



FIGURE 1 Cherokee Middle School 6th graders participate in after-school Garden Club.

Students at Cherokee Middle School learn more than gardening at an after-school program lead by Allison Villa.

GROWING PEER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE GARDEN

Article by Allison Villa (FoodCorps NC alum, Cherokee Central Schools)

When Cherokee Middle School gave me, a second year FoodCorps NC Service Member with Cherokee Choices, the opportunity to lead an after-school Garden Club, I was excited for a year of STEM-heavy activities, and for middle schoolers' capacity for advanced topics.

The group of 6th graders who signed up for Garden Club were funny, intelligent, and caring, but had little interest in the lessons I had planned. Not to mention their desire to stay in their pre-formed cliques, and to avoid talking to me as much as possible. I remember very clearly what it felt like to be twelve years old- trapped in a changing body, struggling to meet the new expectations of middle school, and fearful of judgment from my peers. Reflecting on these pressures made it easy for me to adjust the expectations I had for my students.

Instead of planning structured lessons, I started writing everything that needed to be done for the afternoon on a whiteboard, bullet point style, "Water the garden," "thin out the cornbead plants," or "weed the garlic beds." With some light facilitation from me, students were free to decide amongst themselves who would do what.

After giving students more independence, they were happy to do everything that needed to be done, and more. They even started asking me questions about how plants grow.

But something even more fundamental started happening: the kids began interacting outside of their cliques in meaningful ways. Two students put on their iPod and sang along while weeding together. Two others (pictured right) strategized and carried out a plan to repair a wobbly bean trellis. There was never any of the teasing and bullying that was classic in some of my other 6th grade classes.

These students understood the garden as a place of trust, relaxation, and cooperation. School gardens can be an amazing academic supplement, but it's also important to recognize their potential as spaces for social-emotional learning and healing. A garden is a place where kids can build confidence in their abilities, find peace in the midst of stressful school environments, and maybe even make a lifelong friend or two, *Figure 2*.



FIGURE 2 Finding friendship in the garden is one of many benefits of gardening with youth.

