Educating Urban Youth on Horticulture as a Profession or Hobby through Fair Participation

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Young people often do not know about the many areas of horticulture as a profession. Generally, youngsters ages 5 to 18 often have difficulty raising an animal to show at agricultural fairs due to costs, space, and deed restrictions. Pasco County Extension has developed a program for young people allowing them to participate in the fair and obtain an opportunity to learn about raising plants, marketing, and other aspects of the horticultural industry. These students learn about different types of plants (including perennials, woody landscape material, foliage, etc.), growth characteristics, sales techniques, and showmanship. Through education, they learn how to keep track of their costs, identify plant problems, and hone pruning techniques. Students even learn marketing skills, culminating in sales at the end of the fair. Workshops, mandatory educational meetings, 4-H project books, and mentoring with professionals and Master Gardeners are used in the program. Each year between 40 and 50 4-H or FFA students select and raise plants, then show and sell them at the annual county fair. Students create a marketing display plan and display, and answer technical questions posed by judges as if they were selling to an educated lay person (resident) (Fig. 1). Awards are given for the commercial quality of plants as well as garden center knowledge and display appearance. All plants are auctioned off on the last day of the fair to local businesses and area residents who were marketed to by the participating youth. As a result, these young people are rewarded for their efforts by receiving above-market prices for their plants. The 2013 plant show grossed over $14,000 for their 120 plant lots. The prices for each lot ranged from $60 to over $1,000 per lot. The median price was $150 for each lot, and most youth showed more than one plant lot or about $325 per youth. Cash add-on prizes can raise their take-home “pay” significantly. Many youth participate for several years, honing their skills. Some students have indicated an interest in pursuing horticulture as a profession as a result of their successes, including a couple of local “success stories.” This educational approach would be relatively easy to adopt in other counties, and is especially good for an urban environment. Start-up costs are low. Holding the show and sale in conjunction with the fair creates a built-in plant show audience; fairs appreciate the additional draw and attraction of families and businesses attending their fair, and give young people a chance to shine with their displays throughout the length of the fair. Pasco County Agents would be happy to share our process with any county.

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