consider the needs for timing, seating (number and style of set-up), AV specifics (if provided in-house), food and service, etc. Inquire about receiving a sample page of the BEO early in your planning; it is helpful in planning details. Hotels will provide guidance and help in preparing these documents; it's in their interests, as well as yours, to see that everything is provided and runs smoothly.

A pre-conference meeting at the hotel, the day before registration begins, is often required by the hotel, and always helpful. The hotel will bring representatives of each department (sales, front desk, banquet, AV, security) to this meeting, and the host chapter should send its major Chairs. At this time, all scheduled events are reviewed, details refined, questions resolved. This may be an appropriate time for a show of good will, offering the hotel managers a small NARGS- or meeting-related logo-ed gift.

Master Account:

This is the account of all goods and services provided to the meeting by the hotel. Be sure to have only one (at most, two) person(s) who can authorize any expenditures. Make this clear to the hotel and to all the chapter organizers and workers. The hotel will certainly be used to this procedure; the workers may not. The Master Account is, in effect, a running tab: it begins with the contracted items, but generally grows throughout the meeting as afterthoughts or new needs arise. The hotel can provide a daily print-out of the Master Account - especially for longer meetings - and the hotel liaison should inspect it every day.

Settling the Account:

The contract with the hotel should stipulate that final payment is not due for two (or more) weeks after the close of the meeting. This will give the coordinator, hotel liaison, and treasurer time to carefully study the bill, which will be based on the Master Account. This bill will itemize, for each event, all goods and services used by the meeting. Be sure to ask questions for any items that look unfamiliar: hotels can make honest mistakes and will quickly rectify them.

Front Desk:

The front desk is the first point of contact between the hotel and meeting registrant, beginning with initial reservation and continuing through check-in. It is helpful to both sides for the chapter's Registrar to have early contact with the manager(s) of the front desk to inform them of your group's arrival times, the negotiated room rate, room block size and closing date, and any special needs.

To simplify the meeting registration process, all registrants should be required to make their own hotel reservations, either directly with the hotel, via its toll-free number, or online. Meeting registrants may occasionally find better deals for the hotel through an online booking service (Expedia, Hotline, etc.). There should be a written understanding with the hotel that all rooms reserved for the meeting - no matter how they were booked - will count toward the room-night tally.

It would be helpful to have a display board near the front desk to direct registrants to the meeting registration area.

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TRANSPORTATION

Where group tours or field trips are an integral part of the meeting, chartered buses play a large role in the success of the meeting. A firm contract should be negotiated more than a year in advance, so that the costs can be factored into the budget. In order to deal with the bus company, clear plans are needed regarding the field trips: routes, mileage, timing, alternate access, alternate trips; number, size, and types of buses needed; and other variables. In order to arrive at that information, field trip planners need to make trial runs, to establish best routes and length of time it takes to complete the trips.

Bus rates are based on door-to-door costs: from the time they leave the garage until the time they return to the stable. It is best to use a bus company that is as close to the meeting site as possible. Factor in the time needed for boarding the buses, at the hotel and in the field. There are always laggards, forgotten items, misunderstood directions. This can be compounded by multiple stops, as in garden tours. Buses can also get lost, especially on garden tours through city neighborhoods. Although it may be the driver's fault, it will be the NARGS chapter that pays. Be sure to have clear maps and directions; a GPS would be very helpful.

Parking space and turnaround clearance for buses should all be checked beforehand. This information should be equally well understood by the bus drivers and the bus captain.

The contract should clearly state the date(s), price (including the cost of unexpected overtime), responsibility for lunch for the driver, and where the bus will be waiting during field trips (as near to the field site as possible, in the event of evacuation, due to weather or other problems). The bus company should be requested or required to list NARGS as an "additional insured" on its own liability insurance. Any additional afterthoughts, not included in the contract, should be set down in a letter to the company, with an initialed copy returned to the chapter and kept in its files. Payment is generally in the form of a deposit to accompany the signed contract (to hold the price, dates, and buses), with the balance due shortly before the tours. Determine whether the costs are firm, or whether a fuel surcharge will be added sometime in the interim. It's doubtful that it could be adjusted downward, in the event of lowered gas prices, but it doesn't hurt to ask.

In determining the number of buses needed, figure that the average bus holds between 44 and 48 people. Extra seats will be needed for guides and the bus captain, and possibly trash bags, gear, reference books, etc.

If possible, charter buses with toilet facilities and air conditioning. Do not count on finding facilities at the trailhead (or even along garden tours, except for emergency stops at gas stations). Every bus should have a chase car, to ferry any passengers who cannot continue on the trip. Bus captains and chase cars should both have cell phones. During trial runs, check cell phone reception (minimal in remote field sites) for all areas covered by the trips.

The buses themselves should be equipped by the host chapter with maps, details of the itinerary, routing (including possible alternatives), and parking areas. The bus captain and guides should all be familiar with this information. In addition, upon boarding at the hotel, there should be a first aid kit, box lunches, snacks, water and other drinks (a copy of the contract might be helpful), extra copies of the plant list (participants will lose/forget theirs), reference books and field guides.

