



GREEN GUARDIANS

Summer Youth Training Series Program Report September 2025

Prepared by:
Kyla Muhammad
Will County Program Director
The Conservation Foundation



Summary

In the summer of 2025, The Conservation Foundation (TCF), Heart Haven OutReach (H2O), and Will County Community Development Division's We WILL Grow Community Garden Program (WWGCGP) offered the Green Guardians summer program for the second year. The Green Guardians program provided 22 Romeoville & Bolingbrook area high school students with 15 contact hours of training, interactive engagement, and education about gardening, environmental restoration, and environmental career pathways, across six 2.5-hour workshops and an opportunity to participate in an outdoor recreational field trip. For each workshop, participants were provided with door-to-door transportation from their homes to workshops held at Lyman Woods in Downers Grove, McDonald Farm in Naperville, Hidden Oaks Nature Center in Bolingbrook, O'Hara Woods Nature Preserve in Romeoville, Morton Arboretum in Lisle, and College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn. Twenty-one of 22 participants (95%) successfully completed the program and received a certificate of completion and either a \$200 (for new participants) or \$250 (for team leaders) cash stipend for attending at least 5 out of 6 workshops.

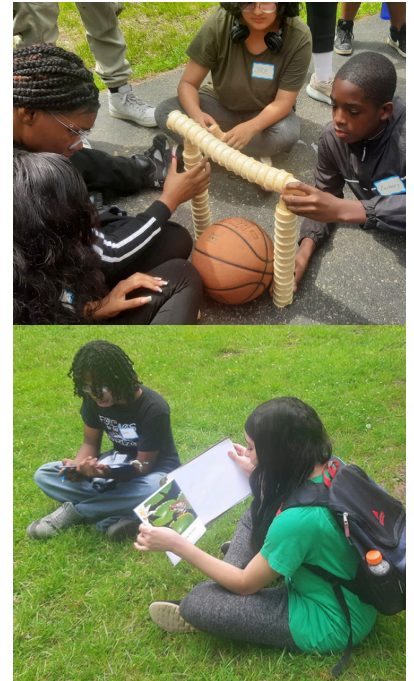
Based off feedback from 2024 pilot program participants, the 2025 program aimed to increase the cohort size from 20 to 25 students, allow for up to 5 returning participants to act as team leaders, increase contact hours from 10 to 15, increase experiential learning opportunities and visit more locations, better leverage H2O staff as facilitators through a TCF-led staff training, and improve the social connections between the participants through adding in a teambuilding-focused workshop session.

Participants in the 2025 program reported that the cash stipend, exploring different natural area sites, completing hands-on activities, and learning about gardening and environmental restoration skills were the aspects of the program they most enjoyed. The program inspired 35% of participants to be more interested in volunteering for environmental stewardship activities like tree plantings, restoration work, environmentally focused community science projects, etc. Upon completing the program, the number of participants with a strong interest in learning ways to mitigate climate change also increased from 27% to 40%. For participants that entered the program with a moderate interest in pursuing a green career, the program strengthened their interest in exploring green career pathways. Overall, 85% of participants were satisfied with the program and 90% said they would recommend the program to a friend.



Program Background

In 2023, TCF completed listening sessions with a variety of organizations serving Bolingbrook area youth and repeatedly heard from stakeholders that the community was concerned about supporting the social-emotional and mental health needs of teenagers. Per the CDC, in 2023, 4 in 10 (40%) high school students felt persistently sad or hopeless and nearly one-third (29%) experienced poor mental health. These feelings were found to be more common among LGBTQ+ students, female students, and students across racial and ethnic groups. Additionally, stakeholders were concerned about social isolation and disconnection from the outdoors because of a lack of access, high electronics and social media use (77% of high school students reported social media use several times a day in 2023 per the CDC), COVID-19, and other factors. Despite these challenges, community members noted that teens have a pronounced interest in climate change impacts, water conservation, growing culturally relevant foods, and environmental stewardship, but do not necessarily have an educational or exploratory outlet to explore these interests and concerns. Research studies have also shown that learning in nature can support social-emotional wellbeing including improved relationship skills and a reduction in stress, anger, and aggression.



