HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

CULTIVATING KIDS

The latest research supports what parents have always known: getting kids outdoors is good for them! Exposing children to living plants can improve concentration and self-discipline, and increase self-esteem. While some children can explore the great outdoors at home and during recess, many teachers are giving kids the opportunity to learn their school subjects outdoors too. School gardens provide fun, hands-on learning experiences for youth, and all school subjects can be taught through gardening.

School gardening is not a new concept. During World War I, the United States School Garden Army was formed. President Wilson declared "The movement to establish garden is just as real and patriotic an effort as the building of ships or the firing of cannons." "Victory Gardens" were grown in schools during World War II so that more food could be shipped overseas to support the war effort. In recent years, teachers are rediscovering the benefits of gardens in schools as a way to introduce nature to childrens urban lives, among other benefits.

Research from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign has shown that Children who spend time in "green" settings have decreased Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder symptoms, ADD symptoms in children are relieved after being around nature; the greener the setting, the greater the relief. This is great news for parents who are frustrated with the limitations of medications and behavior therapy. Denise, an Osceola County parent whose child has ADD, has found that her child is much easier to deal with when he's outdoors on their farm, as opposed to playing video games. "One of the reasons we keep him in 4-H is because it gives him opportunities to be outdoors. He doesn't respond to us when he's stuck inside."

Even viewing living plants can improve a child's ability to focus. In a separate study, girls with a home view of nature scored higher on tests of concentration and self-discipline. Additional studies have shown that attitudes about school, self-esteem, and environmental attitudes are improved in children who participate in school garden programs.

At Kissimmee's Gateway High School, Michelle Mazzuca-Lux is one of eight teachers that use gardening to teach. She teaches physical science, but says that in addition to learning science and landscape care, the students are taking pride in school beautification. "The kids are protective of their gardens and are intolerant of other kids messing with their gardens or littering in them. Administration has been supportive (of the gardens), because it keeps the school looking good." The gardens are also used as part of an after-school program.

In efforts to introduce gardening into more local schools, the Osceola County Florida Yards & Neighborhoods program is coordinating the "Cultivating Kids" School Garden Start-Up Program. Through Florida Yards & Neighborhoods, people learn how to create beautiful landscapes and gardens without harming the environment. Massey Services Inc. is sponsoring the "Cultivating Kids" program in Osceola County.

Massey offers landscape and structural pest prevention services throughout Florida. This may seem an unlikely partnership, but Massey shares a common purpose with the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods program to protect health and environment. Howard Stepleman, General Manager at Massey's Kissimmee service center, says "One of the things I truly enjoy is working with the children in our local schools, and my employer encourages it. By educating our children on protecting our health, food, property, and quality of our environment, we are ensuring that our future is in good hands".

Teachers in Osceola County are eligible to apply for the "Cultivating Kids" program. Six schools will receive a Cellugro raised growing system, soil, tools, seeds, assistance with set-up, and horticultural help.
The intent of "Cultivating Kids" is to promote horticulture as a teaching tool in schools, and raise children's environmental awareness. For an application for the "Cultivating Kids" School Garden Start-Up Program, Click Here or call Jessica at the University of Florida Osceola County Extension at 321-697-3000.

The deadline for applying is August 1st, so that "Cultivating Kids" can begin during the Fall 2004 semester to allow maximum growing time in the gardens. Teachers and students will guide the focus of the individual garden projects, while Extension will provide the horticultural knowledge to ensure that the gardens are successful. Some possible gardening projects could include a butterfly garden, a snack food garden, a cultural garden, or a storybook garden. A garden is a great place to grow imagination!

Upcoming Extension programs:

May 11th Woods Walk 8:30am @ Prairie Lakes Preserve
May 11th Trees & Shrubs 6:30pm @ Extension
May 18th Annuals & Perennials 6:30pm @ Extension
May 20th Rain Barrel Workshop 7:00pm @ Extension

Call 321-697-3000 to register.

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