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PUBLICITY and BROCHURES

There are now two types to be considered: print and electronic.

Print material: Printing can be done in-house by a chapter member or by a commercial company. In either case, it is important that the copy, graphics, and layout look professional and well-executed. Expectations are now higher, and non-profits and plant groups can no longer expect to get by with poorly-designed and amateurish efforts; we are competing with all other events for the same discretionary funds. Where possible, use chapter (or other NARGS) members who are talented and skilled in graphics to help in the design and layout of the several pieces that will be necessary: advance flyers (distributed at the same meeting in the prior year), registration brochure (paper and electronic formats), meeting booklet/program, plant lists. The more work that can be done by the chapter in preparing and refining the publicity pieces before they are turned over to professional hands, the less expensive the final costs of preparing and printing.

Gather as much information about the meeting as possible from all committees: programs, field trips, catering, sales, pre- and post-meeting activities. Refine this mass of information down to the most essential, in order not to overload the brochure. The web page for the meeting can host all the remaining information - with colorful images, as well.

Registration forms – both printed and online – should contain clear information about the activities: lectures, speakers and/or trips, vendors, plant shows, auctions, hotel information and links: Anything that will both attract registrants and help them plan their trip.

If you are hoping to attract overseas participants, be sure to send out this information (or post it on the web) at least a year prior to the meeting. Overseas vacationers seem to plan much further in advance.

To find a professional design/print company, check references from other groups, examine the results from other events, and get quotes on your brochures and other print materials from several sources. Consider not only the cost, but the company's reputation and track record for reliability. The work will be done on a tight deadline for the meeting booklet, which contains programs and participants that can change up till the last minute. To get their best price, let the printers know that they could be used for multiple jobs: flyers, registration brochures, meeting program book. Give an estimate of how many of each item will be needed. Do not hesitate to play one company against another: If your preferred printer does not offer the lowest price, take the lowest bid to him and ask whether he can meet it, or offer other services in compensation. Check with the company currently used to print the NARGS "Quarterly;" with all the other work done for NARGS, their price may be very competitive. And since they will ultimately be inserting the fliers into the "Quarterly" for distribution, the cost of shipping the brochures to them can be saved.

Then, work with the printer closely, giving him a final count for numbers as soon as possible, especially if a special paper stock is requested. Get a clear schedule from printer, so that your copy arrives on time. Be sensitive to the printer's own time constraints; every one of his customers considers their printing jobs as important and urgent as you do.

Check with the NARGS Executive Secretary to determine the current number of members, in order to estimate the number of brochures needed. In addition to printing enough to go out with the "Quarterly," you will want to send additional brochures to each chapter, for display at their local meetings and for those chapter members who do not belong to national. (Non-NARGS members are welcome to attend national meetings. There is an additional \$25 fee for non-members, but only at the AGM, not for Winter Study Weekends.) The Executive Secretary will also need a supply, to send with new member packets, and for the inevitable number who lose theirs.

The Bulletin Board section of the NARGS "Rock Garden Quarterly" is the best way to reach all members. The deadlines for the four issues are the first of February, May, August, and November. Anyone wanting to submit meeting publicity must contact the Editor before having the pages prepared, because there are certain limitations on what can be handled in terms of file types, and you must be specific about the exact size when sending pdf files. Also, there are certain kinds of graphics that do not reproduce well. The Editor can also give advice on how to lay out the information pages and the tear-out form.

Electronic: The meeting web page on the NARGS website will be as key to drawing in participants as anything else. It is here that you can offer the maximum information and details - while keeping it well-designed and concise - along with images of the field trips, gardens (taken during advance planning trips), links to the key speakers and vendors (their own websites for academics and/or nurseries), other local events of interest, and links to the hotel's site for publicity and reservations. Closer to the meeting time, daily schedules, menus, and other details can be added. Schedules are important to the

registrants, and should be posted (if only in rough outline) as soon as possible, to help them to plan their travel.

Contact other area/regional organizations with like interests: botanical groups and institutions, wild/native plant societies, garden clubs, arboreta, nurseries, horticulture schools, etc. Invite their members to participate in the meeting. To encourage these possible new members, the meeting planners may wish to offer a day-only package for field trips, covering just the cost of the trips and lunch (without hotel meals, activities). These organizations can be found on the web, and the information on their own website should be used to draft a letter sent directly to the contact person, with the name of the organization embedded in the message. Impersonal blast emails are generally disregarded as spam, if they even make it through the junk mail filters. NARGS members may also give talks to local garden clubs and other societies that share common interests to entice their members to attend. If people are on the fence about attending or have questions, this direct contact can be very helpful. Local radio and community-access TV stations can be used to spread the word.

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REGISTRATION and RESPONSE PACKETS

Following the Registration brochure, the Registrar is the first person with whom a prospective registrant may have contact. If s/he is contacting the Registrar, it is because there are questions about the meeting, so the Registrar must be knowledgeable about every aspect of the meeting (programs, field trips, gardens, menus, hotel, etc.) and be patient and willing to deal with questions that might seem to have obvious answers (why didn't s/he read the brochure?!) or might be difficult to resolve.

