

## **Plants Grow Children: A Master Gardener School Enrichment Program**

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**The Benton Franklin Master Gardener's Plants Grow Children program has grown like Jack's beanstalk since it began in 1988. Master Gardeners started teaching plant science to elementary school children in Benton and Franklin counties that year. The success of the program is evident in the over 51,000 children reached since 1988. They started out reaching 1291 children the first year. The 10,305 children participating in 1995 were from 439 classes and attended 34 different schools.**

### **LESSONS**

The Plants Grow Children program is targeted at kindergarten through 6th-grade levels. Elementary schools are given seven choices of lessons: the Miracle of the Seed for kindergarten level, the Mini-Greenhouse for 1st grade; the Fantastic Peanut for 2nd grade; Tree-mendous Trees for 3rd grade; Composting with Worms for 4th grade; Everyday Insects for 5th grade; and the Flower for 6th grade. Each lesson involves an action learning activity that yields a "product" to take home, such as a seed planted in a cup or an insect magnet the children make themselves.

In addition to the action learning activity product, each student also receives a *handout to take home to her/his parents*. The handouts explain the Plants Grow Children and Master Gardener programs, thereby increasing the awareness of WSU Cooperative Extension. The handouts also provide seed and plant culture information for the appropriate lessons. Spanish versions were made available in 1993.

### **PARTICIPATION**

The highest participation is usually at the kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd-grade levels. Participation by grade level in 1995 was 1290 at the kindergarten level, 1412 at the 1st-grade level; 1568 at the 2nd-grade level, 1195 at the 3rd-grade level; 1559 at the 4th-grade level; and 1036 at the 5th and 6th-grade levels. The most popular classes have traditionally been the Miracle of the Seed, the Mini-Greenhouse and the Fantastic Peanut. Approximately 18% to 20% of the audience has been minorities each year.

### **EVALUATION**

Classroom teachers consistently have positive reactions to the program and look forward to its return every year. More than 90% of those teachers returning evaluations every year indicate that the classes introduce new topics or reinforce previously taught material. Over 90% also rate the quality of instruction as excellent.

## **BENEFITS**

The Plants Grow Children program does more than teach plant science and stimulate an interest in gardening. Classroom visits by Master Gardeners spread programming opportunities and extend awareness of WSU Cooperative Extension to potentially new audiences, especially minorities. At the same time, the classroom visits initiate a partnership between the classroom and WSU Cooperative Extension that's rewarding to students, Master Gardener volunteers, and teachers alike.

Another wonderful thing about the program is its adaptability for local clientele and special program needs. Various other counties and states have utilized the concept and modified the curriculum to fit their needs.

The program has received the 1989 Search for Excellence Award in Youth Programming from the National Association of County Agents, the Search for Excellence Award at the National Master Gardener Conference in 1989, and the Search for Excellence Award at the International Master Gardener Conference in 1993.

## **CONTACTING THE SCHOOLS**

In late-February or early March, forms are sent to all local elementary and parochial school principals to see if they are interested in signing up for the program. If they are interested, they must sign an agreement form, indicating that they will pay 20¢ per child to cover the cost of the learning activity supplies. They sign up for the classes on a registration form that allows teachers to indicate which lesson is requested, the teacher's name, class size, and grade level. Each school designates an individual to be the contact person for scheduling the classes. This may be the principal, an office secretary, or a teacher. The deadline for forms to be returned is usually before the end of March.

## **UNIT LEADERS**

Unit leaders are in charge of a specific lesson. They are responsible for organizing the volunteer teachers and assistants for that particular lesson. They determine when each volunteer is available to teach the classes and then they communicate this information to the volunteer doing the scheduling. Unit leaders are also responsible for assembling the needed supplies, parent letters, and evaluations needed by the volunteers who teach that lesson. Unit leaders may or may not teach, depending upon their preference.

## **ENLISTING THE MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEERS**

While schools are in the process of signing up for the lessons, the Master Gardeners are being asked to sign up as unit leaders, teachers, and teaching assistants for the lessons of their choice. We ask every volunteer who will be working with children to submit to a state patrol check of their criminal history and we ask for the names of two references who will indicate their suitability for working with children. Training by experienced Plants Grow Children teachers is provided. New teachers will often accompany experienced teachers to several classes before teaching the lesson by themselves.

## **SCHEDULING**

Once the registration forms are received from the schools, they are entered into a database (FileMaker Pro) set up to keep track of the information for scheduling,

billing, and evaluation purposes. The needed information is collated and provided to the individual who is doing the scheduling. The scheduler calls the schools and schedules the classes. Once the classes are scheduled, this information is communicated to the volunteer teachers by the unit leaders. The unit leaders then assist the volunteer teachers in finding teaching assistants and make sure they have their class supplies when needed.

### **GETTING READY**

Classes are taught primarily in April and May. Volunteer work parties are organized by the Cooperative Extension agent and the unit leaders to put together the materials needed for the action learning activities, such as filling cups with potting soil or stapling tree booklets together.

### **EVALUATION**

Each volunteer teacher leaves an evaluation form at the end of class for the classroom teacher to fill out and return to the Extension office. This evaluation provides affirmative action data, information on performance, and any changes that are needed. As soon as all the classes are completed, the evaluation results are entered in the database. The numbers of students contacted are tallied and the schools are then billed. Contacts are reported to the university as part of their 4-H School Enrichment program.

In late-summer or fall, all those Master Gardeners who helped with the program, especially the unit leaders and the teachers, are invited to an evaluation meeting to assess how the program went and to discuss needed changes for the next year.

### **BILLING**

Schools are billed on the basis of the actual number of students reached in the program. Schools are invoiced by the Benton-Franklin Master Gardener Foundation who co-sponsors the program. Bills are sent to the schools before the end of June and payment is received by the end of September.

This is a self-supporting program. Donations of seeds and other supplies are solicited every year, with donations defraying some of the costs of supplies. Donors are thanked and often provided pictures of the students benefiting from the program. They also receive a yearly report.

### **PROBLEMS MOST OFTEN ENCOUNTERED**

- Principals who lose the registration form or who don't notify their teachers on a timely basis of its availability.
- Late registration forms.
- Last minute schedule changes at the schools.
- Getting the billing out before the schools dismiss for the year.