

Reprinted with permission from School-Age NOTES (www.SchoolAgeNotes.com), the most trusted publisher and provider of quality, innovative resources designed to elevate the skills of adults who create learning opportunities for children and youth.

School-Age Notes
National Institute on Out-of-School Time
April 15, 2003
Georgia Hall

Back to the Farm and Garden

One of the principal rules in dairy farming is always close the gate behind you! There was a moment of crisis on a family run farm where my daughter and I were working last summer when the gate was left open, and eleven cows as if instinctively knowing the path was open, took off to stomp the newly planted vegetable garden. What was most exciting was to observe the farm staff hasten to chase each wanderer down and eventually lead them all back to the barn. While the staff were engaged in crisis management activity, the youth who were spending the week on the farm cheered from their bunkhouse. To this day, I am not sure for which side they were rooting!

American culture is deeply rooted in the experience of farming and gardening. Yet, many youth today have not experienced any activities that involve an in-depth level of caring for animals or plants other than growing seeds in a classroom or a family pet. There are in fact many programs such as 4-H clubs that provide experiences for participation on farms, and also other clubs that promote community-based youth farm and garden projects.

Summer is a perfect time for youth programs to take advantage of the many ways that farm and garden projects can contribute to youth development. Farm and garden projects can focus on a variety of themes including environmental education, community development, physical skill development, ecology, and zoology. Hazluz-Delay (2001) suggests that we might foster a youth's sense of stewardship toward her/his own environment through naturalistic observations. Youth can better understand the critical importance of caring for the environment through the experience of planting and caring for their own garden.

Farms can be illuminating models of efficient work habits and time management. I spent a week last summer on a family farm with 25 youth. They fell right into step with the farm staff, waking at 6:00 AM for chores, picking the lunch salad daily from the farm garden, and turning the compost. There were powerful lessons in the symbiotic lifestyle that made the farm work. Both farming and gardening can offer authentic learning opportunities for youth outside of their typical spheres. The sense of satisfaction at the end of a long farm day or after harvesting a vegetable that required hours of weeding and watering, can help youth make the connection between time invested and benefit gained. Farming and gardening have many of the fundamental experiences in which we are

looking to engage youth as suggested by the National Research Council (2002) and others:

(a) Being productive.

Working towards a product helps youth see the connection between inputs and outputs.

(b) Connectedness/Opportunity to contribute in meaningful ways.

Gardens and farms can require extensive teamwork. Many tasks are dependent on others being executed. Even small tasks can be critical to success.

(c) Challenging experiences.

Farming and gardening involve navigating new tools and situations. Learning flexibility around unexpected circumstances such as weather, plant disease, or temperamental animals yields valuable practice in creative and critical thinking.

(d) Integration of family, school, and community.

Community gardens offer wonderful opportunities to form local social networks. School beautification projects can uplift community morale and participation. Family farms offer a unique example of family resourcefulness and continuity around goals.

There are multiple ways that out-of-school time programs can integrate gardening and farming experiences into their curriculum. Many family farms welcome youth groups as visitors and may be able to incorporate youth into the daily task schedule. Even a several hour visit to a family farm can help stimulate a deeper conversation and understanding of the food system and economic relationships between producers and consumers. The intricate relationship between animal, farmer, and technology on a dairy farm can be fascinating to observe.

School grounds or other community building grounds are often workable options for planting gardens. With support from the Center for Ecoliteracy in California, students at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley have turned part of their schoolyard into a working garden called the "Edible Schoolyard." School garden projects started in the spring are often left unattended at the end of the school semester, making a perfect opportunity for summer out-of-school time program youth to pick up the tasks. Consider inviting a nursery owner to visit with youth at the program site in order to share gardening tips and suggestions. Libraries have many resources for gardening, nature studies, and nature games.

The following resources may be helpful in planning farming or gardening related experiences for an out-of-school time program:

www.ecoliteracy.org

www.gardengatemagazine.com/projects/kid.html

www.gardens.com/resource/children.htm

www.aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/kindergarden
www.usfarmnetwork.com
www.greenlink.org/offc/
www.4-h.org/

References:

Hazliza-DeLay, R. (2001). Remystifying the city: Reawakening the sense of wonder in our own backyards. Thresholds in Education, 27, (3-4), 36-40.

National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002). Community programs to promote youth development. Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth. Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer A. Gootman, eds. Board on Children, Youth and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.