Keeping track of registrations and relevant information is most important, and a spreadsheet is probably the best way to assemble the information reliably and succinctly. Key elements are the name and all contact information (including email), field trip choices (in order of preference, where there are size limits to the groups), meal preferences (where options exist), break-out choices (in order of preference), membership status (where non-member fees apply), amount paid (where it varies based on options).

Resign yourself to the fact that there will be mistakes and misunderstandings - on both sides. Careful, current records can help smooth glitches, as can patience and apologies (warranted or not). This is a job for someone with the mind of an accountant and the heart of a social worker.

There will be cancellations and requests for partial registrations: establish policies well ahead of time for dealing with both. For the first, set up a schedule for refunds, with criteria to be met and percentage returned (based on date of request). For partial registrations, decide who will be eligible: conference workers, chapter members,

registrants in general, vendors. It will be necessary to consult the budget and work closely with the treasurer, to determine the real costs for various portions of the meeting (meals, trips, speakers); a small penalty “tax” may be added to partial registrations.

The response to all registrations should be a packet of information, real or virtual. In addition to all possible information regarding the meeting, it should contain a hotel brochure (or link), plus items and events of local interest around the hotel area. Work with the local Chamber of Commerce and Tourist Board. Expanding the number of area attractions enhances the meeting itself as a draw, and as worthwhile spending for the (often limited) vacation budget.

For meetings with plant sales, clear information should be supplied for Canadian/overseas attendees who wish to carry/ship plants home. A brief run-down of the process and costs of obtaining a phytosanitary certificate at the end of the meeting will be helpful. These registrants will also need to learn their own countries' import regulations, and whether they will need a permit to import plants and/or seeds.

This is also the time and place to state requirements for clothing and/or other hiking safety items (especially footwear) that should be brought to the meeting, along with optional suggestions for hiking comfort. Enforcement of these requirements are at the chapter's discretion, and a policy should be formulated.

Information about gardens that will be open before and/or after the main meeting should be sent at this time - to make the meeting more attractive and to aide in planning by the registrants.

Approaching the deadline date for registration, there may be fewer registrants than needed to break even, in which case, consider dropping the late fee (if one had been established), sending further reminders online to list servs, NARGS chapters (Chairs and newsletter editors), and local organizations.

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MEETING REGISTRATION and CONFERENCE PACKETS

Registration offers the first impression that the registrant has of the meeting and its organization, so it is important that the registration area be well-marked, brightly lit, and as attractive as possible and the registration process smooth. The tables and general set-up should be in place well ahead of schedule, for those arriving early at the meeting. There should be sufficient volunteers manning the registration tables, and they should all be well-briefed and knowledgeable about all aspects of the meeting. It would be wise to have a laptop with the registration spread sheet, or a print-out, at the Registration table, to resolve questions or make changes.

There are varying views about whether or not to identify first-time registrants or new NARGS members. Some feel that it's a courtesy, making them feel welcome; others think it's an imposition on privacy. There can be an additional welcome gift of a plant or booklet. Some meeting hosts may also wish to identify Life Members with a special name badge. The NARGS Executive Secretary can supply the list of Life Members, and then it is up to the planners to decide how to differentiate these attendees.

All materials for each registrant should be gathered into a convenient holder: a bag or a sturdy folder or envelope (possibly with a NARGS or meeting logo). Name tags for the registrants are necessary, and can be useful in a number of ways. The face of the tag should have the registrant's name in large, clear, bold print; calligraphy looks lovely, but is not easily read. Adding the hometown and/or chapter is a good conversation-starter. In addition, it is wise to have a symbol for the field group of the registrant, which will help bus captains sort out who belongs on which bus and aide field guides in keeping track of their groups. Top-opening tag-holders can be used to hold meal tickets. Some find that badges on over-the-head strings are preferable to pin or clip badges; however, badges on strings can whip around in mountain winds. Extra identification – either on the badge or elsewhere – is very useful to point out members of the conference steering committee and others who will answer conference-related questions, speakers, guides, vendors. Colored tags and bandanas are particularly bright and noticeable – and inexpensive from online sources.

The primary document in the Registration packet is the Program booklet. This is printed very close to the beginning of the meeting (within a week or two) and typically includes the daily schedules, a map of the hotel, the speakers' biographies and slide lists, names and contact information for the vendors, acknowledgement of raffle prize donors, and a list of the attendees.

All events and participants should be listed: lectures and lecturers, break-out sessions, social hours and meals, a description of immediate surroundings of the hotel (whether in town or in the field), services available in the hotel or nearby, and possibly some botanical or whimsical artwork as page fillers.

This is also the place to give credit to all the many people who have worked on the meeting. Since all work is done by volunteers, public recognition of their help is the only compensation for the many hours devoted to the meeting. This printed thank-you can be augmented by a warm expression of thanks at one of the gatherings for a meal or lecture. But, rather than a long roll call of names, the prime movers can be acknowledged singly and all the volunteers asked to stand for a round of applause.

