

Children's Vegetable Garden Phil Hardberger Park

The Children's Vegetable Garden (CVG) is located in the Historic Homestead section of Phil Hardberger Park. It was started in 2016 and is a 16-week program for home-schooled children aged 5-14. The program is coordinated by our own BCMGs and led by BCMGs Kathy Breniman and Linda Cace.

Some families have been attending since the program first started. Typically, returning families make up about half of the participants, while the other half are new gardeners. This year, there are 43 children participating, with up to 3 children sharing a specific garden plot. This program enables home-schooled children to forge new friendships and to learn teamwork. Kathy Breniman states, "We have also observed older children helping the younger ones and families stepping up to help when another family has to be absent".

The children plant their plots under the direction of BCMG volunteers, many of whom have also returned year after year. Kathy says, "For volunteers, this program is a great opportunity to share knowledge and to pick up some new gardening tips from fellow gardeners. And nothing is better than watching a child eagerly eating freshly picked broccoli or hearing a child squeal in delight over that first ripe tomato!"

In addition to the family plots, 2 plots are designated for "experimental gardening," where volunteers can try out herbs and vegetables that are not planted in the family plots. They can then share what they learn (and some of the produce!) with the families. Some of the experiments have been spaghetti squash, tatume squash, Juliet tomatoes, fennel, tromboncino squash, and gourds. At the March 10th session, Melanie Short was passing out "herb bouquets," from the experimental plots, to the families and volunteers.

The program has also given volunteers a chance to try new things and solve problems. "For example", Kathy says, "we have observed a decrease in our fire ant population after we started applying dry molasses to our beds. We put a stop to the ground squirrels' destruction of our cole crops by caging each new plant with a simple wire basket (available at the Dollar Store), anchored with landscape staples. When the plants are bigger and better able to survive, we remove the baskets." Kathy says, "This program validates my belief that gardeners are the best people!"

Each week, the children are taught at least one garden activity and they also attend a lesson in an outdoor classroom. Carol White, the Education Coordinator, designs the curriculum from the National Junior Master Gardener material developed by Texas A&M for students aged 8 through high school. The students who complete a total of 12 individual or group lessons and the garden project will earn a certification from the JMG Program in "Vegetable Gardening." Carol covers topics on Plant Growth & Development, Soils & Water, Ecology & Environmental Horticulture, Insects & Diseases, Landscape Horticulture, Fruits & Nuts, Vegetables & Herbs, Life Skills & Career Exploration in the Agriculture Industry.

Carol teaches many of the lessons herself. On occasion, guest speakers come, such as the PHP Park Educator, Susan Campbell; PHP Conservancy Educators-Drake White and Mary Cross; Bexar County Agricultural Agents and Assistants-Ruby Zavala and Margaret Bass; other Master Gardeners,-Bill Swatner, Monika Maeckle, and Jesse Valdez; and Food Bank Chef/Food Educator-Roman Longoria.

On March 10, the children planted tomato plants and learned how to shield them from the wind with row cover. To date, they have planted potatoes, broccoli, cabbage, tomatoes, lettuce, and radishes. Due to the Covid-19, some sessions have been cancelled, but if and when they resume, they hope to plant cucumbers, yellow squash, jalapeño peppers, bush beans, and basil.

Carol White says, "This season is up in the air with the COVID-19. The students were able to work in the garden for three sessions before all the closures. The work they have done so far covers about 2-4 lessons. I am now rearranging the 2020 spring garden season into lessons they can take home to complete. I will coordinate with students and parents about the completion of lessons electronically or by phone. How much work they can do in the garden is not known at this time and it is a critical element to earning the certification. But I feel confident that the students will be able to earn their JMG Certification in Vegetable Gardening for this spring 2020 garden."

So, a big "THANKS!" goes out to the volunteers of this program:

Anna Rascoe	Cyndi Tourtellot	Daniela Oliver	Deborah Mayes
Gene Breniman	Joan Cleary	Juliana Robledo	Gayle Longoria
Kathy Breniman	Lee Zinn	Linda Cace	Marie LeBlanc
Melanie Short	Michael Sroczynski	Paula Peters	Sandra Kunder
Terry Larison	Carol White		

And to the Watering Team:

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