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Training and Supporting Volunteer Mentors for Juvenile Offenders in Urban Gardening

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Training and Supporting Volunteer Mentors for Juvenile Offenders in Urban Gardening

Abstract

This article summarizes 3 years of experience in training and supporting volunteer mentors for work with juvenile offenders in an urban gardening program. The program parameters are given, and the methods for selection, orientation, and training of volunteers are both described and commented upon.

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Adult volunteers are the head, heart, and hands of a healthy 4-H mentoring project with juvenile offenders. The Green Team Project is a 3-year partnership of Extension's 4-H and Urban Gardening programs and the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court for urban gardening with juvenile offenders.

Volunteer selection, training, and support are important aspects of the program. This article gives an overview of the Green Team Program and then shares the volunteerism lessons gleaned from the 3 years of experience.

1998 was the first year of 4-H volunteer involvement in the Green Team. Following a research design, 30 juvenile offenders were randomly selected from a pool of 60 designated by the court. The 30 Green Team youths were to garden twice a week for 5 months. A team of 40 volunteers was selected and trained to work with the youths in teams of one or two youths with an adult.

In 1999 and 2000, the program was modified from the original research model, and the court referred selected youths for community service with the Green Team, generally for 20 hours each. Gardening was on Tuesday evenings for 2 hours and on Saturday mornings for 3 hours. Again adults were matched with youths in teams of two or three.

Table 1.
Youth and Volunteer Participation in the Green Team Project, 1998 to 2000

Year	Total Youths	Total Youth Hours	Total Adults	Total Adult Hours
1998	27	1,117	33	775
1999	119	1336	71	1343
2000	44*	483*	40*	359*

* statistics through August 1, 2000.

Volunteer Recruitment was handled through word of mouth, through a request to the Master Gardeners program, and through newspaper and other media articles and announcements. Many volunteers have returned year after year. As is evident through the statistics, in the second year there were many short-term volunteers. Volunteers come with a variety of backgrounds. Some are Master Gardeners or others with a high interest in gardening. Others have little gardening experience but have a high motivation to serve and help the youth in the Green Team.

Volunteer selection over the 3 years was based on an application process that included a formal application, signing of a volunteer standards of behavior and youth protection policy, a reference check, and an interview with a Green Team staff member. In 2000, a police background check, conducted through the county, was added.

Volunteer training has evolved and will continue to be modified as experience dictates. In 1998, volunteers participated in an 18-hour training process that included 6 hours of garden training and 12 hours of the *Training Program for Leadership of Youth Groups* designed by a task force of the Association of Social Work with Groups. Youth-serving professionals with social work and educational backgrounds presented the program.

1998 Orientation Schedule

Group Formation Activities—2 hours
Understanding Youth Today
 Developmental and Social Issues of youth Today—2 hours
 Societal Issues Impacting Youth Today—2 hours
Understanding Youth Groups
 Group Process—2 hours
 Group Leadership—2 hours
Adult Leaders of Youth
Standards of Behavior and Liability for Volunteers—2 hours
 Burn-out and Support for Volunteers—2 hours
Garden Training Sessions—4 hours

This ambitious training program was of great benefit to some volunteers and considered overkill by some with social work or education backgrounds. In reducing the orientation to two sessions for the 1999 and 2000 seasons, we yielded to the request of many applicants to enter the program more easily. We supplemented the basic training with more on-the-job training.

Perhaps, in the process, we have sacrificed some up-front team building and understanding of the process of group development. We balanced this by bringing the experiences of the current volunteers into the training as each topic was covered. We have supplemented the group process training by ongoing reflections on the process as each gardening session is debriefed. The orientation and training has evolved to this:

2000 Orientation Schedule

Orientation Session—2 hours

- History of the Green Team effort and 2000 Plans
- Green Team Youth—Who are they and how are they sent by the court
- 2000 Green Team Daily Work Plan: Welcome, Ice- Breakers, Team Formation, Work Assignments, Break, Clean-up, Dismissal, Debriefing
- Structure and Behavior Guidance: What are the rules and how to handle infractions and problems
- Youth Development Reflections from the book *The Nurture Assumption* by Judith Harris and volunteer stories of positive encounters while gardening

Garden Training—2 hours.

Additional, ongoing training for volunteers has been through the 3-hour video conference *Youth Starts with You*, which centers on Relationship, Behavior Guidance, Motivating, and Communicating.

Key to the success of the program has been the work of the Green Team coordinator, who has served as a liaison with the juvenile court, as volunteer coordinator for the project, and as the facilitator of activities at the garden site. The position has been held by both Extension program assistants (paid for with grant money) and, in 2000, by a court employee with a strong social work background. The court's willingness to support the Green Team community service project in this way is a positive sign of the value of the program.

A key element of this coordinator's work is to match the youths and volunteers and to facilitate the beginning, break, and closing of the sessions. Fortunately, the strong leadership of the Extension Urban Gardening staff has directed the gardening plans and work. This allows the coordinator to focus on communication with volunteers and youths.

Volunteers bring their own special talents: story-telling, conversation, bringing special foods from their home garden, initiating a game of horse-shoes at a break, or telling about their own career path. Volunteers come with a variety of abilities to relate and form a bond with the youths. Coaching and developing such skills is the responsibility of the Green Team staff. Volunteers are

expected to work at strong contact with the youth during gardening activities but are discouraged from contact privately with youth outside garden activities.

The Green Team is youth development at its best: creating positive relationships between adult volunteers and youths in an activity valued in the community.

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