A priority of the WWGCGP was to provide youth from low-income households in Bolingbrook & Romeoville within DuPage Township with workforce development training opportunities related to sustainable agriculture, environmental sustainability, and healthy growing practices to help improve local capacity and interest in these fields. Per the 2022 Will County Community Health Assessment, 62% of Bolingbrook High School students and 61% of Romeoville High School students are from low-income households vs. the Will County high school average of 23%. Therefore, recruiting program participants from these high schools was a priority.

A theme of H2O's 2025 summer programming was 'Discovering Your Spark' which provided teens with different opportunities to uncover and explore their true passions, talents, skills, and dreams. The mission of H2O is 'to transform the lives of (at risk) struggling teens through caring relationships and programs that support healthy development on an emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual level.' Over the last 2 years as H2O has collaborated with TCF, it was clear that the teens had an interest in the outdoors and the positive impact it could have on their overall development. As a community partner of the Valley View Community Unit School District 365U and the Plainfield School District 202, Heart Haven OutReach has daily contact with teens in the Bolingbrook, Plainfield, & Romeoville area, making H2O well positioned to recruit and spread the word about the Green Guardians program with youth who would benefit from opportunities to participate in this very special program with TCF.

To address these collective priorities, TCF, H2O, and WWGCGP piloted the Green Guardians program in summer of 2024. The program provided 20 Romeoville & Bolingbrook area high school students with 10 contact hours of training and education about gardening, environmental restoration, and environmental career pathways, across five 2-hour workshops and an opportunity to participate in an outdoor recreational field trip. For each weekly workshop, participants were provided with door-to-door transportation from their homes to workshops held at McDonald Farm in Naperville, O'Hara Woods Nature Preserve in Romeoville, and Morton Arboretum in Lisle. All 20 participants successfully completed the program and received a certificate of completion and a \$200 cash stipend for attending at least 4 out of 5 workshops. Overall, 100% of participants were satisfied with the program and 70% said that they were more likely to engage in environmental stewardship. With the success of the pilot program, the partners agreed to continue the program in summer of 2025.

Program Objectives

With the goal of combining the collective priorities of the three organizations while also aiming to address the needs and interests of teens, the main objectives of this training series were to match Bolingbrook and Romeoville area high school youth's environmental interest with skill development and learning opportunities and to foster connections among participants and the environment. Upon successful completion of the workshop series, the aim was for participants to have substantially increased their a) knowledge of possible green career pathways, b) aptitude for fundamental gardening and restoration skills, and c) interest in environmental stewardship and/or pursuit of additional environmental education or employment opportunities d) and to remove socioeconomic barriers to program participation like limited access to transportation, income, and food.



Program Structure

Green Guardians is a program created and administered by TCF, H2O, and the WWGCGP that provided 22 Romeoville & Bolingbrook area high school entering 9th to exiting 12th graders with 15 contact hours of training and education about gardening, environmental restoration, and environmental career pathways, across six 2.5-hour workshop training sessions and the opportunity to participate in an outdoor recreational field trip in the summer of 2025. Workshops were held weekly from May 29th to June 26th and on August 7th and took place at Lyman Woods in Downers Grove, McDonald Farm in Naperville, Hidden Oaks Nature Center in Bolingbrook, O'Hara Woods Nature Preserve in Romeoville, Morton Arboretum in Lisle, and College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn. The field trip took place at The Forge Adventure Park in Lemont on August 9th.

