

Here's to Another Round

By Arianne Fosdick, UNH Cooperative Extension

Every August for the past three summers I've set out to judge the gardens of our 4-H Garden Program participants. The 4-H Garden Program is a lovely little program that begins every year in March when the paperwork is sent out. This "Garden Packet" is comprised of ten, double-sided pages that contain all manner of guidelines, deadlines, score sheets, and information our potential gardeners need to know. Every year when we meet to reflect on the program we vow to pare down the packet, and every year we realize that each item present is important and can't really be taken out. And so the beast goes out, bulk-rate, and we wait to see who will complete the necessary forms and take on the challenge of diligence, commitment, and focus that comes with growing a 4-H garden.



Gabriel George,
of Helping Hands 4-H Club in
Woodsville, with his 4-H garden.

To give some idea of the grit of 4-Hers, even with all this paperwork we have 41 gardeners this year. Kids can choose to plant flower, vegetable, or container gardens, and many plant all three. Seeds are given out at a workshop in April. Everybody uses the same seeds, making the playing field at least somewhat level at the start. From here though, it is a widely diverse playing field. Some kids come from gardening families and will have their plot nestled next to their parent's well-tended beds, while others are starting from scratch. One apartment dwelling gardener plants her container garden in a wheel-barrow. This way she can follow the sun across her small yard and avoid too much rain. Another family of 4-H gardeners boasts at least 8 gardens to be judged between the whole lot of siblings. In years past these gardens have been well-intended tangles of weeds. But this year, determined to actually get some produce from their labor, the family invested lots of time into early season mulching. They put down shredded newspaper in their raised beds, and cardboard and carpet in their rows, and effectively cut their weeding needs by at least half. Limited by a small back yard already busy with a chicken coup and the random accumulation of family life, they decided to save space by trellising everything they could. Instead of climbing over plants to find other plants, their cucumbers, melons, tomatoes, and beans are all neatly climbing their sapling-framed trellises.

There are many joys involved in this yearly task of garden judging. One is seeing the gardens, like the one I just mentioned, change from year to year. The biggest is being shown a child's very own garden by the child him or herself. Though most kids don't love weeding or the other leg-work of gardening, they are truly taken with the magic of seed, soil, and the eventual product. I guess this could be said for some gardening adults too, both about the leg work and about the awe and pride in what we've planted. This stays with us no matter how many years pass.

Because of this simple, easily attainable joy, I urge you all, in the quest that we're all on to be better humans, to plant something any chance you get. Plant spinach now, plant garlic in October, save this article until January 1st and add to your list of resolutions the words "plant something." Don't get bogged down with doing it perfectly in the beginning. Take as your model one beaming 4-H gardener who had three barren flower boxes and one glorious nasturtium plant blooming in the fourth. Or the boy whose cucumber and melon seeds had been washed away, but whose sunflowers were so big that his weighty cat Christmas could be seen climbing up them (but unfortunately not on command).

Use these 4-H gardeners as your inspiration, and use the rest of us at UNH Cooperative Extension for your information. Call the office at (603) 787-6944 with your gardening questions, or attend our next gardening workshop “Frost Protection and Winter Crops” on Wednesday, August 25th, from 5:30 to 7:00 pm at the Grafton County Complex in North Haverhill, NH.