



Summer Youth Training Series



2026 Program Report

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A program provided by:



GREEN GUARDIANS

Summary

In the summer of 2026, The Conservation Foundation (TCF) and Heart Haven OutReach (H2O) offered the Green Guardians summer program for the third year. The Green Guardians program provided 15 Romeoville & Bolingbrook area high school students with 12.5 contact hours of training, interactive engagement, and education about gardening, environmental restoration, animal habitats, and environmental career pathways, across five 2.5-hour workshops. For each workshop, participants were provided with door-to-door transportation from their homes to workshops held at Camp Fire Illinois Prairie, McDonald Farm in Naperville, College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, O'Hara Woods Nature Preserve in Romeoville, Morton Arboretum in Lisle, and the DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center in Glen Ellyn. Fourteen of 15 participants (93%) successfully completed the program and received a certificate of completion and a \$200 cash stipend for attending at least 4 out of 5 workshops that were held.



Based off feedback from the 2025 program participants, the 2026 program aimed to provide better balance between time spent indoors and outdoors reducing exposure to high temperatures, incorporate more information about animals and wildlife, increase experiential learning opportunities, maintain a diverse array of program locations, and continue incorporation of more elements of social interactions amongst the participants.

Due to both a change in funding sources and H2O programming capacity, the cohort size was reduced from 25 to 15 students, first-time participants were prioritized for program participation, and the program schedule was truncated to 2 sessions per week, so the entire program would be completed by the end of June.

Due to severe weather predicted for the 6th session of the program related to water quality and an inability to reschedule the session prior to the end of the program, that session was cancelled.

Participants in the 2026 program reported that the cash stipend, exploring different natural area sites, completing hands-on activities, and learning about gardening skills were the aspects of the program they most enjoyed. The program inspired 57% 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, 100% of participants were satisfied with the program and 93% said they would recommend the program to a friend.



Program Background

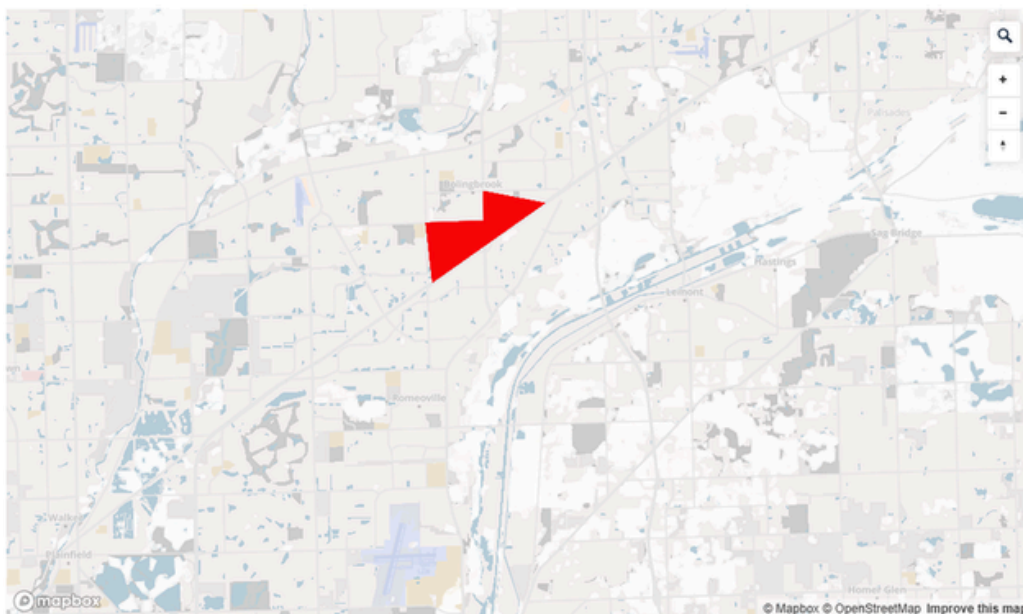
In 2023, TCF completed listening sessions with a variety of organizations serving Bolingbrook area youth and repeatedly heard from stakeholders that the community was concerned about supporting the social-emotional and mental health needs of teenagers. Per the CDC, in 2023, 4 in 10 (40%) high school 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.



Historically, Green Guardians was designed 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. The 2025 Will County Community Health Needs Assessment states that 33% of households (1 in 3) in DuPage Township are asset-limited, income constrained, and employed at a level that's above the poverty line, but at a level that makes it difficult to meet essential living expenses. Furthermore, the 2022 Will County Community Health Assessment stated that 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%. The Center for American Progress, also identified census tracts in Bolingbrook within the top 25% for nature loss within Illinois (see map). Considering these collective data points, recruiting program participants from Bolingbrook and Romeoville was a priority.

