

SEARCH FOR EXCELLENCE AWARD APPLICATION

Master Gardeners of Monmouth County, New Jersey

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Category – Youth Programs

Project Name – Junior Gardener Program at Deep Cut Gardens

Description of Project: The Junior Gardener Program is a children's gardening program, located in the All American Display Garden at Deep Cut Gardens, Middletown, NJ. This program was created by members of the Master Gardeners of Monmouth County (MGMC) and is offered to children aged 8-12 in collaboration with the Monmouth County Park System (MCPS). The initial coordination of the planning team started in November 2002 for the first session held from April to June 2003. The Junior Gardener Program is in its third year of planning and operation at the present time.

The Monmouth County Master Gardener's Association developed this Junior Gardener Program to be a unique countywide program that introduces children to the world of gardening. This program teaches students about soil, garden planning, propagation, composting, herbs, flowers, insects, and backyard birds; aiming to develop them into future gardeners and environmental stewards. The expanded support group of mentor MGs, 30 strong, like Gertrude Jekyll, the renowned landscape designer, hopes that, "The love of gardening...for the students of the Junior Gardener Program, would grow to an enduring and ever-increasing source of happiness..."

Method of Instruction: Students attend eight, two hour long, instruction classes from the end of April through the middle of June. The first hour in each session is devoted to instruction and hands-on learning of a specific garden topic (e.g. plant propagation), guided by MG mentors. Then, the children spend the second hour in the garden where they apply the skills they have learned. Here, they work cooperatively in pairs, each under the supportive mentorship of a Master Gardener. The pairs plan and plant their own garden plot throughout the eight-week period. Then they tend their gardens until the time of the Monmouth County Fair when, if they choose, they receive education from MGs as to how to select their produce and flowers for competition on Gardener's Day.

Results: MGs everywhere look to the garden as a grand teacher of patience, watchfulness (monitoring), hard work, careful use of resources and trust. Feedback from families has verified these expectations, adding their observations of the strong positive effect on their children's self-esteem, their sense of peace, as well as the excitement, enrichment and joy of learning through hands-on experience with partners, in the presence of expert gardeners.

Beyond teaching basic gardening skills, an important goal of the Junior Gardener Program is to provide a positive, educational, intergenerational gardening experience for the students. Students learn from MGs and MGs learn from each other. The entire experience is supportive and exciting. To make the natural environment in which we all live less of a mystery, the process of discovery is encouraged. The children, with the help of the MGs make predictions, formulate explanations, imagine alternatives, and design plans. In doing so they may reach a third goal of the program, which is to improve their understanding of the environment, and to take responsibility for protecting and preserving it.

Conclusions: This program is highly rewarding for the individual children, their families, friends and the MGs that volunteer their time. Registration for the second year's session, Spring 2004, was rapid, with many children on the waiting list. Because of space limitations at this MCPS location, it is a natural expectation that this program may be extended to other community sites where it can be offered to a larger number of children, at various socioeconomic levels. The committee believes that gardening education in a non-agrarian community is an essential ingredient if environmentally sound principles are to be understood and used, and if the Earth is to be respected and tended with care.

Names of MGs involved in Program from start to finish:

Core Planning Committee: Jim Henry, Bob Ernsdorff, Jayne Cleveland, Karen Livingstone, Dolores Ranghelli.

Guest Speakers: Karin Poorvin, Jim Farmer, and Patrice McCoy.

Mentors: Eleanor Hallstrom, Anne Kolshorn, Marian Bussetti, Linda Wright, Dorothy Zimms, Wanna Chin, Kim O'Neill, Laura Hardy, Linda Johnson, Jan Mundy, Aniko Pernyeszi, Sharon DeSimone, Maria Kramer, Lynn Trela, Audrey Sheehan, Barbara Richardson, Janice Dzioba, Anita Meeks.

Simplicity: This program may be easily replicated. What is needed?

- A. A committee of interested, child friendly MGs who will create a preliminary budget and program overview.
- B. A vision encompassed in a planned curriculum (8-2 hr. sessions).
- C. A handicapped accessible garden with indoor instructional space.
- D. A community organization willing to lend financial support.
- E. Publicity through newspapers, directories and newsletters.
- F. An evaluation form to measure program impact.

Practicality: MGMC believe this program is useful and practical because it fills a void in local communities that are suburban areas that have lost their agricultural roots and urban areas where most residents have little or no contact with nature. We have found that our children do not understand how the vegetables that they eat are grown. This program draws on the natural curiosity of students leading them into exploration and discovery. It is inexpensive to provide to the public since all that is needed are some seeds, basic gardening tools, a space to garden, and a group of well-intentioned and committed MGs. Many materials used for the program may be created from recycled materials, thus encouraging environmental stewardship in the children as well.

