

Success Stories

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CSU Extension-Head Start partnership reveals success for novices and experts

Connecting Head Start families with Boulder County Master Gardeners improves nutrition, food security, family bonding, and self-sufficiency.

Situation

On a breezy, warm day in early September, Isabella is grinning as she dances through a lush garden filled with a half a dozen varieties of tomatoes. She plucks a few cherry tomatoes off the vine and pops them in her mouth.

Her grandmother, Peggy, shrugs then smiles before explaining to a visitor that they can hardly keep them on the vine, her granddaughter eats them so quickly. Isabella and her grandmother perfectly illustrated the benefits of growing and eating your own food. Gardening gives people a chance to connect with nature, with their families, all while getting exercise and eating food at its most nutritious.

Gardening has been found to reduce chronic diseases by improving dietary habits while increasing physical activity. In times of economic downturn, gardening increases food security for budget-strapped and low-income populations by providing affordable and healthy food. Encouraged by these findings, Boulder County Head Start wanted to create a mentoring program that would teach its low-income family clients how to garden. With a pool of 235 highly trained volunteers capable of offering experienced, hands-on assistance, Boulder County Extension's Colorado Master Gardener program became an instant partner.

Extension's Response

Now in its second year, the Head Start Family Garden project is a joint effort between Boulder County Head Start and the Boulder County Extension Colorado Master Gardener program. The project attracted 15 families in 2009 and 14 in 2010. (Four families from the first year have returned).

As was the case last year, Head Start recruited families who are matched with Master Gardener volunteers. From sowing seeds to harvesting, Master Gardeners provide the supplies, tools, expertise, assistance and encouragement that help Head Start families learn how to garden. From late March through May, Master Gardeners work with families to locate garden plots at their home, prepare soil, and plant seeds and seedlings that families select to grow - from tomatoes to broccoli, peppers to carrots. Through the summer, the pros helped them mulch, identify weeds, and troubleshoot.

This year, the top winners of produce the families harvested and consumed were tomatoes, squash and cucumbers, though strawberries were popular with the children. Volunteers visited families weekly the first two months, then twice a month, or as needed, for the remainder of the growing season. What the Master Gardeners discovered was that many families, especially those who had been in the program the year before, needed little help.



The Bottom Line

- By teaching Head Start families how to grow their own food, Boulder County Master Gardeners are helping families create pathways to food security and self-sufficiency.
- By successfully engaging youth and their parents, Master Gardeners are growing new generations of gardening enthusiasts.

Contact Information

Carol O'Meara
CSU Extension, Boulder County
Horticulture Entomology Agent
9595 Nelson Road
Longmont, CO 80501
(303) 678-6377
comeara@bouldercounty.org

Extension's Response (Continued)

Nearly 43 percent of the Head Start families were experienced gardeners this year, and nearly 36 percent were somewhat experienced. Only slightly more than 21 percent of families needed a great deal of help from their mentors. Families are responsible for watering, weeding and harvesting their garden. To help Head Start families get into gardening, the Boulder County Extension Master Gardener program annually invests more than \$2,000 to provide the following supplies at no cost: compost, seeds, seedlings, tomato cages, hoses, shovels, rakes, soaker hoses, fertilizer, containers, and potting soil.

Results

Across town from Isabella, young Eddie is helping his dad weed, water and mulch their garden. Eddie is, his father Ralph says, dad's little garden companion. This second-year Head Start family is the envy of many of his neighbors. Final reports show that this is only one of the Head Start families who are successfully learning to grow their own food.

In 2009, it was clear that the majority of gardens produced an abundance of vegetables that gave families new and healthy eating choices. In 2010, the Master Gardener program has found that both the families that were involved in the program in 2009, along with new families, have been more successful year over year, as shown by numbers that track everything from success of the garden to consumption of produce. The numbers show that some of the minor problems the Master Gardeners faced in 2009 were solved this year. The proof: 100 percent of the families consume more produce than they did before the garden was harvested.

Half of the families considered weeding, watering and harvesting a project for every member of the family. Nearly 86 percent of the families who participate in the program say they'll garden again next year, equipped with the knowledge supplied by Master Gardeners. Two of the inexperienced gardeners from last year are now somewhat experienced, and one of the gardeners from last year moved from somewhat to very experienced. CSU Extension has tracked everything from the families' eating habits to their passion for gardening. These baseline assessments helped determine which family members spend the most time gardening, what they are learning, and if they are increasing their intake of healthy foods.

Among some of the findings: Older siblings of Head Start children seem to enjoy working in the garden with their parents, though the Head Start children enjoy watering and harvesting. And the grandparents of three of the Head Start gardens were very enthusiastic about creating a veggie garden, and involving their grandchildren in the process. Overall, parents and grandparents say that all of their children are motivated and delighted by gardening.

It is wonderful, parents and grandparents say, to watch a 5-year-old dash out to the garden in the morning, pluck a tomato and bite into it. It surprised two Master Gardeners that broccoli was popular with the young set. It wasn't as surprising that the four families who planted strawberries had happy children. The Head Start Family Garden project is quickly becoming a model for how Master Gardener expertise and resources can give families control over what they eat and how they spend time together. By helping families make informed gardening choices, by providing free tools and supplies, and by offering reassurance, Master Gardeners are helping families create pathways to food security and self-sufficiency.

"What surprised me was how they accepted me, and drew me in as part of the family. I helped them with the garden, but in return, they taught me so much. It was an amazing experience."

– Michael Arias
Boulder County Master Gardener

"It's been an incredible year. I've heard nothing but positive reports, so I can't tell you how much we appreciate the time these Master Gardeners put into the program."

– Deb Croteau
family services coordinator for Boulder County
Head Start

"Jo (Zeimet) was amazing. She helped tell us what would grow best where, and when we had a problem with a tomato plant, we called and she came right out. Our garden is thriving because of her."

– Noemi Contreras
mother of a Head Start child

By the Numbers

- Percent of Head Start families who plan to plant a veggie garden again next year: Nearly 86 percent.
- Head Start families who say growing a veggie garden increased their consumption of produce: 100 percent, with consumption increase ranging from 5 to 30 percent, with an average of around 19 percent.
- Percent of families who made the garden a family project: 50 percent.