

## **Junior Master Gardener program set for Greater New Orleans**

The LSU AgCenter and the Bayou Land Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council recently secured over \$32,000 in grants to develop a Junior Master Gardener program in the Crescent Region.

The funds came from the Cox Foundation (\$5,000), Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation (\$25,000) and the Ella West Freeman Foundation (\$2,000).

These funds will be used to purchase supplies and to hire a part-time employee to oversee the projects.

Bayou Land Resource Conservation and Development Council is a non-profit, all volunteer, member-based organization funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that focuses on natural resource conservation, development and use in Jefferson, Lafourche, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. John, St. Charles, St. Bernard, and Terrebonne parishes, said Alton James Jr., coordinator for the Bayou Land Council.

“It just makes sense for us to work with the LSU AgCenter on this initiative,” said James. “With the AgCenter’s personnel here in the area and their expertise in program delivery, we would only need to assist with identifying host schools and obtaining necessary funding to bring the program to area schools.

The goal for the Junior Master Gardener program is to grow kids by igniting a passion for learning, success and service through a unique gardening education, he said.

Two schools in New Orleans are participating now, according to Russell Harris, LSU AgCenter horticulture agent, who is spearheading the effort, along with Traig Varnado, LSU AgCenter 4-H agent and Hendrix Broussard, the Southern University 4-H agent in New Orleans, will be looking for more schools to add to the effort.

Schools already in the program are Langston Hughes City Park Academy and McDonogh City Park Academy.

“We’ve been working with schools in the city that are interested in developing school gardens, but neither the schools nor the AgCenter has had the funds to fully implement a Junior Master Gardener curriculum in the schools,” Varnado said.

The role of Bayou Land RC&D is to provide the vehicle for local citizens to plan, develop and complete projects like the Jr. Master Gardener Program, James said.

LSU AgCenter staff and Master Gardener volunteers train teachers, volunteers and students in the Junior Master Gardener program, Bobby Fletcher, LSU AgCenter regional director said.

“Gardening projects for children in a school setting provide an extraordinary learning opportunity,” Fletcher said. “They learn first-hand about plants, agriculture, nature and the outdoors, and they learn how fresh food is grown.”

The purpose of the program is to get into the schools and work with the students in groups in the garden using the Junior Master Gardener curriculum, Harris said.

“We will be working with third through sixth-grade students, letting them know the importance of plants and how they are used by people,” Harris said.

Children are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables they grow and prepare and improve their attitude toward consumption of new fruits and vegetables, Fletcher stated.

“In addition, third- fourth- and fifth-grade students who participated in school gardening activities scored significantly higher on science achievement tests compared with students who did not experience any garden-based learning activities,” Fletcher explained.

The RC&D Council serves as a source of technical assistance and provides financial resources, if needed, to carry out action-oriented plans for the social, economic and environmental enrichment, according to James.

“Local leadership and support are key elements for any successful project. We have worked with the AgCenter on other projects like this in the past and are looking forward to develop a strong, student-led gardening program in the area,” James said.

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