Plant lists and maps for all field sites should be included in the conference packet, so that registrants can save the ones for sites not visited at the meeting for future personal visits. The plant lists should be in a format that is easily portable (half-sheets) and printed on sturdier paper. For post-conference local gardens, the dates and times they will be open for visitors should be clearly stated; maps and directions should be geared to the out-of-town traveler with no knowledge of local roads.

If there are giveaway items (hats, pens, notepads, sunscreen, seed packets) these are included, too. The registration table is also the best spot for those other informational items that may be of interest to only some registrants: brochures for local places and events of interest (although some of these may have also been included with the initial response to registration) from the local tourist board or chamber of commerce; maps, catalogs, or free samples.

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SALES

Sales merchandise should be diverse and planned to appeal to a wide range of interests and budgets. Plants, and books (new and old), should be represented, along with Seeds, Art, Crafts, Tools, Containers (including Troughs), Garden ornaments, and Rocks (e.g., tufa). A local commodity, plant group, or other item that people cannot easily obtain elsewhere can be an interesting feature of the sales rooms.

There are two approaches to working with vendors: Either charging them a flat fee or a percentage of sales, or viewing the vendors as an extra attraction to the meeting and a service to NARGS members. The flat fee might simply be the amount charged by the hotel for the table. Percentages are difficult to calculate and awkward to enforce. Alternatively, vendors might be requested or required to donate an item for the raffle or auction (if either or both is being held). Requiring vendors to register for the meeting is optional, although they can reasonably be expected to pay their share if they will attend the lectures, field trips, or meals. They cannot be expected to pay for their meals if the sales rooms will be open at any time during those meals.

Sales tables should be open as often as possible, but closed and secured when the programs are active. This ensures that speakers are not in competition with the sales, and vendors who have registered have a chance to hear the programs. All tables should be manned by vendors or their delegates during all designated sales periods (rooms should be locked at other times).

PLANTS are the raison d'etre for these meetings and an abiding passion of the attendees. Plant sales benefit everyone by raising funds for the chapter (receipts from plant sales are generally not part of the equation when determining the chapter's donation to NARGS National) and the participating nurseries, as well as feeding the plant cravings of the registrants and raising the level of excitement.

Plants can be produced by the chapter and/or brought in by local nurseries. In either case, this should be decided well in advance, so that there will be proper time to plan, propagate, and grow salesworthy plants. Two years is not too long a lead time. For plants grown by members, the chapter can either provide pots (bought wholesale) or ask members to consider all the materials (pot, medium, plant) as a donation to the effort.

When working with nurseries, all interests are best served by having a form of contract, or some written document detailing arrangements and expectations on both sides: fees (where applicable); number of tables (and their costs); times of sales; directions to the hotel; location of loading docks; arrangements for access to the sales room, set-up and break-down; and whether there will be chapter members to assist before and/or during sales hours - a service that is always appreciated by vendors. Follow-up reminders during the interim leading up to the meeting are a helpful way to insure that any further questions are resolved.

The hotel should be informed that there will be plants - with the possibility of some spilled dirt. In turn, the hotel should assume the responsibility of covering the carpets, where necessary. Requesting that a vacuum cleaner be on hand, and cleaning spills before they are ground into the carpet, would benefit relations with the hotel staff. Ideally, there should be a source of water easily accessible. Ask about the use of carts and flatbeds for moving multiple flats and plants to/from the sales room; if they are not available from the hotel, obtain some from local nurseries and friends. Try to have the sales rooms on the entrance floor, to obviate waiting for elevators - or arrange for use of freight elevators.

The sales tables may be skirted or not (this may or may not be an extra charge); vendors like to store extra stock under the tables. Supply rolls of plastic sheeting to cover the tables early on the first day, before the vendors arrive.

Shoppers will need flats/cartons for carrying their purchases. Shallow cardboard boxes used to hold cans of soda are ideal. Local nurseries may be able/willing to provide - or at least sell - them to the chapter; they will be needed by the dozens. A further service to those registrants taking plants on public transportation would be the provision (or sale) of cardboard cat carriers, which fit on planes and hold multiple rock garden-sized plants very neatly. These can be purchased through veterinarians, animal shelters, and online.

Phytosanitary certificates for Canadian/overseas shoppers present an additional consideration. To line up a local inspector, contact the state plant health director: http://www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/plants/plant_exports/ecs/index.shtml ...for information about having an export certification specialist come to the hotel to issue phytosanitary certificates on the last day of the meeting. If there is a problem, contact the NARGS Government Liaison for help in resolving questions. Be sure that the registrants understand the current requirements for importing plants into their country and whether import permits are needed. To further clarify the issue, place signs on the tables of non-certifiable plants (such as the plants donated by chapter members, that do not originate in a single certifiable nursery).

