

FLOWER POWER

Enthusiasm blossoms as kids get growing

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STAFF PHOTO: BOB BIELK)
Members of the Junior Master Gardener Grow Team watch as Master Gardener Jayne Cleveland demonstrates planting techniques at Monmouth County Agricultural Building in Freehold Township.

Master Gardener Susan Zientek readied herself as 10 fourth- and fifth-graders charged the vegetable and flower garden.

"I want to see their faces," Zientek said.

The students were filled with awe as they took in the 50-foot-by-50-foot plot, seeing what had grown since their last visit.

"Look at them," said Zientek, 51, of Farmingdale. "This is their garden. They haven't been here in two weeks. Look at this energy."

Giant radishes were ready for picking. Flowers bloomed, and an assortment of plants grew including pepper, onion, zucchini, peas, lettuce, fennel, chard and alyssum.

"It's really cool," said fourth-grader Nessay Long, 10. "It just has a lot of plant life in it."

The 10 youngsters were from the Park Avenue School and Freehold Learning Center, two Freehold schools taking part in Monmouth County's first Junior Master Gardener Grow Team. Twelve are on the team, but two were absent on this recent day.

Texas A&M University developed the international learn-to-garden program, which is run locally by the county Master Gardeners Association. The association is composed of graduates of the county's Master Gardener program, which began in 1999 and is run by the local office of the Rutgers University Cooperative Extension.

The Master Gardeners Association raised \$2,500 — for such items as plants and seeds, garden tools, books and office supplies — to set up and run the program. A federal grant provided \$500 toward transportation.

The eight-class program ran from April 11 to June 8.

"Half the class is classroom, then they go out in the garden," said Diane Zahorsky, the extension's home horticulturist.

The garden sits behind the county Agricultural Building on Kozloski Road in Freehold Township.

The Freehold school district was in the pilot program because its schoolchildren already were involved with the extension's 4-H section and because of the district's closeness to the Agricultural Building, Zahorsky said.

"We didn't want to go into a school, we wanted to have it, here (at the Agricultural Building)," said Zahorsky, explaining the Master Gardeners program is based at the building and the garden area is maintained through use by the junior and senior master gardeners.

Signs posted at one plot hint at which garden belongs to the kids.

The signs read: "Pay attention," "Walk, don't run," "Don't eat what you don't know," "Be careful with tools," "Don't step on the plants" and "Share, please."

And, after all that, one sign advised: "Have fun" — which the kids do.

"They go into the garden and they kind of do their thing," said Michelle Hampton, 39, an Oceanport master gardener who teaches in the program.

Andy Colon, 10, a fourth-grader, was off by himself, planting basil. Eventually, he would take it home and use it on pizza, he said.

"He loves this," said Andy's mother, Nicole Provencher, 31. "It's his favorite day of the week. This and fishing — he's a big outdoors person."

Elsewhere in the garden, Yeraldy Tinoco, 10, another fourth-grader, planted sunflowers and zinnia.

"We got to pick our own place (in the garden)," Yeraldy said. "We got to plant cool stuff."

"I was surprised because everything grew so fast," said fourth-grader Jakaia Harris, 10.

Garden crops will be donated to Freehold Area Open Door, a Freehold food pantry that supplies goods to the needy.

"Part of this is showing them community service — donating food to the food bank," Zahorsky said. "And showing them how to grow vegetables to enter into the (Monmouth County) Fair."

The fair is scheduled for July 25 to 29 at East Freehold Park Showgrounds on Kozloski Road in Freehold Township.

So, although the program has formally ended, the Master Gardeners will continue working with the kids over the summer.

Before going out to the garden this day, the kids did classroom work — dissecting flowers and plotting a garden.

At first, Nessay's mother, Vanessa Taylor-Long, had to force her to get into the gardening program. Now, "she loves it a lot," said Taylor-Long, herself a gardener.

"It's very interesting because you get to learn about plants," Nessay said. "And you make your own garden."

"We want a new generation of gardeners," said Master Gardener Jeanne Patterson of Freehold Township. "We are the Garden State."