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## Latino Youth Involved in Urban Community Gardening

Sonia G. Morales Osegueda

*Washington State University Extension*

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### **Abstract**

Since Latinos became the largest minority group in the United States (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2011*), urban communities have experienced growth in Latino immigrants. This change in demographics helps fund employment opportunities in agribusiness, food processing, and harvesting of crops (Berry & Kirschner, 2002). This rapid growth of the Hispanic population has had, and will have, an important influence on the economic, political, and social life of the West, and on the nation as a whole. King County, Washington, has historically been a productive agricultural region with dairies, livestock operations, crop farms, and berry fields (King County, 2012). However, agriculture has decreased for many reasons, including urban encroachment, lack of technical support, high cost of land, and low profitability. These factors have discouraged young people from pursuing an agricultural career. In addressing those challenges, Washington State University Extension, through 4-H Youth Development, has designed and implemented an interactive agriculture program for youth. The program helps youth grow their knowledge of agriculture, environment, and natural resources. Youth learn that agriculture is everywhere and that many crops are used in food production. Furthermore, youth develop skills needed to achieve lifelong learning. The program includes gardening implementation in urban settings, which enhances the important role that agriculture plays in the national economy.

*Keywords:* immigrant population growth, urban agriculture, youth education

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## Review of Literature

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), around 15% of the world's food is now grown in urban areas (Municipal Research and Services Center, 2012). The economic well-being of our society depends on agriculture to supply affordable, safe, and abundant food as well as clothing, shelter, plants, animals, and natural resources. Introducing agriculture through gardens strengthens community bonds, and individuals meet others who are dedicated to making a difference in the lives of youth.

Urban gardening, now called "community gardens" (Lawson, 2005; Draper & Freedman, 2010), is not a new concept. It began in the United States around 1890 where individuals raised much of their own food at home. This concept is gaining new support among diverse citizen groups all over the country (Adam, 2011). Schools, colleges, and governmental and nonprofit organizations are coming together to give a fresh new meaning to "greening the city." Like other large projects, working in community gardens requires detail and finesse (Betterley, 2012).

What is more, community gardens, farmers' markets, and urban agriculture involve land use decisions, employment and job training, food processing and delivery, the creation of clean, green working spaces in urban areas, and much more. Community gardens can supply most, if not all, of a family's produce needs (Hagey, Rice, & Flournoy, 2012). Lastly, gardening instills an appreciation for agriculture and its importance in providing food and fiber for a growing world population (Upson, 2002).

Gardening is not just for adults! Gardening is a valuable tool for a variety of settings and content areas (National Gardening Association, 2012; University of Maryland Extension, 2013). It boosts kids' interest in school and learning and improves their attitudes about eating healthful foods and caring for the environment. Previous studies have demonstrated that children and youth who are actively engaged in garden projects show better and positive attitudes toward learning and education (Canaris, 1995; Dirks

& Orvis, 2005). Denver Urban Gardens (2012) stated that school gardens are "outdoor classrooms" that expand learning and provide engaging spaces for children to develop both a respect and a nurturing relationship with nature and their community. Furthermore, Habib and Doherty (2007) conducted a survey of community gardeners in Denver and found that 80% of participants who gardened at a young age had positive attitudes that impacted their lives more broadly.

Gardening offers children hands-on tasks that help them master skills and concepts involving science, math, reading, and writing (Upson, 2002; Betterley, 2012). Further, a study conducted by Klemmer, Waliczec, and Zajicek (2005) consisted of 3rd, 4th, and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students from seven elementary schools in Temple, Texas. Their findings revealed that students who participated in school gardening activities scored significantly higher on science achievement tests compared to the students who learned science without garden activities. Nurturing plants from seed to harvest can lead to increased feelings of confidence, self-esteem, and pride. In the garden, kids learn to cooperate and solve problems together.

Community gardens promote stronger neighborhood leadership, outreach, and volunteerism (Teig et al., 2009). Community involvement increases as parents, adult staff members, or volunteer educators usually lead informal education programs with youth (Carlson & Maxa, 1997). Because of their knowledge and skills, these individuals are needed to engage youth in hands-on agriculture and garden projects in school and community settings.