Plants will need to have their roots cleaned of all soil, so the hotel must be able to provide a place to carry out this procedure and pack the plants for shipping. A large trash bin for shaking out loose soil and a work sink for washing off the remaining bits

work best. The chapter should provide a room, or an area, where the inspector can work comfortably. Paper toweling for wrapping roots and plastic zip bags for packing can be offered or sold by the chapter. Shipping material (boxes, tape) is usually provided by hotels, at a cost. Exporters must cover the costs of the phyto, but several people can purchase one phyto and ship all their plants together to one address, sharing the costs. All information and requirements must be made clear before registrants come to the U.S. meeting, with suggestions of bringing their own packing material, if possible.

BOOKS are almost as attractive to gardeners as plants - and can be shipped home with fewer worries. Having a variety of options for browsing and buying satisfies many needs.

In addition to local booksellers, carrying current editions of horticultural books, the host or another area chapter may have its own used-book store. Used-book tables are always popular for out-of-print classics or more recent books at a reasonable price. Alternatively, invite a local used-book store to sell at the meeting, explaining the types of specialty books needed (not just basic gardening books).

Book-signings for NARGS authors are a nice touch, and of benefit to both NARGS and the author. It might be helpful if there were a chapter member on hand to assist the author.

Local art societies can be involved in the sales or exhibits for the meeting. Give them a horticultural theme and let them run with it. You could offer judging (by popular vote or judges) and a prize, as well as the opportunity to showcase and sell their works. Craft guilds (weavers, potters, metalworkers) could show and sell their wares, especially from groups whose works can be even loosely tied into plants, gardening, and garden ornaments.

Security: Sales rooms should always be locked when not in use. Ideally, the lock should be re-keyed just for the meeting, and there is usually a charge for this. One person (at most, two) should hold the key(s), but be easily reached by cell phones or pagers, with all vendors having this contact information.

In addition, chapter members should be assigned to wander through the sales rooms and keep an eye on the merchandise, which is all very portable. This is often difficult in the frenzy of the early sales and the crowds, but it should be a consideration, as there have been occasional losses over the years. Vendors should arrive with sufficient change and receipts, and secure storage for both.

Storage of extra stock: it may be possible to designate an adjoining room for the storage of giveaway plants, raffle items, extra stock for the vendors, boxes, etc. This room should also be secured at all times, with information about the key-holder(s) made available to all vendors and relevant chapter members.

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PLANT SHOW

If at all possible, schedule a Plant Show as part of the meeting's activities. Plant shows not only educate the membership and enhance the surroundings, but they serve as conversational ice-breakers and ease the sharing of common interests between new and veteran members. The Show can be a focal point of the meeting, where members congregate between trips or lectures (when not plant shopping), and often even draws in the hotel staff, who become more involved with the success of the meeting.

Organizing a NARGS plant show is relatively easy, involving a minimum of time and volunteers. But the one requisite is plants, and they may be difficult to come by for winter meetings. Also, if the hosting chapter is very small, or isolated so that most of the attendees will arrive by public transportation, there may not be enough entries to justify a show. However, it is always worth a try to announce the plans and schedule for a show, then cancel, or turn it into an unjudged exhibit if enough prospective exhibitors do not respond.

The plant show chair can consult with several experienced growers (within and without the chapter) when drafting the schedule. There is also a document available, written by Michael Slater, which outlines all requirements and advice pertaining to Plant shows:

file:///Users/joyce/Desktop/planning_faq/flowershows.html

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DISPLAYS, EXHIBITS

These are not strictly necessary, but do add a great deal to the ambiance and the enjoyment of the attendees, and can also help carry out the theme of the meeting. They are probably more useful at winter meetings, when registrants will have more time in the hotel to enjoy them. Displays can be as modest as a couple of planted troughs at the Registration table, or as extravagant as the incredible room-size alpine gardens that Jim Cross used to create, or the several planted tables that the DelVal chapter members exhibited at a WSW. These can be done either by chapter members, local chapters of other specialty plant societies, nurserymen seeking to showcase their specialties (particularly enticing if their nurseries are open during or after the meeting). Local arboreta, extension services, or horticulture schools can add an educational dimension. Any display will likely enhance the festive atmosphere and offer the attendees more opportunities to relax, learn, and interact.

The displays can be gathered into one room, or can be scattered throughout the meeting areas - although thought should be given to the issue of security. Wherever they are, exhibits should be very well lit, for the sake of both the plants and their viewers.

The Chair of displays/exhibits should be aware of the hotel's facilities and the costs the chapter might incur for use of their tables, easels, rooms, etc. With a clear idea of the available possibilities, the Chair can then contact prospective exhibitors. This should be done as far in advance as possible, to allow time for production of plants and/or photographs, scheduling, or just the maturing of ideas for the display.

Confirm details in writing, offering the exhibitors clear instructions on the scheduled times for set-up, break-down, and access to the display area(s), and any help that might be available to them from NARGS volunteers. Keep in touch during the interim, to answer questions, or inform them of any changes in plans and, in general, act as a reminder of their commitment. After the meeting, a warm thank-you to each exhibitor would be most appropriate for all their work.