Based off participant feedback from the 2024 pilot program, the 2025 program aimed to increase the cohort size from 20 to 25 students, allow for up to 5 returning participants to act as team leaders, increase contact hours from 10 to 15, increase experiential learning opportunities and visit more locations, better leverage H2O staff as facilitators through a TCF-led staff training, and improve the social connections between the participants through adding in a teambuilding-focused workshop session at the start of the program. TCF led a training session for 3 H2O staff on April 22nd at McDonald Farm to prepare staff for co-facilitation of the workshop series.

TCF primarily developed the program structure, coordinated location logistics, and provided the workshop instruction, H2O primarily provided door-to-door transportation for all participants, handled the main marketing of the program and registration, and participant and guardian communications, and the WWGCGP primarily served as a program catalyst, provided funding to support the program, and consulted on program structure.

The Green Guardians program was designed to address and overcome potential barriers to program participation by teens in low-income households where limited access to transportation, income, and food are more likely socioeconomic factors at play. Participants were picked up and dropped off at their homes and transported to workshop locations, cash stipends were provided to encourage participation in this program versus pursuit of other income opportunities, snacks and beverages were provided at each session to help promote participant focus and engagement, and the number of sessions and duration of sessions were designed to balance meaningful exposure and skill development while not requiring an extended time commitment that could seem daunting for teens that do not currently spend much time in outdoor spaces. Additionally, enrichment materials and the outdoor recreational field trip were provided to participants, so that costs would not inhibit their ability to practice newly acquired skills at home or to participate in outdoor recreation activities that might otherwise be inaccessible.



Program Content

Session #1 - Orientation + Social + Nature Connections

May 29th at Lyman Woods Nature Center + Preserve, Downers Grove

Co-led by Downers Grove Park District staff, this session provided a program orientation for the participants and focused on building both social connections amongst the participants through engaging, outdoor teambuilding activities that also incorporated environmental education and fostered nature connection through participation in nature mindfulness activities. The goal of this session was to get the participants socially engaged with each other all while incorporating sensory, environmental, and nature wellness aspects in the process.

Session #2 - Learning Ecological Gardening Basics

June 5th at McDonald Farm, Naperville

In this session, participants learned fundamental gardening skills including planting, weeding, and plant care, and about various types of gardens including a raised bed, backyard-style garden, pollinator gardens, and permaculture/edible forest gardens. Participants learned about the importance of native plant gardens, soil health, compost systems, and garden relationships with local ecosystems. Participants planted herbs and vegetables, toured a working organic farm, and learned about various garden tools and agricultural equipment. Participants were given a tomato plant, planting containers, gardening gloves, gardening tools, and herb seeds, so they can experiment with growing vegetables and herbs at home incorporating the practices taught at the session throughout the summer.

Session #3 - Naturalists, Stewards, and Scientists

June 12th at Hidden Oaks Nature Center, Bolingbrook

Co-led in partnership with the Forest Preserve District of Will County, participants explored through experiential learning activities, the work of and jobs related to environmental education and interpretation, including animal husbandry. Participants received an overview of land stewardship and ecological restoration, including the elements of healthy ecosystems, impacts of invasive species, restoring the balance of ecosystems, types of tools used in restoration, and ways to assess the outcomes of restoration work. Participants reviewed equipment safety and cut honeysuckle and created brush piles. Afterwards, volunteer opportunities related to environmental fields, including community science such as plant and animal monitoring efforts were shared with participants.

Session #4 - Exploring Forest Ecology

June 19th at O'Hara Woods Nature Preserve, Romeoville

In this session, participants deepened their understanding of forest ecology through various hands-on activities. Participants learned about the importance of trees and their associated plants and soil life; threats to local woodlands; and wildlife of woodlands. Small groups spent time identifying tree species, measuring trunk diameters to estimate tree ages, and learned why having diverse tree species in a forest system is important to the ecological system. Participants hiked through the forest and learned what makes an Illinois Nature Preserve stand above other natural areas and what special qualifications are needed to earn that status. The group learned how to use technology such as iNaturalist and SEEK for plants and fungi, as well as Merlin Bird ID to identify bird song. Afterwards, participants searched for invertebrates under logs and learned how logs are ecosystems themselves. Log critters were identified and returned to their log habitats.



