

# Youth learn gardening at NMSU agricultural science center

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In five New Mexico counties, public gardens provide communities with teachable moments and public awareness of xeriscaping, water conservation, weed management, soil analysis, pest management, and healthy eating.

Over the summer, the Youth Gardening Experience at New Mexico State University's Agricultural Science Center at Farmington provided a hands-on horticulture experience for members of San Juan County Girl Scouts Cadet Troop 10408 and Roadrunners 4-H Club.



Lionel Sandoval, summer intern from National Indian Youth Council, participates in the Youth Garden Experience program by maintaining the garden between classes. (NMSU Photo by Margaret West)

It's one of the science center's outreach programs, which aims to educate the community about plant science and help them develop gardening skills.

"This program was a wonderful way for the youth to learn about the value in vegetable gardening. They were a very enthusiastic group during the entire process of learning plant science and how to raise a vegetable garden." said garden instructor Margaret West, agricultural research scientist at the center.

"We posed the question to the youth, 'Why grow a vegetable garden?' Their answers included to have self-reliance and life-long enjoyment, and that the responsibility of gardening helped them develop leadership skills."

The six youth gardeners, ranging in age 10-13 years old, embarked on the four-month gardening skill experience beginning in May. They concluded their on-site learning in August.

“The youth attended plant science lectures and received hands-on skill development while planting and managing a garden at the science center,” West said. “They learned how to sow seeds, transplant, irrigate, fertilize, pest control, and weigh the harvested vegetables.

The young gardeners followed the eight steps to a successful vegetable garden as described in the NMSU publication “Home Vegetable Gardening in New Mexico.” Those steps are know your climate, plan before you plant, prepare the soil, plant your garden, fertilize for optimal crop production, water properly to improve yields, control pests, and harvest at the correct time.

“We planted the garden in three two-foot-by-six-foot raised bed boxes,” West said. “The project emphasis was on plant requirement knowledge and hands-on experience with gardening techniques, not family sized yield.”

Dan Smeal, plant and environmental science professor stationed at the Farmington science center, assisted with the design and installation of the micro-irrigation system for the youth vegetable garden.

After preparing the soil, the youth planted evergreen small onions, bush bean, carrot, butternut squash, yellow squash, zucchini, jalapeno, mirasol green chile, cucumber and tomato crops.

“The jalapeno, chile, cucumber and tomato plants were seeded in the science center’ green house at various dates as early as Feb.19 and transplanted by the youth on June 4” West said. “Remaining vegetable seeds were sown directly into the garden boxes on May 17.”

As the plants grew, the crop was watered and fertilized according to daily and weekly schedules with the assistance of Lionel Sandoval, summer intern from National Indian Youth Council.

“Even with Lionel’s assistance, there was plenty of opportunity for the youth to learn about pest control of insects and mammals, and weed management practices,” West said.

The youth reaped the benefits of their garden when they harvested the produce. They learned how agricultural researchers process a harvest by selecting the marketable produce and weighing it to determine the current market price for each vegetable.

“The total marketable price for the combined crop yields was nearly \$174. The youth developed a lifelong skill of vegetable gardening and the potential of raising food for a marketable Farmers Market product,” West said.