Nature deprivation hotspots are distributed across the contiguous United States

Census tracts in the top 25 percent in terms of nature loss in their state, 2020



Source: Conservation Science Partners, "Revisiting the Nature Gap" (2025).

Map: Center for American Progress

Program Background (cont'd)

A theme of H2O's summer programming over the last few years has been '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 3 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 areas, 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 TCF and H2O's priorities, the Green Guardians program was piloted in 2024 with support from Will County's We Will Grow Community Garden program. With strong survey results for the 2024 program and again for the 2025 program, the partners agreed to continue the program in summer of 2026.

Program Objectives

With the goal of combining the collective priorities of the 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 program, the goals were to substantially:

1. Increase participant knowledge of possible green career pathways
2. Increase participant aptitude for fundamental gardening and restoration skills
3. Increase participant interest in environmental stewardship and/or pursuit of additional environmental education or employment opportunities
4. Remove socioeconomic barriers to program participation like limited access to transportation, income, and food

Program Support

TCF and H2O thank the following organizations for their educational and/or location coordination support the 2026 program:

*Forest Preserve District of DuPage County
College of DuPage
American Horticultural Therapy Association
Chicago Region Trees Initiative
& Morton Arboretum
Camp Fire Illinois Prairie
Forest Preserve District of Will County
Bolingbrook Park District
Village of Romeoville*

TCF and H2O thank the following organizations for financial support provided for the 2026 program:

**WHEATON BANK
& TRUST COMPANY, N.A.**
A WINTRUST COMMUNITY BANK



Program Structure

Green Guardians is a program administered by TCF and H2O that provided 15 Romeoville & Bolingbrook area high school entering 9th to exiting 12th graders with 12.5 contact hours of interactive engagement and education about gardening, environmental restoration, animal habitats, and environmental career pathways, across five 2.5-hour length workshops. Workshops were held twice a week from June 1st to June 17th with a pre-program orientation and teambuilding session on May 28th at Camp Fire Illinois Prairie in Bolingbrook and a graduation celebration on June 24th at the Bolingbrook Community Center. Program sessions took place at McDonald Farm in Naperville, College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, O'Hara Woods Nature Preserve in Romeoville, Morton Arboretum in Lisle, and the DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center in Glen Ellyn.

TCF primarily developed the program structure, coordinated location logistics, and provided the main workshop instruction, while H2O primarily provided door-to-door transportation for all participants, handled the main marketing of the program and registration, planned the orientation and graduation celebration, and handled participant and guardian communications.

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 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 - Learning Ecological Gardening Basics

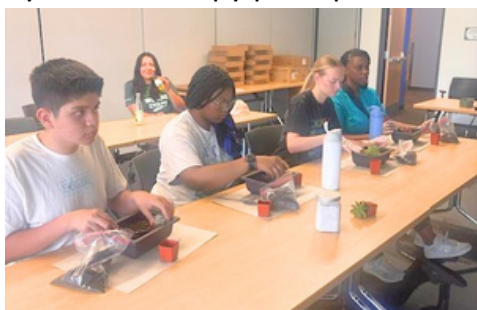
June 1st at McDonald Farm, Naperville

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 gardens' relationships with local ecosystems. Participants planted herbs and vegetables, toured a working organic farm, and learned about various garden tools and agricultural equipment.

Session #2 - Healing Powers of Nature

June 3rd at College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn

Co-led with the College of DuPage, participants learned about different ways that nature-based interventions can promote psychological and emotional wellness and made native plant selections for a therapeutic garden project coordinated by the American Horticultural Therapy Association. Participants participated in a horticultural therapy session provided by an instructor from College of DuPage and also learned about and participated in a mindfulness-centered nature walk inspired by forest therapy principles.



Program Content (cont'd)

Session #3 - Animal Health, Conservation, & Habitats

June 8th at DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center, Glen Ellyn

Co-led in partnership with the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, participants toured the wildlife conservation center and expanded their knowledge of wildlife rehabilitation as a practice and as a tool for conservation efforts. Participants thought critically about the differences and similarities between wildlife rehabilitation and conservation. Participants also went on a habitat hike where they increased their awareness of nature and their interest in the natural world through observation and discussion.



Session #4 - Creating Climate-Ready Canopies & Communities

June 10th at Morton Arboretum, Lisle

Co-led in partnership with Chicago Region Trees Initiative (CRTI), participants learned how plants can help make communities better ready for climate change impacts and explored the ways different types of habitats store carbon and water. Participants worked in groups to research and select climate-adaptive and appropriate tree species for a number of different scenarios. Participants also learned about green career pathways related to trees. Participants that attended and were actively engaged in this session also received \$50 Visa gift cards through a career readiness grant program administered by CRTI.