Originality/Creativity: The curriculum for this program was created by integrating a variety of hands-on materials with different learning styles. Flexibility was a key factor due to the location of the program and the variety of ages that the program is designed for. All instructional materials used in the class were custom created for the program by MGs. Plant materials for the program were carefully selected for the gardens since the available garden space was located in the park's home horticulture demonstration area. Because of this, the plans for the program were required to be structured enough to follow the park's guidelines, yet flexible enough for the children to learn through trial and error, success and failure. This was a great motivation toward creating a top quality program.

Extension and MG Mission/Goals: Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension (RCRE) sets forth the following goals:

- To expand the research and educational capacity of RCRE in order to provide research-based home grounds information through a network of trained volunteers.
- To develop and enhance community programs related to horticulture and environmental stewardship. These programs are educational in nature and may involve environmental improvements, horticulture therapy projects, community and school gardening projects, or other programs as determined by local need.
- To develop leadership potential of Master Gardener volunteers through a volunteer network designed to assist RCRE staff in managing local Master Gardener activities and programs.

The Jr. Gardener Program, offered in cooperation with the Monmouth County Park System, emerges as an effective outgrowth of the RCRE goals aiming:

- To expand the public's knowledge through horticultural activities, environmental stewardship and community service in accordance with community needs.
- To offer the MGs' programs, in cooperation with RCRE, to the public without discrimination.
- To sustain the interest and enthusiasm of MGs through programs which elicit and utilize their leadership skills and encourage their growth in horticultural knowledge and environmental stewardship.

Significant Learning and Impacts: Master Gardeners, Junior Gardeners and Community: Evaluation sessions were held after each class for volunteer MGs. During these, the MG committee realized that significant learning had taken place in this program by both students and MG mentors. In a community where housing developments have replaced farmlands, many of the attending students had never had a gardening experience. Indeed, some only knew produce and flowers that they saw in supermarkets, and did not understand the process of seed to supermarket necessary for food production. In this program, students learned how to be successful gardeners by learning planting techniques, making selections of plant materials, exercising problem-solving skills when faced with a daunting insect

problem, or damage caused by wildlife. Some families were introduced to gardening for the first time when students brought home extra plants for their own gardens.

Further learning occurred for students after the excitement of the spring sessions when they continued to tend their gardens in order to produce vegetables and flowers that would be worthy of display at the Monmouth County Fair in July. None of the children during these two years had previous experience with competition of that sort. While tending their gardens and making their entry selections, they learned what qualities to look for in a winning product and how to display their flowers, herbs and vegetables. Over the past two years, most of the children (18/26) in the program entered their selections. Many were children who had not experienced success like this before in either school or sports. All of them were pleased at what they had accomplished through hard work.

Because this program was held in a display garden, visitors to the garden were also educated by the children's gardens through examples of plant material and demonstrations of safe, healthy, horticultural practices. This display garden is a large attraction in the park. Master Gardeners and Deep Cut Gardens staff used the children's garden plots in their public tours to discuss horticultural options for successful home gardening.

Number of People Impacted: Through Monmouth County Park System publicity (i.e., Activity Directory mailed to 30,000 families, Newsletter mailed to 20,000 families), newspaper articles, brochures placed in public spaces such as libraries, and press releases, news of our program reached both home and publicly schooled students. Available garden and instructional space limited the level of enrollment in the program. During 2003, fourteen students attended; in 2004, there were twelve students enrolled. Their families and friends were active participants in the garden with these children during out-of-class hours. It is estimated that 5,000 people visit the gardens at Deep Cut yearly. These visitors also benefited since they were able to observe the different examples of the successful plants and growing techniques that the children used. Monmouth County Master Gardeners and staff also regularly used these gardens as examples of possible home horticultural practices during visitation hours to the garden. Approximately 30% of active Monmouth County Master Gardeners volunteered in this program for the past two years.

Support from other Community Groups: The Monmouth County Park System and members of the Monmouth County Master Gardener organization, Rutgers Cooperative Research and Extension, supported this program.

Budget: As described before, this program was developed cooperatively between the MCPS and the MGMC with the Park system providing the program's location (Deep Cut Gardens), seeds, plants, and some tools and the MGs providing hands-on practical expertise as well as some materials. The overall cost per student was ~\$10 / student / class period, which covered the program's direct out of pocket expenses: instructional costs of about \$6/student/class period as well as plant and seed costs (~\$2 / student / class period) and other program costs (use of Deep Cut greenhouse facilities). Master Gardeners also contributed their expertise both in the classroom as well as in the garden itself, with over 450 volunteer hours donated by 30+ MGMC members. In addition, the MGs donated some of the program materials (seeds, plants, garden hand tools, gloves, poster, and instructional and educational materials).

Other pertinent information: We have found our relationship with the Monmouth County Park System extremely beneficial for everyone involved. It is our recommendation that any group wishing to replicate this program arrange a joint venture with a Park System, local school district or Foodbank or pantry that sees a need for such a program. If funds are not readily available through these entities, corporate donations, grants or donations from local businesses could fill this gap.