Program Content (Cont'd)

Session #5 - Becoming a Tree Keeper June 26th at Morton Arboretum, Lisle

Co-led by the Chicago Region Trees Initiative and Morton Arboretum, participants learned about the importance and value of trees in terms of climate change, biodiversity, and human health through calculating the quantitative benefits that trees provide using the iTree website. For creative engagement, the participants made sun print art from leaves, told the story of a tree, and created and drew imaginary creatures that had to match customized features and habitats. Participants also toured Morton Arboretum's herbarium and learned about the purpose of herbariums, how plant specimens are preserved, and examined over 100-year-old plant specimens. Afterward, participants learned from a panel of arborists and Student Conservation Corps leaders about the role of arborists and getting started in green career fields.

Session #6 - Careers in Agriculture + Horticulture August 7th at College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn

In this session, participants toured the College of DuPage (CoD) horticultural spaces, including greenhouses, classrooms, and the Sustainable Urban Agriculture outdoor student farm lab. Participants learned about the crops grown by CoD students and harvested crops for CoD's on-campus food pantry. Participants also discovered different horticultural and agricultural careers and education options, including CoD's new Horticultural Therapy program and found out how these programs work directly with other programs like Culinary Arts, Environmental Sciences, as well as local social services and food security initiatives.

Field Trip + Celebration

The three hour field trip on August 9th at The Forge Adventure Park in Lemont served as both an opportunity for participants to engage in various outdoor recreational activities including archery, kayaking, canoeing, and orienteering, and to celebrate their successful completion of the program.

Materials

As part of the program, participants received tomato plants, 5-gallon grow bags, garden gloves, a gardening tool, a compass, a journal with stickers, a bug box and net, a tick remover tool, herb seed packets, 2 indoor pots, and a tape measure to take and use at home to practice skills.



Program Incentives

Each program participant that attended at least 5 out of 6 of the workshop series sessions received a certificate of completion and a cash stipend. New participants received \$200 stipends and team leaders received \$250 stipends. Twenty-one of 22 participants (95%) earned the cash stipend.

Cash Stipends



Per the U.S. Census' 2022 American Community Survey, 10.5% of Bolingbrook residents and 8.4% of Romeoville residents under age 18 are living in poverty and given this plus the fact that some teens may have limited opportunities to earn money due to transportation and other socioeconomic limitations or household obligations, offering a \$200 stipend for participation in the program seemed to serve not only as a significant incentive for program participation and completion, but also as an acknowledgement that the skills that the participants are learning and providing are of economic value.

\$200 stipends were paid to 17 first-time participants and \$250 stipends were paid to 4 team leaders in recognition of the additional responsibilities and leadership expected of serving in that role.

Stipends were paid in cash to afford participants the maximum flexibility in how they'd like to use the funds and to help ensure there are no barriers for participants being able to access the funds.

Certificates of Completion

Participants received a certificate of completion acknowledging their successful completion of the program and may list this program experience when applying for future opportunities. Additionally, graduates of this program are eligible to apply for the Paul Pirotti Memorial Scholarship and The Conservation Foundation Environmental Scholarship if they meet the other eligibility requirements.

Program Assessment

All 22 of the program participants were surveyed at the start of the program and 20 participants completed the survey at the conclusion of the program to assess their prior experience with and exposure to nature and the outdoors and to assess growth in interest in environmental stewardship and/or pursuit of additional environmental education or employment opportunities and skills development.