Washington State University Extension has worked in partnership with interested youth organizations to implement gardens at schools and in communities. Through the agriculture program, youth increase their ability to function more effectively as agriculturally literate citizens. They learn to break the misconception that food is produced at the grocery store. Additionally, youth learn that agriculture is everywhere, and many crops are used in food production. Through the wonder of a garden, students experience hands-on lessons in soil texture by feel,

pH concepts, soil preparation, and seed collection (Morales, 2009).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of the agriculture/gardening project is to implement gardening programs that use learning strategies to increase agriculture/gardening and life skills among Latino youth and community-based education programs in King County, Washington. The objectives were:

1. To engage youth in gardening projects,
2. To increase the number of youth with knowledge in agriculture,
3. To develop life skills through agriculture and gardening.

### **Program Implementation**

Washington State University Extension sets clear objectives in order to effectively serve the diversity of communities across the state. To engage Latino youth in gardening opportunities in King County, in 2012, 4-H Youth Development Program implemented gardening in South Park, Federal Way, Des Moines, and Renton communities with the participation of 54 Latino youths between 6 and 14 years old. The program focused on bringing together Latino youth and parents as volunteers to work in a multicultural environment. Youth experienced hands-on agricultural lessons supported by parent volunteers who came to help build the garden and to become involved in community growth.

### **Findings and Discussion**

At South Park, 23 children ages 6 to 13 participated in outdoor activities, such as planting, during the summer. The gardening captured kids' interest, taught them nurturing skills, and introduced them to healthful foods. At Federal Way, 18 elementary students identified different types of tomatoes and collected different types of beans. Students learned where beans come from and that they are a healthy source of protein. In addition, students cultivated life

lessons from gardening. In Des Moines, 10 elementary students and their families planted a garden with tomatoes, beans, chilis, cucumbers, pumpkins, and corn. One adult pointed out that she supported the children because they are the future, not just of gardening, but of life itself. Children learned that gardening not only taught them agricultural subjects, but it also taught them how to communicate and to solve problems together. Finally, at Renton, children explored and learned to solve real-world problems through hands-on activities. They learned to work cooperatively with others. The youth practiced patience and felt pride in their accomplishments. Also, they learned about the origin of crops planted while taking on the responsibility to care for the garden.

### **Conclusions**

Children increased their knowledge and awareness of gardening as a great tool to demonstrate that there is more to agriculture than planting and harvesting. Gardening offered a hands-on approach to learning. They learned the importance of the role that soil plays in agriculture and how their work has contributed to the food chain. Children also developed personal connections to the food system, and they felt inspired to care for their gardens with confidence, responsibility, and respect.

Parent involvement has a positive influence on the quality of their relationship with their children and enhances students' achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Morales, 2012). Caring parent volunteers enriched, enhanced, and helped create a safe environment for the garden activities. Moreover, gardening gave parents a sense that their children learned subjects necessary for their future and gained knowledge about growing food. Parent volunteers stated that gardening helped them to develop mentorship, leadership, conflict resolution, community organization, and teamwork skills. In addition, parents commented that community gardens helped children learn how to communicate effectively, to solve problems together, and to make good decisions.

The gardens allowed individuals and groups to

contribute their knowledge, skills, and experience in order to successfully work with children. This also provided opportunities to create an effective team that will actively be involved in all gardening needs and will support children.

Overall, the community garden empowered urban youth to be effective in many areas. Youth recognized that garden activities teach life and work skills through hands-on educational activities that helped them develop skills such as leadership, communication, teambuilding, and more. Finally, gardening offered a safe environment for kids to confidently interact with each other.

WSU Extension, on behalf of 4-H Youth Development, is making a positive contribution to diverse communities. WSU Extension partners with schools and youth organizations to create and facilitate opportunities for gardening education. This provides the opportunity to develop future agriculture professionals who are academically prepared to function in a rapidly changing food, fiber, and natural resources industry.

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