Session #5 - Exploring Forest Health & Restoration

June 15th at O'Hara Woods & Nature Preserve, Romeoville

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 also reviewed equipment safety and performed basic restoration tasks.



Session #6 - Water Quality of Our Waterways (Cancelled Due to Weather)

June 17th at Urban Stream Research Center & Blackwell Forest Preserves, Warrenville

Participants were to learn about the importance of water quality and methods to assess water quality. Participants were also to tour the Urban Stream Research Center and learn about the pioneering work the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County is doing related to their Aquatic Species Recovery Program and their propagation of freshwater mussels to improve the health of local rivers and streams.

Orientation and Graduation Celebration

The participants attended a program orientation, which provided an overview of the program, details of transportation and communications, and included team building activities led by staff at Camp Fire Illinois Prairie. A program graduation event was held on June 24th at the Bolingbrook Community Center. Participants and their families were invited to celebrate accomplishments, play games, and eat dinner together.



Materials

As part of the program, participants received pepper and herb plants, 5-gallon grow bags, animal tracks playing cards, a trifold field guide, a compass, a tick remover tool, herb seed packets, and a tape measure to take and use at home to practice skills.

Program Incentives

Each program participant that attended at least 4 out of 5 of the workshop series sessions received a certificate of completion and a cash stipend of \$200. If the participant attended the Morton Arboretum session, they also earned a \$50 Visa gift card through a Morton Arboretum grant program. Fourteen of 15 participants (93%) earned the cash stipend.

Through sponsorship by GEODIS, participants also received a Green Guardians t-shirt and 12-piece gardening kit at the end of the program.



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. 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 15 of the program participants were surveyed at the start of the program and the 14 participants that earned the stipend 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.

Ninety-three percent (93%) of participants completed the program and received the cash stipends and 79% 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.

One hundred percent (100%) of participants were satisfied with the program and 93% said that they would recommend the program to a friend. Several program participants added in their survey comments that they really enjoyed the program and would participate again if eligible.

Program Outcomes (cont'd)

The program inspired most participants to be more interested in volunteering to help the environment.

Fifty-seven percent (57%) 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, 67% of participants had never volunteered for an environmental stewardship activity.

Participants most enjoyed learning ecological gardening and growing skills, exploring local nature sites, doing hands-on activities, and learning about animals and their habitats.

Aspects of the program that participants reported they most enjoyed were having hands-on opportunities to learn a broad range of skills (71%), getting to travel to and explore different outdoor locations (57%), learning gardening and growing skills (57%), and learning about animals and their habitats (50%).

Participants having a high interest in gardening and agriculture increased from 53% to 64% as a result of the program, reflecting an 11% increase.

With two-thirds of participants having never taken an environmental class or workshop before, almost 80% had a strong interest in doing so as a result of the program.

At the start of the program, 67% of participants indicated that they'd never taken an environmental class or workshop before with 47% stating they had a low or moderate interest in doing so. After the program, only 21% had a low to moderate interest with 79% indicating a high interest, representing an increase of 26%.

The majority of participants reported learning a substantial amount of new information throughout the program.

Fifty-seven percent (57%) of participants reported learning a lot of new information about environmental topics and careers and 29% reported learning a decent amount during the program. These are indicators that the scope of environmental topics as well as the depth covered was appropriate level for most of the participants.

As a result of the program, nearly three-quarters of participants plan to increase the amount of time they spend outdoors, which supports improved health.

Seventy-one percent (71%) of participants reported being more likely to spend time outdoors than prior to participating in the program. Prior to the program, 53% of participants said they spent an average of 2-5 hours outside per week and 27% said they spent an average of 1-2 hours outside per week. Increased time outside is associated with lower blood pressure, reduced risk of chronic disease, better sleep, improved mental health, and decreased anxiety.

The program mostly reinforced the participants' existing interest levels in pursuing an environmental or agricultural career and didn't significantly move that interest positively or negatively.

Participants' interest level in pursuing a green career field stayed fairly consistent from the start to the end of the program with 27-29% having a low interest, 29-33% having a moderate interest, and 40-43% having a high interest as indicated on the pre-program and post-program surveys.

Participants had a strong interest in caring for the environment and finding ways to mitigate the impacts of climate change, which stayed consistent throughout the program.

Seventy-three percent (73%) of participants indicated having a high interest in learning of ways to deal with climate change at the start and end of the program. Participants also showed a high interest (79-80%) in caring for the environment from before through after the program.