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SIGNS

There must be good signage around the Hotel, especially on the first day, to direct the attendees to the various rooms and activities. A map within the Program Booklet will be helpful, but signs will be their best guide to the Board meeting, lecture rooms (especially if there will be breakout sessions), sales rooms, late-night slide shows, etc.

Clearly visible, easily read signs are important on the buses, as well, with identifying logos (colors, flowers) for each of the field groups. After carefully balancing the groups, to be sure that all field sites are visited by all possible registrants, it is important to see that all attendees board the buses for their assigned group. Any changes in group assignment should be managed by one person on the meeting staff.

A message board, near the registration table, is very helpful for people to post messages, sign up for car pools, etc.

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RAFFLE & AUCTION

Raffles and auctions are good ways to create extra buzz for the meeting and cash for the host chapter. They are also a useful way to get people back into the room ontime for programs. Acquiring donations for the raffles, table giveaways, and registration bags is always a special challenge. But gardeners tend to be generous people, and nurseries will find it is in their best interests to publicize their wares and entice first-time users. Few people spend only the amount of the gift certificate.

The Chair for the raffle should be a go-getter, with good initiative and contacts in the larger horticulture community. The Chair will be in charge of acquisitions, requesting items and gift certificates from nurseries (local and afar), authors, book stores, tool suppliers, garden centers, artists, crafters, even clothing stores with garden-appropriate

clothes or accessories. Raffle tickets must be ordered and volunteers recruited to hawk the tickets at the meeting. Donated items should be divided evenly (in value) among the several raffling sessions, so that there are choice items available at every one. These sessions can be held at the beginning of a lecture session or a meal - to induce people to seat themselves quickly and on time. However, do not spend too much time at each drawing session, which can become boring to those who have not bought tickets (though, ideally, they are few). Have the tickets drawn and the numbers called in fairly rapid succession, pausing only to see whether the ticket-holder is present. Items for each raffling session should be placed on display just prior to that time, with the remaining items stored in a secure place.

Auctions can be live or silent, or a combination of both. Live auctions can - if handled skillfully - create excitement and involvement in the audience. Silent auctions allow for quiet perusal times and chatting, and the bidding wars that occasionally develop have their own tension and fun (to watch and to bid). Acquiring items for the auction can tap into different sources than the raffle, going to members for a rare plant, an out-of-print book, or piece of botanical art. In this context, "second-hand" adds luster and value with its provenance.

Space and tables must be arranged, whether the auction is live or silent. For the silent auction, bid sheets should be printed with information about the item, and a clear closing time noted and enforced.

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FIELD TRIPS

Since the field trips can be the crux of a meeting, extra care and time with planning is essential. It is usual for members of the host chapter to know local botanizing sites well, so it remains to choose the best ones and the dates at which they are at their floral peak. Several sites, with varying terrains and flora should be chosen, with alternatives as back-up, since peak blooming time can vary by weeks and mountain roads can disappear under slides. There will be widely varying degrees of fitness and physical capabilities, and suitable field excursions should be chosen to meet all needs and challenges. Estimating the conditions of the field sites and matching them to the condition of the participants will remain problematic, even during the trips themselves. Physically fit hikers tend to underestimate the strenuousness of their hikes, and the least physically fit will often overestimate their capabilities. The most difficult trips to plan are those that are labeled as "Easy." Registrants choosing this option are more likely to overestimate their physical strength and stamina, so that planners should take this into consideration, providing enough guides for that trip in case the group needs to be further divided, for different levels of activity.

Sites need to be accessible by bus or van, and within two hours driving distance (at most!). Public access for large groups must be permitted, either generally or by special permission. For national parks, a fee is occasionally necessary, and needs to be included in the budget. Local stations of the Forest Service or other government

agencies (BLM) can provide answers, access, and information (often including plant lists).

Mark name tags with clear group identifiers, making it easier to keep track of group members on buses, and where two groups may intersect in the field. Guides need to check as the attendees enter the bus, to keep the groups balanced and equitable. It should be made clear - at registration and during the meeting - that changes need to be cleared by someone of authority, in order to keep track of participants, for their own safety.

Load buses only 15 minutes before departure, to avoid boredom and toxic fumes. Make plans with bus drivers about where they will wait while the group is in the field, and establish a way to maintain contact, in case of sudden change in weather or other needs for early departure.

Guides are the key to successful field trips, both in the planning and execution. Running successful field trips requires the same effort as getting to Carnegie Hall: Practice, practice, practice. Pre-meeting field trips, held around the same dates one and two years prior, will provide the basis for the plant list and acquaint new guides with the territory. Photos taken on these trips can provide great images for publicity.

Recruiting good guides will take time, effort, and often more than a little persuasion. There are resources outside the host chapter, in other chapters, native plant societies, arboreta, and park rangers. These people may not know all the botanical names, but they do know local sites and plants. However, whenever possible, guides should use botanical names, as common names may be very local and meaningless to people from elsewhere.

