Educating Youth Through Extension
Understanding and Improving Master Gardeners Interactions with Youth

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Introduction

Horticulture has gained a personal and practical application in the Master Gardeners Program through Cooperative Extension. In Cook County, over 600 Master Gardeners work to improve the daily life of thousands of families and individuals through horticultural education.

Studies have shown that families and students who know about gardening tend to make healthier food choices and eat less sugary foods, and those who have gardens of their own reap the physical benefits as well. (Bellows, Brown, Smit, 2003)

One aspect of Master Gardener volunteer work comes in educating youth about vegetable gardening, healthy eating, forest and park preserves, environmentalism, and many more topics.

Cook County demographics contrast greatly to the rest of the state, housing 40% of Illinois’ population on less than 2% of the land area. In an urban environment like Chicago, agricultural education is as important as ever to encourage healthy eating and environmental stewardship. (US Census Bureau, 2010)

Objectives

This study plans to find out the impact that Master Gardeners have on Urban Agriculture Youth Education and the influence they contribute to urban youth education in general.

(1) Observe the common settings and audiences of Master Gardener volunteers when working with youth

(2) Determine the strengths and weaknesses of the Master Gardener when working with youth in their volunteer role

(3) Discuss how Extension could improve the program and challenge current barriers

(4) Present findings to Cook County Extension Master Gardener Coordinators to improve program success

Methodology

This quantitative and qualitative study contains three parts that complement each other and give well-rounded data and results.

Survey (Quantitative)
- Online Survey distributed through SurveyMonkey.com
- Included questions about volunteering with youth audiences, preparedness, self-efficacy, and curriculum strengths and weaknesses

Personal Interviews (Qualitative)
- Interviews conducted in person and over the phone to complement the survey results and gain a more in-depth response to youth audience challenges

Field Observations
- Photo documents and field notes serve as the final part to this research study, allowing personal visits and observations to be made while volunteers work with youth

Results

Survey Results (130)
Survey responses showed that volunteers had high self-efficacy when working with youth audiences. Respondents replied they felt they enhanced youth exposure in the areas of basic gardening skills, where food comes from, and urban agriculture. Volunteers also responded that they receive the majority of their curriculum from UIUC Extension, but would like to receive more seasonal teaching activities. In the spirit of education, almost 25% of those who worked with youth audiences are current or past educators.

Interview Results (34)
Interviewees gave feedback pertaining to what they hope youth get out of the program. Most wanted youth to witness the cycle of life, respect the environment, and see the connection that we have with our outdoor world.

Discussion

The results from the survey showed that volunteers felt prepared to work with youth in their confidence level as well as the curriculum they obtained.

Interview results showed a strong interest in a continuing education class for Master Gardeners regarding informal instruction strategies. Many volunteers felt they were adequately prepared in content areas, but would like to receive training in student management. This could be directed by Master Gardeners who were past educators and could be valued as continuing education credit.

Observations from garden sites showed a unique perspective. Students from differing backgrounds had varying prior knowledge of gardening from older generations’ exposure. As well, Master Gardeners work hard to ask open-ended questions, acting not as formal educators, but as role models and peers.

Conclusions

Master Gardener volunteers are very well prepared in their training courses in varying content areas. Many volunteers were involved in education in the past and desire to continue teaching others. However, some of those who work with youth lack the experience needed to make an impression and leave an impact. A continuing education class in informal instruction could satisfy this need and alleviate any hesitation when working with students.

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