

Growing Roots Through My Hands

Elyse Hardy

At 16, I was struggling to find a job, and I was also very depressed. I heard about the Youth Agriculture Program (YAP) from my therapist, who suggested that a job might be a good way to keep me focused and busy over the summer. Thanks to YAP, I learned not only about gardening, but also about business, marketing, and customer service. Most importantly, the work was meaningful, which is the best antidote to depression!

After many weeks of hard work, sunburns, blisters, and dirty fingernails, our garden began to flourish!

five-gallon buckets full of stones out of the garden, and we established a pump system so we could get water from a nearby stream. Next came digging trenches and bringing in mulch and compost

It all began with a large plot of land, full of weeds, rocks, and poor soil—a very overwhelming sight! During the first week of work, we mostly hauled



Elyse Hardy (right) and other YAP participants working in the garden. All the photos on pp. 46-49 are from YAP.

to fortify our soil. Then we planted.

I was always interested in agriculture, but I had never grown anything successfully aside from a potted violet or a bean plant in a Dixie cup from school. I hadn't had much faith that this whole thing would be a success at all. The prospect of

Skills I Learned at YAP

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I never would have known where to start in the working world if it wasn't for the YAP program. Here is some of what I learned:

CUSTOMER SERVICE: At YAP, I learned how to deal with the public and be polite to customers. I went on to use those skills when I worked at a local pizzeria and then a salon.

PROBLEM SOLVING: Now, I manage the embroidery department at FollenderWerks Inc., and I need to think analytically and calmly in crisis situations—which I got a lot of experience doing at YAP.

KNOW HOW TO ASK FOR HELP: Perhaps the most important skill I learned at YAP was how to ask for help. No matter what we do in life, we will always need help; it is always possible to find people who care.



Elyse Hardy at work

actually having enough crop to sell at the farmer's market was mind-boggling!

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to flourish! We could never keep up with the harvest. We sold lots of our crop at the farmer's market and donated all extra to the Meals on Wheels program. We still had food left over, so we started baking

and cooking and selling those products as well. I still use some of these recipes, including zucchini oatmeal bars and tomatillo salsa.

We became involved in a network of organic farmers, and they came by occasionally to help in our garden. I was learning from others, and I was contributing something important to my community. I felt needed and a part of something. Members of the community would frequently compliment us on our dedication and hard work.

At the end of the season, it was sad to see the plants start to die off, but my life was so enriched from the experience. I learned many job skills, felt connected to my community, and benefited from the tranquil, centering, and meditative activity of gardening—all of which adds up to an excellent treatment for depression.

Elyse Hardy received her high school diploma from the Burr and Burton Target program in Manchester, VT. She is hoping to start taking community college classes this year.



AFTER YOU READ

- 1) Discuss the title. What do you think the author means by it?
- 2) What did the author learn besides job skills?
- 3) See the article on pp. 48-49 for more on YAP.

What Is YAP?

In 2006, The Tutorial Center, Inc.—a community education center in Vermont—created its Youth Agriculture Project (YAP) to provide a fun, motivating, hands-on work experience for at-risk young adults, ages 16-24, mostly high school dropouts.



YAP is a dig-in, get-dirty, try-new-things program that takes education, personal development, and job training out of traditional classrooms. YAPPERS experience success while developing transferable job and life skills by growing, harvesting, and marketing plants and vegetable crops.

They also grow knowledge, self-confidence, motivation, and curiosity—each becoming a bit wiser, a bit stronger, a bit better prepared for a positive future.

- 89% of YAP participants achieved an educational goal in the year following their YAP experience.
- 57% of YAPPERS obtained a job in the year following their YAP experience.
- YAP donates over 2,000 pounds of food each year to Meals on Wheels.
- YAP youth earn ServSafe work certificates for safe food handling.
- In Manchester, VT, YAP created and now manages a community garden, providing vegetable plots for 15 families.
- In 2011, YAP launched the YAP Food Network, which allows small-scale local farmers to sell produce to area institutions such as the local hospital.
 - In 2013, YAP in Bennington, VT, started a 1.5-acre farm that provides food directly to the local hospital.



Find out more at <tutoringvermont.org/yap>.