Food For Thought: A Plant-Based Partnership with Roanoke City Public Schools, Master Gardeners and Master Food Volunteers

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Program Overview

The Food For Thought program is an elective offered at James Madison Middle School in the Roanoke City Public School system. The program was established in 2013 as a collaborative effort between the City of Roanoke, Virginia Western Community College, and Roanoke City Public Schools.

The elective spans three class years, ranging from sixth to eighth grade. The coursework for the Food for Thought program is specifically designed with consideration towards Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Healthcare (STEM-H). It includes elements of agriculture, earth science, ecology, anthropology, biology, nutrition and hands-on chemistry and math as they relate to cooking.

Roanoke’s VCE office partners with the school to provide Master Gardeners (MG) and Master Food Volunteers (MFV) to co-teach a series of classes focused on soil, flowers and seeds, companion vegetable planting and insects; and companion herb planting in the vegetable garden.

MGs first work with the students to learn about one of these topics. One to two weeks later, MFVs return to the class to offer a hands-on cooking session connected to that topic. Students prepare the food and sample each dish. Each volunteer session is approximately three hours per day, one hour per grade level.

Session Topics

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<th>Master Gardener</th>
<th>Master Food Volunteer</th>
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<td>Soil Composition</td>
<td>Soil Salad</td>
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<td>Flowers/Seeds</td>
<td>Seed Energy Bites</td>
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<td>Companion Planting/Herbs</td>
<td>Caprice Salad &amp; Bean Salad with Mint</td>
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<td>Companion Planting/Insects</td>
<td>Fruit Kabobs &amp; Smoothies</td>
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Survey Results

Results from MFV survey conducted in Spring 2013:

- 84% of the students tried new foods
- 75% knew that half their plates should consist of vegetables and fruits
- 80% felt more comfortable reading a recipe
- 76% felt more comfortable measuring ingredients
- 82% felt more comfortable using a knife
- 68% made some improvement with their cooking skills

Sample Curriculum #1 – Seeds Session

The Master Food Volunteers’ goals (for all sessions) are to:

- Reinforce the Master Gardener's lesson that precedes ours,
- Teach cooking skills, including how to use peelers, kitchen knives, graters, and can openers,
- Give students ideas for healthy foods that they can easily make at home, which reinforce nutrition concepts learned throughout the course.

Sample Curriculum #2 – Soil Session

In this session, Master Gardener activities help students explore soil components and structure, including:

- Observing a soil sample mixed with water as the various components settle out in layers,
- Feeling, smelling and even listening to clay, silt, sand and organic materials and describing the properties of each sample component,
- Observing which soil components allow water to run through or impede water flow.

Future Directions

- Explore opportunities for expanded topics/sessions
- Improve and increase evaluations/outcomes tracking
- Incorporate increased use of school garden into MFV sessions

Acknowledgements

Tremendous thanks are due to all the Master Gardener and Master Food volunteers who dedicate their time, energy, and creativity to the students at James Madison Middle. We also wish to recognized the Food For Thought program as a whole, notably Anna-Beebe Sachs, whose care and concern for the health and wellbeing of children of Roanoke is an inspiration to us all.