Youth Engagement in Greening: Best Practices Guide

Why is Youth Engagement in Greening Important?
Overgrown, trash-strewn vacant lots can attract crime and undermine neighborhood safety. Fortunately, engaging community members in greening vacant lots, for example, by mowing, landscaping, or converting lots into gardens, can improve mental health, increase community connectedness, and prevent violence.

Youth who live in economically disadvantaged communities are often left out of the solutions to vacancy and violence. Yet engaging youth in greening, especially in leadership roles, has multiple benefits for communities and for youth.

Benefits of Youth Engagement in Greening
- Reduces violence more than professional greening
- Expands access to green spaces
- Promotes physical health and mental well-being
- Builds life skills such as leadership and teamwork
- Increases economic opportunities
- Helps youth develop pride in their neighborhoods
- Empowers youth to create change in their communities

"Youth feel like this space previously was not inviting to them... it feels different now. It feels welcoming... [Youth] were involved with cleaning it up, so it feels like it's for them"

"The overall thing I was hearing was it was like a stress relief for them and they loved being able to be outside in a space that wasn't far from their school."
Youth are Underutilized
Despite the benefits of involving youth, only 51% of greening organizations nationally reported engaging youth in their work. Of these, only 5% involved youth in leadership roles. Common reasons cited for not involving youth were a lack of funding, staff time, and expertise in youth engagement.

Learning from Organizations that Excel at Engaging Youth
Still, some organizations are excelling at engaging youth and involving them in leadership and decision-making roles. We interviewed these exemplar organizations to understand their best practices for engaging and retaining youth.
### Lessons from the Field

1. **Make it accessible** - Develop local programs in youths’ neighborhoods to increase youth access to greenspace and encourage continuous engagement.
   
   "The children no longer have to leave the community and jump on a bus...previously there was no continuity, they would come back into an area where there was no growing food."

2. **Make it Developmentally Appropriate** - Offer different roles and activities for each age group so youth can participate without limitations.
   
   "We want to include everybody so there was always a job for anybody and everybody....whether they were allowed to kill invasive plants, dig or shovel mulch, or count the flowers."

3. **Make it Fun and Educational** - Ask youth what they want to learn about and what activities they consider fun, then incorporate these ideas into programming to encourage retention.
   
   "I'm going to have snow[cone] machines and I'm going to play slip and slide... But also, I'm going to plant a tree a day. We're going to have fun, and, in the process, the youth tell me what they want to learn"

4. **Amplify Youth Voice** - Support youth to think critically about issues in their community. Guide them to become leaders and decision-makers in community change projects.
   
   "I teach that youth have the answers to these issues in our communities. So, when we spoke through these issues, I said, 'it sounds like you guys don’t like these things. So, what are we going to do about this?' And that’s how the project to do the mural came up. So they felt pride and they were excited every week."

5. **Limit Adult Control** - Create youth-driven spaces, where adult control over the greening work is limited. This gives youth opportunities to explore and build leadership skills.
   
   "The children have their own area above on a platform where there are no adults. If you get up there, it’s a privilege to watch my children at work. So, be quiet, do not advise them, do not correct them... because they can tell you to leave."

6. **Make Positive Connections** - Match youth with positive peer or adult mentors. This can increase engagement, especially if mentors provide guidance while allowing room for youth voice.

   "It was really helpful to have mentors that were a little bit older and more experienced. That peer-to-peer learning was really valuable, and they liked that."
References


