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LIFE

GROWING GOOD KIDS

Fargo's Urban Youth Garden Program has clear benefits

Imagine an activity that causes about teenagers to connect with their parents and siblings. What if the activity induced these youths to become more responsible and cooperative? Better yet, what if this endeavor made them want to eat their broccoli?

No, it's not a transformation chamber in which a teen goes in all teenager-like and comes out an exemplary, cooperative youth. It's simply gardening.

There's a reason gardening remains America's leading pastime. It's popular because it's a wide-ranging activity that offers something for everyone, from houseplants to lawn care. Mostly, though, people like gardening because it's a great hobby, it's relaxing, it provides a nice diversion from unpleasantness, it's good exercise and it's fun to be around nature.

It's easy to see why gardening is good for adults, but gardening might be even more valuable for our youth, as shown by relatively new research conducted by the University of Colorado. Gardening can change young lives.

Spending a few minutes outdoors, surrounded by plants and working in a garden can boost a teen's ability to focus and concentrate.

Gardening increases teens' physical activity, which they might not even realize, as they're stretching, bending and stooping while planting, picking and weeding. Research shows teens connect objectively with their parents and siblings while gardening together.

Fifth grade students who participated in school gardening activities scored significantly higher on science achievement tests than students without the gardening experience. Students had an increased understanding of the responsibility to care for the environment.

Third, fourth and fifth grade students who participated in a one-year gardening program showed a significant increase in self-esteem and the ability to work in groups. Children and youths who gardened

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were more likely to have positive relationships with parents and other adults.

How exactly does gardening foster these benefits in youth? Caring for plants builds responsibility. Children learn cause and effect, such as plants dying without water and weeds overwintering plants if allowed to grow, which improves children's ability to understand.

Self-confidence is built with a sense of accomplishment when children harvest food they've planted and grown. Children's senses of receiving and discovery are engaged as they learn about the science of plants, weather and the environment. Observing how a garden is planned fosters a love of nature and cooperation as food is successfully produced. It's a well-known fact that children and teens who grow their own food by gardening will eat more vegetables and fruit.

Many of our communities are making it easier for youth to have a garden by offering gardening space and opportunities. The Urban Youth Garden Program, coordinated by North Dakota State University's Cass County Extension, has provided young people a chance to garden for over 40 years. By participating in the program, each boy or girl has their own 10-by-10-foot garden plot to plan, plant, maintain and harvest.

The Urban Youth Gardens are located by Fargo's McKinley Elementary School at 30th Street North and 30th Avenue North. The land is provided by the Fargo Park District, which retails the soil, making the plots ready for planting. Youth who enroll will be assembled into garden groups with one or more adult leaders per group. Adult leaders provide educational materials, advice and help coordinate success, while participants provide their own seeds and plants.

The Urban Youth Garden Program is open to those 6 to 17 years old. There is a \$60 non-refundable deposit to reserve a garden plot. Because there's a limited number of garden plots available, they will be assigned on a first-come, first-served basis until all are filled.

To enroll, download and mail the Urban Youth Garden Program form based on Cass County Extension's website www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/umda.edu by May 18, or call 701-241-5700 or email NDSU Cass Extension@ndsu.edu.

For more information, contact the NDSU Extension office at 30th Street North and 30th Avenue North, Fargo, ND 58102. Call 701-241-5700 or email NDSU Cass Extension@ndsu.edu.

DOM KUNZLER
 Growing Together

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