The ratio of guides to group members varies with the group and the type of terrain, with so-called "easy" hikes needing surprisingly more guides, to help hikers who still cannot keep up with the group. At minimum, there should be a leader to find the path, with another bringing up the rear and keeping an eye on hikers who stray; however, both should continue to count heads throughout the trip.

Guides need to be fit, as well as knowledgeable, and maintain contact with the group at all times (there have been complaints of guides running ahead and leaving the group behind). If one guide is used to scout ahead for choice plants and paths, then there must be at least two others that remain with the group.

The size of the groups should be as small as possible, so that all hikers will have access to a guide when needed. Patience is more than a virtue here, it's a necessity - especially with the groups on hikes marked as "Easy." There will be those who still cannot manage, and a sub-division of the group might be necessary on the spot, with one group continuing at a lower altitude or slower pace. Be sure there are enough guides to cover both groups. Guides should wear something bright and clearly noticeable, that identifies them as guides; bandanas are easily seen, and come in a variety of colors for different hiking groups.

Safety on the trail begins with adequate advice before the meetings. Inform all registrants, in the response package and again at the meeting, of basic requirements for field trips: adequate footwear, with good treads; layers of clothing; rain gear, as well as sun screen (weather is wildly variable on a mountain); water; and a day pack (small backpack) for carrying everything – plus the box lunch. While it is desirable to have everyone in the field fully prepared and equipped, the host chapter will have to decide how strictly to enforce the requirements. Instead of turning away someone whose shoes seem inadequate for climbing rocks, it may be possible to ask them to change to a less strenuous hike. The chapter should be prepared to supply items that may be forgotten: extra water, sunscreen, antacids (for altitude-induced reflux), bug repellent, plant lists.

At registration, participants can be asked to sign a pre-printed waiver that absolves the chapter and NARGS of liability. While this may have few legal teeth, it does send the message that NARGS is serious about safety.

The bus captain is a guide with added duties: directing the morning loading of the bus, with attention to box lunches, drinks, trash bags, reference books, first aid kits; monitoring the group at loading time and upon each return to the bus. The bus captain should be familiar with the route to the field sites, along with possible alternative routes in case of traffic/road blocks. Bus drivers cannot be expected to make a dry run on their own time.

The captain, or another guide, can offer occasional information en route about points of interest, but should not be too talkative on the bus; this is prime time for registrants' socializing on the way out, and naps on the return trip (if you want them awake for the evening lectures). The NARGS and/or National Park policies on collecting (even seed) should be pointed out while en route. Bus captains are responsible, in effect, for a smooth and safe experience, and this responsibility should be handled by someone who will treat it seriously.

Consider breaking up long drives with a scenic stop on the way up, and/or a snack on return trip (ice cream is nice).

Box lunches should contain a protein-based sandwich or wrap, some condiment/salad (pasta, green, or grain), fresh fruit, dessert. Drinks can be supplied separately, in lightweight, re-closable containers. Vegetarian lunches should be kept separate, in order to reserve them for those who requested them on their registration forms; extras can be on hand for non-vegetarians who simply like them.

Plant identification: The Plant Lists (either alphabetical or by families) should be either a separate booklet or list, or be easily removable from the meeting booklet. Stress, in announcements through the meeting, that hikers should take these with them, but have extras available on the bus. Reference books, loupes on the bus would be helpful in keying out new plants. Discussions about the plants seen on the hike - either on the return trip or during after-hours at the hotel - are useful for consolidating knowledge,

expanding the plant lists, or for informing other groups about special sights or problems encountered.

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GARDEN AND OTHER TOURS

Garden visits can either be the whole theme of a meeting, one day out of two or three, or an added draw before and/or after the conference. Be open minded – tours can also be to nurseries, museums, and botanical gardens, some of which can be conducted in winter. For winter study weekends especially, smaller tours with car-pooling can work.

Caveats are pretty much the same as for field trips, with the added problems of city traffic, and maneuvering and parking unwieldy buses. Etiquette is also basically the same: stay on paths and no collecting! Additionally, visitors should not expect entry to the home or its bathroom facilities; there should be a toilet on the bus.

For pre/post-meeting garden visits, limit the number of gardens available, so that all will have visitors, rewarding the owners' hard work in preparation. Be sure that all gardens are ready and worthy of a visit. Cluster the gardens geographically and provide clear directions: from the hotel, from one garden to another, and back to the hotel. Accurate, objective descriptions – preferably not by the owner – listing style, age, outstanding collections, and specimens, will be helpful to visitors for planning which gardens to visit.

Directions need to be clear, concise, and above all accurate. Give mileage counts between turns and do not depend solely on online resources to develop directions. After the directions are completed, conduct an independent test by having another person follow them. An estimate of driving times is also helpful.

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POST-MEETING FIELD TRIPS

These trips should be planned as carefully as the meeting trips themselves. It is possible that NARGS could plan one of its annual Expeditions as a post-conference trip, and this could be handled by the NARGS Expeditions Manager.

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NARGS FINANCIAL SUPPORT, POLICIES, and LIABILITY INSURANCE

There are several ways in which NARGS will support the chapter in hosting a meeting, and responsibilities that the chapter has to NARGS.

