SITUATION

Topics related to horticulture, including houseplants and vegetable gardening, are showing a dramatic increase in popularity as a hobby among the general public. This is evidenced by increased sales of home gardening books and materials demand for information at this extension office. However, 4-H enrollment in these project areas is steadily declining, from 27,267 in 1983 to 23,703 in 1984, and 23,091 in 1985. Many who are enrolled in the projects use the county fair as their only related activity. They have the idea that the only activities available are those listed in the premium book.

Project leaders often find themselves seeking good educational material that holds an interest for youth. Experiential learning can be expensive and time-consuming, so most horticulture project leaders simply eliminate it. This leads to boredom among the project members and a tendency to drop the project or never take it at all.

In the Northern District, horticulture was named as one of the areas in which leaders felt they needed training. The horticulture skill-a-thon idea was developed as a tool to provide that training at the 1985 4-H Leader Training Invitational.
OBJECTIVES

1. Project leaders will discover the skill-a-thon method of learning to be a new way of teaching horticulture skills. This learning method can also be applied to other project areas.

2. Horticulture project members will learn new skills through the skill-a-thon learning method that will sharpen their interest in the project.

3. 4-H members will learn to work as a team, make decisions, and speak before a group.

4. Given a task, 4-H'ers will be able to evaluate their abilities to solve the problem and discover what they need to know to do the activity.

METHOD

A 4-H horticulture skill-a-thon package was developed containing 12 stations. (See Appendix A for one sample.) The skill-a-thon idea was borrowed from the University of Minnesota model. (Appendix B.) A skill-a-thon is an excellent method of involving 4-H'ers in challenging activities which develop both life and project skills. It is designed as a series of mini-learning stations with a facilitator at each one. The participants rotate in teams from station to station, attempting to perform the specific tasks given at each station. The station facilitator allows all team members to test their own knowledge and abilities before giving them any hints. The new skill-a-thon was first presented as a part of the Northern District 4-H Leader Training Invitational. Gregory Clift, 4-H and Agriculture Agent for Sawyer County, contributed station ideas and helped with the leader training. Leaders were divided into teams and actually completed the task at each station, with one leader acting as facilitator for that station. By this method, leaders learned what each station contained, how to set it up, and how to facilitate the skill-a-thon. At the end of the session, questions were answered and the skill-a-thon learning method was related to other project areas to show its many uses in the 4-H program. It was also stressed that horticulture skill-a-thons can be used as a club activity for clubs with few horticulture project members, as this could possibly interest others in the projects. The cost of implementing was kept to a bare minimum, with most stations using materials readily available in the home or yard.

CONCLUSIONS

Reactions to this activity from adult and youth leaders present at the 4-H Leader Invitational were excellent. (Twenty leaders representing six counties were exposed to the material.) What they liked most was the potential for practical application of the skill-a-thon idea to project meetings, the possibility for a variety of topics, and the fact that the skill-a-thon method can be used in any project area.
Participants became very excited about possible uses for it in their clubs and counties. One woman said it sparked ideas for her to use with various age groups in teaching decision-making and teamwork. Many leaders discussed the ease of use of the material due to the fact that station description sheets containing all the necessary information are available.

In working through the skill-a-thon stations, leaders found they had to develop and use many skills to do the activities required. Their brainstorming and sharing of ideas greatly increased the value of the experience.

At this point conclusions on member reactions are difficult to draw since the materials have not been available to leaders or agents on a district-wide basis. However, when the skill-a-thon was tried in one county at a club meeting, most participating members showed a great deal of interest in getting more involved in horticulture project areas. It developed better teamwork among them and the general leader reported that participants retained skills learned and were more confident in their problem-solving abilities.

The horticulture skill-a-thon material was presented to 4-H, Horticulture and Agriculture agents at the 1985 State Plant and Soil Science program subcommittee meeting. The eight agents present felt the material was excellent in its scope and potential and they expressed a desire to have it made available statewide. Many comments were made about its application as a recruiter for plant and soil science projects in the 4-H program.

IMPLICATIONS

As a result of this program, the following implications can be made for 4-H programming:

Perhaps the greatest implication of this project is that leaders need informative project materials and educational activities for their horticulture project members. Station sheets should be duplicated for use by all project leaders who request them. Further stations can be developed, and leaders should be encouraged to develop some of their own based on local interest. The skill-a-thon learning method should be used not only on the club level but also at county events such as camp and the county fair to develop interest in those not currently enrolled in horticulture projects or even in 4-H. There has been discussion of using the horticulture skill-a-thon on the state level, perhaps at State 4-H Congress or National Junior Horticulture Association Day.

It is believed that this would create interest in the projects and show potential members that they can have fun while learning skills and developing leadership abilities.
PRUNING TREES

Importance of topic:

Pruning fruit trees is an art, based on science. The purpose of this lesson is to explain some reasons for methods of pruning. There are many reasons for pruning, and all pruning should be based on reason.

What you will need:

1. Pruning shears
2. Several 3 ft. high twigs that resemble young trees.
3. Ice cream bucket with sand to hold "tree."
4. Tree pruning fact sheet.

What leader does:

Place a twig in the bucket of sand so it resembles a growing tree. Set out pruning fact sheet for members to read.

Situation:

Your 4-H project apple tree is 3 years old and needs pruning.

Task:

Demonstrate the correct method of pruning an apple tree.

Questions to ask:

1. Q. When is the best time to prune apple trees?
   A. Late winter or early spring, while they are dormant.

2. Q. Why is it important to prune?
   A. To maintain the health and quality of the tree and to encourage fruit production.

3. Q. What are some reasons for pruning certain branches - or, which branches should be pruned?
   A. Branch stubs, rubbing branches, suckers on the tree's base, and branches should be pruned.

4. Q. Why should you sterilize pruning tools between apple trees?
   A. To prevent the spreading of Fireblight or other viral diseases.

Mary Jo Wimmer
4-H/Horticulture Agent
Washburn County
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4-H SKILLATHON MODEL*

1. DIVIDE THE 4-H'ERS INTO TEAMS OF 2 TO 5 MEMBERS.

2. MAKE SUPPLIES AVAILABLE

3. PROVIDE THE 4-H'ERS WITH A REALISTIC SITUATION AND TASK TO RESPOND TO.

4. STEP BACK AND ALLOW THE MEMBERS TIME TO DISCOVER THEIR OWN SOLUTION.

5. RESPOND TO 4-H'ERS QUESTIONS WITH QUESTIONS SO THE ANSWERS ARE THEIR OWN.

6. LISTEN TO THE MEMBERS' PRESENTATION.

7. ACCEPT THEIR SOLUTIONS.

8. ASK QUESTIONS TO HELP THEM BUILD ON WHAT THEY PRESENTED.

9. REINFORCE THEIR EFFORTS WITH PRAISE.

* Also referred to as Learning By Doing Before Being Told or Shown How Model, Experiential Learning Model, and Learn By Doing Model.

- Developed by University of Minnesota Cooperative Extension.