

Sharing the difference CSU Extension makes in people's lives and their communities.

Growing the future

Junior Master Gardener promotes self-sufficiency and healthy habits for Teller County youth.

Situation

A 25-mile drive connects Cripple Creek residents to the nearest town with a large-scale grocer. In 2008, rising gas prices sparked community-wide interest in learning to grow food, despite the town's 9,500-foot elevation. An unused city-owned greenhouse behind the town's Parks and Recreation facility offered a much-needed space for high altitude gardening by people of all ages. But, most local youth didn't know how to garden. Mark Platten, Teller County Extension director, wanted to reverse that trend.

Extension's Response

In 2008, Platten received a grant from Colorado State University Extension to launch a Junior Master Gardener (JMG) program in Cripple Creek. The international JMG program was developed by Texas AgriLife Extension Service to promote a love of gardening and develop an appreciation for the environment through education and community service. The program helps students learn about plants, soils, ecology, insects, vegetable gardening and eating healthy foods.

Numerous community partners joined Platten in developing and operating the Cripple Creek GreenHousers JMG program. Larry Stebbins, a retired educator who runs Pikes Peak Urban Gardens, helped Platten modify the JMG Level 1 curriculum to fit the high altitude environment of Cripple Creek. The City of Cripple Creek and its Parks and Recreation Department provided facilities and recruited students. Many other partners donated materials, time, facilities, educational expertise and money. They are listed on the back of this report.

In the summer of 2008, 33 students from six to 14 years of age participated in the first ever program. Students learned about soils, water and compost and planted tomatoes, peppers, cilantro and other vegetables in five greenhouse plots. Residents from the Cripple Creek Rehab and Wellness Center helped students maintain these plots. Students also took field trips to explore native plants and terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, and to sample vegetables grown by local gardeners. They celebrated the end of the program with a harvest and cooking feast at the Aspen Valley Ranch (AVR) in Woodland Park. Following the feast, students were recognized with JMG certification.

Platten expanded the curriculum in subsequent years so repeat students could learn new information and skills. For example, in 2009, the program featured a class on native natural fruits. Students harvested wild raspberries and learned about food preservation by canning and making preserves.

Since 2008, over 120 Teller County youth have received JMG certification.



The Bottom Line

- The Teller County Junior Master Gardener program has expanded local food production and encouraged high altitude gardening.
- JMG motivates youth and their families to grow food, plant gardens, give back to their communities, and discover the benefits of eating healthy foods.

Contact Information

Mark Platten
CSU Extension, Teller County
County Director
(719) 686-7961
mark.platten@colostate.edu

Results

The Cripple Creek GreenHousers JMG program has experienced remarkable success in its three-year history. Student evaluations show that they gained the knowledge to grow a garden and are making healthier food choices. Some participants report trying and liking foods they've never eaten before. Students also say they have a better understanding of where their food comes from, and an increased awareness of the importance of the natural environment.

Participation in the Teller County fair gave students recognition for their efforts growing food. Ribbons were displayed at the Cripple Creek Parks and Recreation facility. This gave students a sense of success and accomplishment. According to Platten, learning to garden gave students the confidence and self-sufficiency to start their own family garden. Some families even adopted the JMG greenhouse plots following the program's end and donated surplus produce to the local food bank.

GreenHouser JMG students also learned leadership skills from cross-generation and peer mentoring. Youth learned from and worked with Master Gardeners, community leaders and residents of the Cripple Creek Rehab and Wellness Center. Older JMG students assisted younger students in managing greenhouse plots and helping them during educational activities.

In the summer of 2010, students experienced a new level of community involvement and civic pride with a free 'Soup For Community' event. GreenHousers made soup with the help of local junior high students. They used vegetables they had grown and produce that was donated by local growers. The Aspen Mine Center, a community food bank, provided stock, beans, breads and cookies. The local high school donated their kitchen and cafeteria. One hundred people attended the event, which featured a recognition ceremony for GreenHousers. Leftover soup was donated to a food bank in nearby Divide.

The community collaboration and combined outcomes of the GreenHouser JMG program has resulted in state and national recognition. In 2008, the program received the Excellence in Agriculture award from the Colorado Association for Environmental Education. In 2009, the program received a Diversity Award from the Colorado chapter of the Extension Professional's Organization, Epsilon Sigma Phi (ESP), and national ESP recognition in 2010.

Partners

The following individuals and organizations have played a key role in establishing the JMG program throughout Teller County.

City of Cripple Creek

Cripple Creek Parks & Recreation Department

Pikes Peak Community Foundation

Teller County Public Health

Colorado Master Gardeners of Teller County

The Catamount Institute

Cripple Creek Rehab & Wellness Center

Gordon Jackson Foundation

Teller County Fair

Nutritionist Jerianne Heimendinger

Gateway Elementary School

Cripple Creek-Victor Junior/Senior High School

Aspen Mine Center

Pikes Peak Urban Gardens

Diggin' in the Dirt