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Encompassing a Sense of Belonging with Youth: Art-based exploration in Urban Gardening

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Abstract

This article showcases an arts-based project incorporating designs from youth participants in Project GROWL (Growing Real Opportunities in Work and Life). Project GROWL incorporates agricultural and environmental education with personal and professional development skills. Youth participants actively engage in an urban garden. These paintings were completed by youth and sprayed with a clear overcoat to protect them from the weather. All paintings and bee boxes were placed strategically around the urban garden to promote visual stamina for human and pollinating visitors. By creating these art pieces for the garden, youth found a deeper sense of belonging with this outdoor space. This activity also promoted by-in with youth to keep the garden safe and welcoming for all things living.

Keywords

Urban agriculture, art-based education, outdoor learning, STEAM

Cover Page Footnote

This material is based upon the work of Project GROWL, a project supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, United States (U.S.) Department of Agriculture, through a cooperative agreement with The University of Georgia under award number 2014-41520-22209. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), or the Children, Youth, and Families At Risk (CYFAR) Professional Development and Technical Assistance (PDTA) Center. We also credit the following students for their contribution in the art pieces: Alicia A., Jenaya B., Zenobia C., Camari F., Ashley G., Amari L., Maria L., Amy R., & Julius W.

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“To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.”

–Audrey Hepburn (1929-1993, Humanitarian)

“Gardening is the art that uses flowers and plants as paint, and the soil and sky as canvas.”

–Elizabeth Murray (1940-2007, Painter)

See appendix for art pieces created by youth engaged with this urban agriculture program.

Cooperative Extension faculty and staff identified the need for youth in urban areas to form a deeper understanding of agricultural and natural resource systems. Project GROWL (Growing Real Opportunities in Work and Life) aimed to increase science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) focus at the middle and high school levels that is highly relevant to agricultural sciences. An overarching objective of this program was to identify a method to serve more effectively an urban audience while providing a unique contribution unavailable through other available programs. An appropriate urban agriculture experience was the method to provide this objective.

Project GROWL provides agricultural and environmental science programming to urban youth at-risk. This program design allows youth to explore new experiences and opportunities while developing personal and professional life skills. Project GROWL recruits students in the seventh grade using a cohort style model to retain students each year, culminating in their tenth-grade year. The program started during the 2015-2016 school year and now has a total enrollment of 45 students.

The desired long-term results of Project GROWL include: 1) youth will create a personal work and life plan, 2) youth will begin to measure progress toward their individual work and life goals, 3) youth will implement and manage an urban agribusiness from conceptualization through operation, and 4) youth will influence the policy of local food, agricultural and natural resource systems while negotiating often conflicting views, perceptions, and evidence. Youth, community partners, and volunteers encouraged participation and sustainability efforts through the design and implementation of the urban garden.

Project GROWL youth participants have been major champions in the design, creation, and up-keep of the Project GROWL urban garden through collaborations with Extension volunteers. Youth led the efforts to clean up the ¼ acre space on Martin Luther King Day in 2017. They continue to have their hands in each part of the process. They used their hands to nurture the soil that in turn nurtures the plants. Their hands created beautiful hand-painted garden signs and bee boxes that have welcomed human and pollinating visitors.

Each bee box and garden sign represent the creativity and unique motivations of each youth participant. Inspired by tribal designs, the main sign, which reads “Project GROWL 4-H Garden”, was created using painters’ tape and various colors. The sign represents the vibrancy

and cultural significance of the participants and community members who use the garden today. GROWL youth participants were asked to create a sign that represented how they felt gardening fit into their experiences in Project GROWL. One female participant in the second cohort showcased her artistic skills by hand painting the sign with a quote from Audrey Hepburn, which highlights the importance of gardening and its impact on positive youth development.

The “Head, Heart, Hands, Health” sign was plastered with the many hands of Project GROWL 4-H members, connecting back to the structure of 4-H within Project GROWL. “Planting the Future with Youth” (see Appendix) embodies the Audrey Hepburn quote and the Head, Heart, Hands, Health painting by reminding garden visitors that our future relies on agricultural and environmental education and positive youth development. Using stencils and various shades of paint, GROWL youth participants painted bee boxes while referencing memes and videos found on social media. Each bee box represented a different participant and their own artistic visions. Trees, flowers, and colors reveal each participant’s unique perspective and will leave a legacy in the Project GROWL garden.

