IMPACT

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Master Gardener School Garden Mentors support healthy youth initiatives statewide

The Situation

The Farm to School movement has increased dramatically over the last 15 years in the United States as a way to address problems of childhood obesity and foster agricultural literacy. Commonly, programs involve school gardens, classroom education about food and farming, and the inclusion of more fresh, local foods in school lunch programs. Farm to School efforts effectively improve children's health, food preferences, and eating behaviors (Smith et al., 2012).

In 2013, the Idaho State Department of Education awarded grants to 12 Idaho schools and childcare centers to establish or sustain on-site school gardens. University of Idaho Extension was recruited to provide training and support for these garden projects.

Our Response

Extension Horticulture Educator Ariel Agenbroad worked with partners to develop a new program to train, certify, and supervise active Idaho Master Gardener Volunteers as School Garden Mentors. Similar Extension programs in California and Rhode Island that have fostered long-term school garden success provided inspiration and best practices.

Master Gardener Volunteers in good standing were recruited from the counties where each school or childcare center was located in early May. Ten of the 12 schools were paired with a mentor. Mentors received training via webinar on school garden basics, 4-H garden curricula and child protection. Each passed background screening. Mentors were provided with 4-H Junior Master Gardener Curriculum handbooks, including *Health and Nutrition from the Garden,* which had been approved for classroom instruction by the Idaho State Education Department's Child Nutrition Services.

Master Gardener Mentor Myrna Keyes was paired with Tater Tots child care center in American Falls. Photo by Ariel Agenbroad.

Funding provided by the Idaho State Department of Education and a University of Idaho Extension Critical Issues grant were used to develop the program, purchase curricula and supplies, conduct statewide trainings and provide mentor and educator travel stipends.

Mentors served in schools and child care centers in Kellogg, Coeur d'Alene, Troy, Boise, Caldwell, Meridian, Parma, Mountain Home, Fruitland, American Falls and Idaho Falls.

Program Outcomes

Master Gardener Mentors conducted an average of three phone conversations, five email consultations and three on-site visitations with their school throughout the growing season. They assisted garden teams with garden planning, variety selection, season extension, pest management, soil health, irrigation

University of Idaho, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Idaho counties cooperating.
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design, seed starting, fruit production, problem solving, youth activities and parent outreach.

Youth who participate in school gardens experience a number of benefits, including an increased interest in science and healthier lifestyle choices. At least 1,000 youth ranging from toddlers to high school students were involved in the school gardens where our mentors served.

Three mentors were invited to deliver additional youth gardening activities at their assigned school using 4-H Junior Master Gardener curriculum. Over 164 youth were engaged in these learning opportunities.

One expectation was that school garden teams assigned a Master Gardener Mentor would establish productive vegetable gardens and successfully harvest at least six of the fruits and vegetables emphasized by the USDA in their nutrition programs.

On average, ten crops were grown, harvested and consumed by children at each school; including salad greens, tomatoes, carrots, green beans, melons, zucchini, cabbage, winter squash, potatoes, corn, beets, peppers, pumpkins, spinach, peas and strawberries.

One of the final goals for this program was for school garden teams who received Master Gardener School Garden Mentors to establish sustainable gardens with staying power. All ten schools plan to continue to grow gardens into the next season and beyond.

Young gardeners at the Parma Learning Center were enthusiastic about their bountiful harvest and the summer school activities provided by their Master Gardener School Garden Mentor. Photo by Mentor Debbie Delaney.

The Future

Pilot Master Gardener School Garden Mentors provided excellent feedback on the program. They appreciated the quality of the training, materials and support they received. They believed their contributions of time and expertise were valuable to the teachers, administrators, parents and youth involved in the school garden projects. All wished to continue serving their assigned school in the future, with or without a stipend. Some felt the stipend was important if the mentor travelled extensively to the school site or spent significant hours teaching or assisting. Mentors recommended that they be paired with their schools earlier in the season to be more involved with spring planning. Several mentors were interested in conducting more youth and adult instruction in the schools. One mentor was preparing to present indoor, winter gardening activities. Plans are underway to continue and expand the program in 2014.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

Idaho State Department of Education Child Nutrition Services, Heidi Martin, Diane Esplin, University of Idaho Extension, Martha Raidl, and the Extension Horticulture Team.

Reference:

Smith C.A., B. S. Corriveau, A. Aaronson, C. Fitzgerald, A. Heeres, K. Eagle and J. DuRussel-Weston. 2012. School Intervention Incorporates Farm to School Programs to Highlight Healthy Eating: A Report from Project Healthy Schools, Childhood Obesity, 8(6):584-587.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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