Program Outcomes

Cash stipends were an important part of the program for participants. 95% of participants completed the program and received the cash stipends and 70% said that earning the stipends was an aspect they most enjoyed. This information confirms that offering the cash stipends was a key incentive to facilitate successful program completion of participants. Part of the H2O philosophy is holding teens to high expectations because of the belief they are more than capable to meet and even surpass those expectations, which can help lead them to live even more successful and meaningful lives. Green Guardians laid clear expectations, holding teens accountable and because teens were given the chance to earn a stipend, they met those expectations. In order to do that, the teens needed to be reliable, consistent and committed to attending and participating in the sessions. This taught them work ethic and the rewards that can follow. Successfully completing Green Guardians helped build self confidence, giving participants courage to continue to step into future opportunities that may have felt out of reach previously.

Participants were satisfied with their overall experience and would recommend the program to others. 85% of participants were satisfied with the program and 90% said that they would recommend the program to a friend. Several program participants added in their survey comments that they loved the program and thought it was a fun experience.

Program Outcomes (Cont'd)

The program inspired some participants to be more interested in volunteering to help the environment and find solutions to climate change. 35% of participants said they are now more interested in volunteering for an environmental stewardship activity like tree plantings, restoration work, environmentally focused community science projects, etc. than before they started the program. Prior to the program, 50% of participants had never volunteered for an environmental stewardship activity and 27% weren't sure if they ever had. Additionally, after the program, participants overall reported a stronger interest in caring for the environment and sustainability. Upon completing the program, the number of participants showing a strong interest (10 on a scale of 1 to 10) in learning ways to mitigate climate change also increased from 27% to 40%.

Participants most enjoyed learning ecological gardening and restoration skills, exploring local nature sites, doing hands-on activities, and learning about environmentally-related careers. Aspects of the program that participants reported they most enjoyed were getting to travel to and explore different outdoor locations (60%), learning gardening and growing skills and environmental restoration skills (50%), having hands-on opportunities to learn a broad range of skills (45%), and learning about green career pathways (40%).

The extreme heat waves that occurred during the program period and extended outdoor time of the program likely resulted in a temporary decrease of other outside time spent outside. During the program period, participants reported that the frequency of time spent in natural areas like parks, forest preserves, and gardens went down by 13% from either frequently (4+ times per month) or sometimes (2-3 times per month) to occasionally or rarely (1 or less times per month). Participants also reported that time recreating or relaxing outside during the program went down by 21% from either frequently or sometimes to occasionally or rarely. From mid-June to early July and again in early August, there were heatwaves with max temperatures consistently over 90 degrees Fahrenheit. For sessions 5 & 6 and the field trip, the temperature was over 90 degrees, so the sessions had to shift indoors or within shaded areas as much as possible and participants did provide feedback about the high heat being the factor they least liked about the program. These factors plus participants spending significant outdoor time each week throughout June, participants likely were trying to minimize being outside more than was necessary. It's expected that these trends identified during the program period are likely temporary, especially given the overall participant satisfaction with the program and interest in doing more environmental-based volunteering in the future.

For participants that entered the program with a moderate interest in pursuing an environmental or agricultural career, the program strengthened their interest in exploring a green career field. Prior to starting the program, 23% of participants expressed a low interest, 54% expressed a moderate interest, and 23% expressed a high interest in pursuing an environmental or agricultural-related career. However, after the program, 25% of participants expressed a low interest (+2% change), 45% expressed a moderate interest (-9% change), and 30% expressed a high interest (+7% change) in pursuing an environmental or agricultural-related career. Additionally, for the participants that already had a strong interest in green careers, the program reinforced this interest and provided confirmation to continue exploring green career pathways. However, for participants that had a low interest in green careers at the beginning, the program reinforced a disinterest in green career fields, but a preference for supporting environmental efforts from a volunteering capacity. Having the opportunity to engage in this hands-on learning for participants to better understand different green career fields, roles, and responsibilities can be invaluable when considering post-secondary educational options and reducing time and money spent on careers that are not ultimately the right fit for students' goals and interests.

To further support the participants that still have a moderate to strong interest in exploring green careers, Heart Haven Outreach is exploring additional opportunities to provide support for participants to further their environmental education and experiences.