Hillsborough County Youth Learn by Doing — Producing Wholesale Plants

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During the 1970s in Hillsborough County, qualified, employable young people were hard to find to enter the growing field of ornamental plant production. The Hillsborough County Horticulture Agent (Roger Newton) and representatives of the ornamental industry created a program where students could practice growing quality wholesale plants for education and prizes. This program attracted prospective youth to employment in local industries or to continue advanced education in the same field after high school. In 1975 the Hillsborough County Youth Plant Show and Sale was born. In 1976 the show and sale joined the Florida Strawberry Festival as the event venue. The Environmental Horticulture Production Extension Agent manages the program with its host of volunteers. He is helped by a youth committee comprised of teachers, 4-H agents, and industry members. The Agent publishes a set of rules that govern the show and sale with committee approval. The students have sold their plants and raised approximately $715,000 since the show’s inception. The students are required to attend a mandatory meeting that educates them on what is expected from show participants regarding plant projects and entry into the show and sale. Students must grow a fixed number of pest free, Florida Fancy or Florida #1 graded plants determined by rules set forth each year by the committee. Teachers, 4-H leaders, industry members, the Extension Agent, and parents assist the students with their projects during the competition season. Students must obtain their plants prior to dates set forth in the rules. The plant entries are judged by landscape architect volunteers prior to the show. Students compete for cash prizes and ribbons donated by the Strawberry Growers and other industry donors. Students also complete a record book of their project. The record book includes tracking costs, pesticide applications, horticultural practices, taking pictures, a Florida-Friendly data sheet (M.B. Henry, 2009), and marketing letters that the participants write to attract bidders to the auction sale. Partners to the program help promote the show by giving tickets for buyers, parking passes, and advertising. In 2013 the Agent utilized a self assessment, pre/post evaluation to track knowledge gain and ability increase (Fig. 1). Seventy-two students successfully entered into the show and $29,760 was earned by the students at the auction. Fifty-eight entrants answered the assessment. There was an increase of 9% to 24% in the overall student abilities in 16 different topic areas. Students gained the most knowledge about Florida-Friendly Landscape Principles and their ability to safely apply pesticides (both a 24% increase in ability). They gained the least in their ability to make decisions and set goals for themselves (9% and 10%, respectively). There was a 76% decrease in the number of students who ranked themselves poor to fair on all measured abilities. Students ranking themselves excellent in all the measured abilities increased 85%.

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Fig. 1. Evaluation tool used for the 2013 Florida Strawberry Festival Youth Plant Show and Sale.