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Gardening grows life skills for teens *Helping elderly and disabled eat better*

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A unique gardening program for teens offered by the Williamsburg-James City County Community Action Agency goes beyond watering the plants.

The Green Team Community Gardens program was launched in January with classroom instruction. In March the teens took what they learned outside, where they began work on several gardens in the community.

Gardening expands on the agency's long-running Green Team program that offers teens experience doing housing and weatherization repairs for the elderly and disabled. The new program is covered by stimulus funds.



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Reba Bolden, executive director of the Community Action Agency, said the teenagers are paid a stipend of \$50 a week to tend the gardens.

The idea is engage boys and girls aged 16-18 from low-income families in constructive activities that focus on teamwork, life skills, goal-setting and decision-making. "They learn to be cheerleaders for each other and positively encourage each other," she said.

In all, 23 teens work with the James City County Master Gardeners to tend to gardens at Freedom Park, Lafayette Village and the Historic Triangle Community Services Center.

John Smith, who oversees the gardening program, said, "Sometimes kids don't get the opportunity to eat these kinds of things. We are trying to encourage them to be healthy and be conscious of what they put in their mouths."

The program has a financial educational aspect with a banking class by Wachovia. It helps them start a bank account and learn the difference between credit and debit.

Getting teens to stay focused on a physically taxing task like gardening can be challenging.

"The more and more they go along, I think they are starting to like it more," Smith said.

David Hofmeyer said he has learned about which plants need more water and where to place certain types of plants depending on their needs. "It's hard work, but I get paid," he said.

Jordan Graham has learned how complicated growing plants can be. He found that certain plants like potatoes and tomatoes can't be planted near each other because they prevent each other from growing.

"I thought gardening was you put a seed in the ground and it would grow," he said. "Gardening is a whole lot more."

Graham said seeing the plants grow and completing a task has other benefits. "It shows if you put work and time toward this, like a garden, you can accomplish anything if you put the work and time towards it," he said.

Dominique Gray has enjoyed earning money and learning about banking. "I never knew about banking or how to cash a check," she said.

Gray, who will be a senior in high school in the fall, said that the skills she's learning will go far. "I think it is helping us to find another job," she said.

The gardening program concludes in September. Bolden is looking for more funding to keep the program going. "We think it's a really good project, The kids receive a lot of benefit from it."

More — To make a donation to the Williamsburg-James City County Community Action Agency's Green Team call 229-9332.

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