NARGS carries liability insurance (through Berkley) that covers its meetings and attendees. A copy of the section that outlines the coverage can be made available to the hosting chapter, if required.

Registrations can be made online, through the NARGS website. Those individuals responsible for registration will be trained by the Treasurer and provided with access to the conference section of the NARGS website. This procedure would absolve the hosting chapter of the need to open accounts solely for the purpose of collecting money, and would allow the hosting chapter almost instantaneous access to the funds.

The following document clarifies the current policy for the relationship between NARGS national and the hosting chapter. It describes what NARGS will do to help the chapter financially and the chapter's responsibility, in return:

North American Rock Garden Society (NARGS) Policy
Annual General Meetings and Winter Study Weekends

This policy sets forth guidance regarding the financial arrangements between NARGS (hereinafter known as National) and local Chapters hosting Annual General Meetings (AGM) and winter Study Weekends.

Premise:

While Annual Meetings and Winter Study Weekends are ultimately the responsibility of the individual Chapters to plan and implement, it is recognized that, on occasion, a Chapter may look to National for financial support, either in the form of (a) an advance, when the Chapter has insufficient funds to cover necessary outlays; or (b) the subsidization of a loss incurred when expenses exceed realized income.

Intent:

The intent of this policy is not to dictate how a Chapter plans and conducts an AGM or Study Weekend, but to insure that, if National is involved with regard to fiscal responsibility, the proposed budget is sound and attainable, and that, should unforeseen expenses occur, that the Chapter is not solely liable and can rely on the fiscal backing of National.

Procedures:

If a Chapter expects National to subsidize an unanticipated financial loss resulting from an AGM or Study Weekend, a tentative budget for the meeting must be submitted to the NARGS Treasurer as soon as practicable (but in no case less than 12 months prior to the event) and prior to setting the final registration price. In the event that the proposed budget cannot be prepared at least 12 months in advance (due to unforeseen circumstances), the Chapter can ask AdCom for an exception and have the budget reviewed.

The budget shall include projected costs for all expense items (including speaker's fees, hotel guarantees, rental fees, administrative costs, etc.), a "break-even" attendance

figure based on the projected registration fee, and any other information the Treasurer may request. This additional information may include the proposed contract with the hotel detailing the guarantees such as room nights and food and beverage.

If the Treasurer, after consultation with the Administrative Committee (Ad Com), concurs with the submitted budget, National will agree to subsidize 100% of any unexpected shortfall, provided that no significant changes have been made during the implementation of the planning. For this purpose, profits from plant sales, auctions, raffles, etc., shall be included in the calculation of the income from the meeting.

The Executive Secretary can provide a set of guidelines to assist Chapters when planning for meetings. If a Chapter feels that it has the expertise to undertake an AGM or Study Weekend without the assistance or advice from National, it may certainly proceed. However, financial assistance to cover unexpected shortfalls is expected from National, it is reasonable that some control and/or review occur at the National level.

In the event that a Chapter chooses not to avail itself of the above procedure, and subsequently incurs a financial loss on a meeting, National may agree to subsidize any portion of the loss, with each situation being decided on its merits and circumstances, but is under no obligation to do so.

If a Chapter chooses not to avail itself of the above procedure, then proceeds do not need to be shared with National, although contributions to the National treasury will be welcomed.

Responsibilities:

NARGS will:

1. Advance seed money to the local chapter in an amount approved by the National Administrative Committee (AdCom).
2. Make no charge for the inclusion of an announcement in the Bulletin nor for the use of the NARGS mailing list, and it shall advertise Study Weekends on a half page of free space in the Bulletin and will advertise Annual Meetings on one full page, or two half pages, of free space.
3. Cover any shortfall balance (after the local Chapter has exhausted all income from plant sales and other peripheral sales), as approved by the AdCom.

The local chapter shall:

1. Determine the event income or loss
 - a. by calculating the surplus or deficit from conference registration and optional meal income and conference expenses (facilities rentals, expenses for speakers, banquet, promotion, national officers, etc.);
 - b. by calculating the net income from raffles, plant and peripheral sales.

2. Allocate surplus or deficit.

a. In the event of a surplus in 1a, the percentage of proceeds from 1a to come to national to be negotiated by the President and Treasurer with the conference or study weekend Chair or chapter Chair. The resulting proposal will be presented for approval by the AdCom. If there are proceeds to share, the hosting chapter shall retain all the funds of 1b.

b. In the event of a deficit in 1a, apply sufficient funds from 1b to off-set the loss, then retain the balance.

3. Reimburse National for any seed money advanced. In the event that there are insufficient funds in 1b to cover the entire deficit in 1a, then the Chapter shall advise National the extent of the shortfall and apply for relief either by way of a reduction in repayment of seed money or, if this does not cover the entire deficit, a grant to cover the remainder.

Approved by NARGS AdCom at 2008 EWSW: 3/28/08

Item 2a Amended and approved by NARGS AdCom at 2009 AGM: 3/09