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4-H Garden Project Builds Positive Life Skills in Youth

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ABSTRACT.

A vegetable garden project is an excellent way to develop life skills including decision making, record keeping, enhanced self-esteem, and good work ethic in youth. It also promotes a healthy lifestyle by developing an enjoyment in gardening and consumption of fresh vegetables. The objectives of this project are to teach youth: basic horticulture skills to implement a garden plan; how to make educated decisions in the care of their gardens based on knowledge gain; utilization of grown vegetables as part of a healthy nutrition plan; and to encourage a sense of citizenship through donations of vegetables to those in need. Over the last two years summative evaluations of 148 youth participants were collected from garden judging, vegetable exhibits, and record book scores. Results found: 98% completed the project; 75% received a blue ribbon score of 90% or higher on their record book; 100% prepared at least one recipe from the vegetables grown, and a follow-up survey of ten youth indicated 100% knowledge gain and reported developing record keeping, time management, decision making, and problem solving skills and enhanced self esteem.

KEYWORDS: vegetable garden, life skills, youth

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1890's, 4-H has been the premier youth development program, helping young people become healthy, problem solving, constructive adults. The essential elements which serve as guiding principles are positive relationships, engagement in learning, self determination and service to others. The subject matter used for meeting the needs of youth and building life skills is numerous. This vegetable garden project increases competency in youth horticulture and nutrition skills.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The garden project begins each year with interested youth attending a mandatory workshop to receive instruction on garden site selection, soil sampling, proper soil preparation, correct fertilizing techniques, appropriate irrigation techniques, and cultural practices to care for a spring vegetable garden. Each youth enrolled in the project plant a 20 by 26 feet garden in mid-March according to a specified garden plan with ten vegetables: radish, turnips, snap beans, yellow squash, zucchini, cucumbers, tomatoes, sweet corn, onions, and bell peppers. Throughout the project instructional newsletters are distributed providing pertinent and timely information. Youth are encouraged to keep a garden record book, present a demonstration to their club members, research nutrition information on vegetables grown and prepare a dish to serve family and friends. Towards the end of May youth submit their project books and a group of Master

Gardeners visit and judge each garden. The last Monday night of May is Exhibit and Awards Night. Youth bring in four different types of vegetables for display according to guidelines. Awards are given to: the top five overall gardeners, best garden, best project book, best exhibit, best first year gardener, best scarecrow in each category, and the best cucumber in a bottle.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Over the last two years (2006 and 2007) summative evaluations of 148 youth participants were collected from garden judging, vegetable exhibits, and record book scores. Results found: 98% completed the project; 91.9% received a blue ribbon score ($\geq 90\%$) or red ribbon score (80 - 89%) on project books (111 blue, 25 red); 100% prepared at least one recipe from the vegetables grown, and a follow-up survey of ten youth indicated 100% knowledge gain and reported developing record keeping, time management, decision making, and problem solving skills and enhanced self esteem. Parents of youth participating in the project indicated that their families benefited from the project in the following ways: quality family time together, saved money on grocery bill, increased their consumption of vegetables, and youth developed marketable life skills.