

A Youth-operated Certified Compost Production and Distribution Scheme

Final Report for FNC00-306

Project Type: Farmer/Rancher

Funds awarded in 2000: \$15,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2002

Matching Non-Federal Funds: \$40,157.00

Region: North Central

State: Michigan

Project Coordinator:

[Leroy Ray, Jr.](#)

The Farm School Cooperative

Project Information

Summary:

PROJECT BACKGROUND

This grant operation involved compost gardening of vegetable crops, marketing and evaluation of the hands on production system. The project examines and evaluates science modules where youth are conducting small scale vegetable crop production using earth friendly natural science resource protection approach. The farm headquarters contains forty acres with a large farmhouse, science labs, bunkhouse, pond and woods. We grow a big vegetable garden and have walnuts, apples, cherries, a blueberry patch, horses and trees in our natural undeveloped woods.

We had garden sites in Vandalia, Covert, Bloomingdale, Cassopolis, Grand Junction and Pullman. Elementary aged boys and girls are conducting the garden operations learning how to compost, produce, and market to local residents.

This grant enabled us to continue our research on compost and refine our small scale production and marketing. Two new families added had not practiced sustainable vegetable crop production via their own compost efforts. The second focus fits well with goals of USDA/NRCS. Those goals are to enlarge the pool of candidates for positions in government agencies and protecting our natural resources. We reach youth that 4-H and Envirothon have not. The third point we examined organic certification comparing criteria of Tennessee and Michigan. Both states criteria proved complex, costly, and require an enormous tedious paper trail. Our youth are evolving and learning how to follow the certification paper trail.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND RESULTS

We asked seven adult professional growers, from this region, what questions they would like answered. We used their most frequent questions:

- 1) What crops did you produce? Mustard greens, green beans, cucumbers okra, peppers, zucchini, squash, corn, watermelons, cantaloupe and pumpkins
- 2) Why did you select these crops? Growers identified these crops as most popular with area consumers

- 3) What kind of compost did you create? Compost created used domestic plant materials, some manure, paper, grass clippings and worms.
- 4) What did you do with the produce? The produce was sold to local residents door to door and at the area farmer's market
- 5) How did buyers respond to the children growers? Consumers were excited and enthusiastic - very positive. Consumers want more produce.
- 6) What is the organic certification process, its benefits and costs? The organic certification involves detailed paper trails on origin, composition, chemical composition, status, dates and related logistical notations. Accountability is expected. End results of the certification process is to ensure that reduced harmful materials and known toxics are not found in the produce. Consumers want to believe their foods are safe.

The project goals are to involve youth and families in compost generation, safe veggie crop production; to impact the under representation of minorities in science; and to prepare them for staff positions within the USDA/NRCS. Youth growers were involved in many discussions and presentations given by expert certified organic compost technicians. Hands on labs were conducted to provide experience in real practice.

Crops are dependent upon variables (weather and pests) over which growers have little control. Our grower's techniques and applications are essential to crop productions. Our growers must provide ample water and keep harmful pests from plants. The youth began to research their produce by learning how deep the different seeds were to be planted, how much water was needed for the plants to produce and the difference in the time it takes for the vegetables to produce. They also had to read, experiment and learn ways to keep the insects off the plants.

Process:

Four different residences started compost piles in the fall of 2001. They were started with leaves, grass clippings, the dead plants from the garden sites, manure, worms and throw away vegetables and fruit from our homes. This was the first time the youth tried to compost and the results were there was not enough compost generated for the 2002 gardens, reason being, they piled too high and did not turn enough. This year they altered the process by spreading out. They learned that meat scraps, fat, bread and pastries attract pest to compost bins. The process: compost, sow seeds, cultivate, harvest, market and evaluate.

People:

The people who assisted with the project were parents of the youth involved, the people who leased the land to us, and employees from the NRCS. The instructors at the winter camp workshops that were held are employees from the USDA, Sauk Trails RC&D, NRCS, Michigan State Extension and Teachers and Professors from High Schools and Universities.

The results achieved will be very valuable for next year, that is, much bigger gardens will be planted and more varieties of vegetables will be grown to keep up with the community demands, wants and needs. More and more people are beginning to look for out chemical free vegetables at the Farmer's Market each week.

Results:

Eighteen growers produced eleven varieties of vegetable crops on four different sites in three communities. Seven compost bins had plant materials and horse manure, from the Bloomingdale headquarters site, to create the first batch of compost for the gardens. Children who worked the gardens harvested, marketed and sold the produce to families nearby, informing and educating, as they traveled around. Children growers are engaged in learning and teaching their families and

community residents about composting and sustainable gardening. The results offered real positive evidence/illustrations making the community aware of what the youth achieved and also beginning to make them aware of healthy food. We measured by the fact that there was never enough, produce almost always ran out and we could not keep up with demand. This was better than expected and plans are already being made to be able to fulfill the demands next year. Instead of bags of vegetables we intend to concentrate on baskets and bushels.

Discussion:

From this grant we learned that more consumers are willing to purchase the vegetable crops we are producing; composting is not popular and can be added to the production scheme when education about it is provided; parents want their children involved; consumers are willing to support the growers; some vegetables seem to attract more pests than others, water is essential; certain materials are not suitable for use in compost bins.

We learned how to recruit our growers from among the lot of youth not willing to work without dollar incentives. We are connecting with experienced growers who know how to produce organic crops. The design and size of our bins have been modified to get faster results for our use. It pays to listen to the growers who have solved problems we might confront.

Advantages: consumers are excited and supportive even if they do not understand specifically what we are doing. We are engaging more people to pay attention to environmental issues. We have not found as many pests as growers indicated we might to date. Our consumer pool is expanding and demand is increasing.

Disadvantages: time to work and transportation to and from garden sites remain a major problem to solve each year. Getting the individual home owner to pay attention to the paper trails and origin of materials used for the bins. The detailed paper work is a barrier for some growers. We are and would be willing to provide information to requests for additional information about this project.

OUTREACH

We used the following methods to tell others about our projects:

- 1) Word of mouth
- 2) Announcements at clubs and churches
- 3) Flyers distributed at community events
- 4) Email
- 5) Network telephoning
- 6) Newspaper

Field day attendance: Rodeo - 800 attendances. Several major presentations were made to Proviso Leyden, Chicago about 1200 youth attended. Motherhood of Detroit about 200 adult attended. Presentations in four different churches averaged about each 150, and two family reunions had over 200 each.

Research

Participation Summary

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 or SARE.



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