

El Paso's troubled youths learn gardening through agricultural project

by **María Cortés González** \ **El Paso Times**

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Officials at the Juvenile Probation Department may have a few green thumbs among them.

In partnership with the El Paso County Master Gardeners, young people on probation and in the Challenge Academy have started learning how to garden at Ascarate Park.

Ray Bader, director of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, said the project is part of a grant from the Paso del Norte Health Foundation.

"It's a big initiative for healthy eating and active living," Bader said.

Israel Tena, supervisor for the Challenge Academy, said the academy is a post-judication program where juveniles have been sentenced to stay for a period of five months minimum for delinquent behavior.

Tena said he chose about 16 students from the Challenge Academy to learn about gardening based upon their interest.

"At first, they had a lot of question marks on their faces," said Tena, speaking about the juveniles helping to prepare raised beds. "But then they started working with them and they do seem to enjoy it."

Juveniles who are on probation and have to do community service also have been participating. About 20 youths are in that situation.

Tena said it will be a good experience for the juveniles to plant a seed, nurture it and see results from their own work.

"All they know about vegetables right now is to go to Walmart," he said.

Tena said the other positive result is seeing communication improve between juveniles and their parents.

"The parents are doing the work with them," Tena said. "So they're working together and you see that link of communication opening again."

Bader said the juveniles have already installed an irrigation system with the gardeners' help. They have worked on about 16 beds.

"The plan is to get some produce and donate it to the food bank," Bader said.

The garden beds are near the entrance of Ascarate Park. Bader said he hopes the garden can be a demonstration garden for the public in the future.

There also is still room for other youth groups to get involved, Bader said.

"It's a big place. We're looking for other youth organizations that can adopt some of those beds," he said.

Master Gardener Lucille Teran is one gardener involved in the program. Other gardeners include Rex Morris, Dave Turner and Jim Hastings.

"I love the program," Teran said. "We've planted chiles, jalapeños, lettuce, carrots and just anything we think will make it.

"And we're going to keep growing it. They've got a lot of room."

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