Appendix



Project GROWL 4-H Garden sign designed and painted by youth.
Photo credits: Nykita Howell

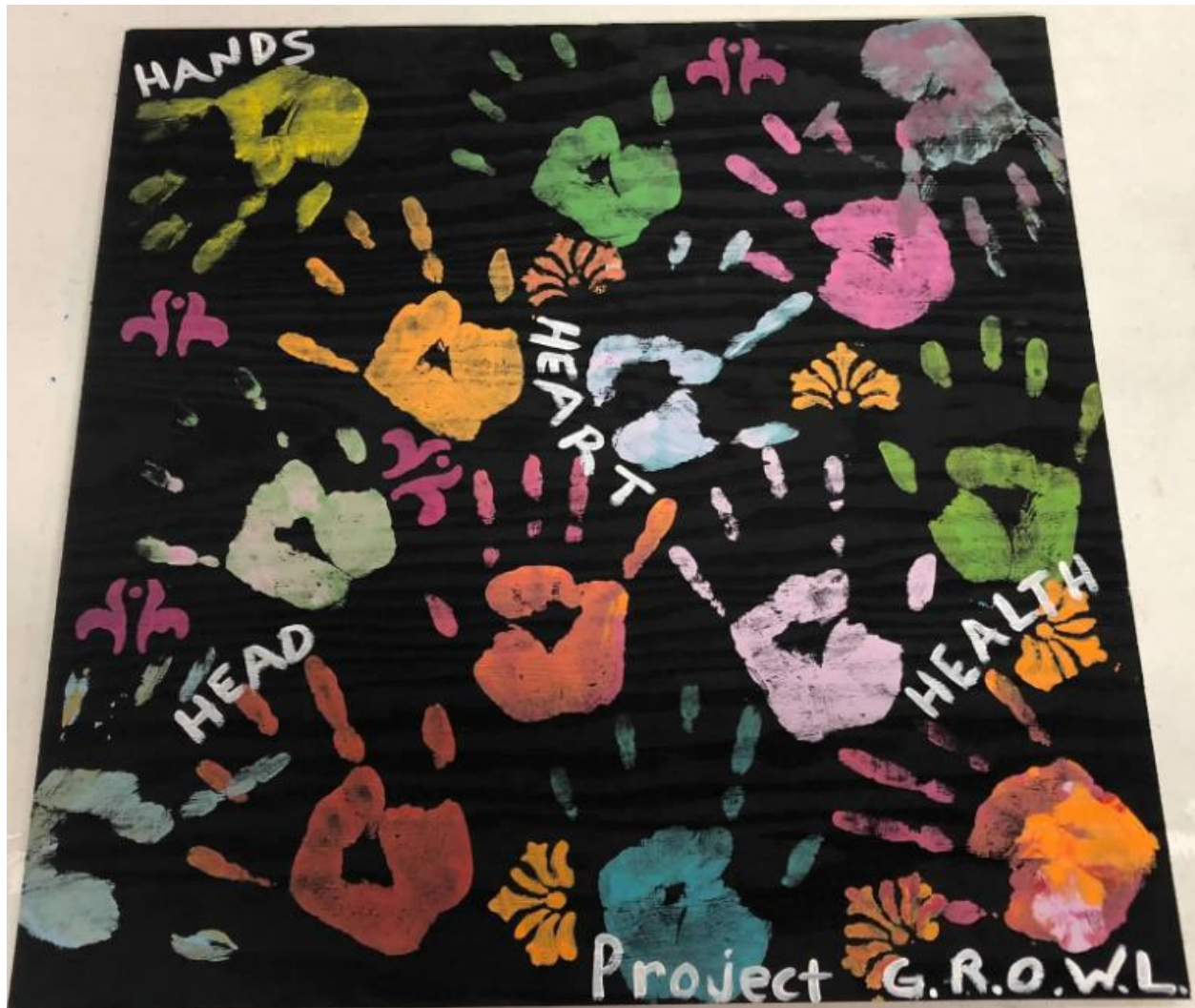


Early stages of Project GROWL 4-H Garden sign designed and painted by youth.
Photo credits: Nykita Howell



“To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.” -Audrey Hepburn
Designed and painted by a female participant in the second cohort.

Photo credits: Nykita Howell



Head, Heart, Hands, Health
Designed and executed by male and female youth participants
Photo credits: Nykita Howell



Planting a Future with Youth
Designed and painted by youth participants
Photo credits: Nykita Howell



Bee boxes, constructed and painted by youth participants, set up in a pollinator garden bed.

Photo Credits: Chasity Tompkins



Bee box being painted by a female participant in the first cohort.
Photo Credits: Chasity Tompkins



Bee box being painted by a female participant in the first cohort.
Photo Credits: Chasity Tompkins