

Menard Morning Glories youth garden group wins coveted national title

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MENARD - Like the flower the group is named for, Menard's Morning Glory Junior Master Gardener group just keeps blooming and growing.

The Texas AgriLife Extension Service horticulture group started in 2005 with just eight members and has now blossomed to 30 youngsters fourth grade and older.

They currently have 22 raised-bed garden plots where they maintain and grow a number of spring, summer and fall vegetables including onions, potatoes, all types of greens, tomatoes, egg plants, peppers and a host of other plants plus a few morning glory vines, said Mary Kniffen, the group's volunteer adult leader. The plots are located across the street from Menard Junior High School in an area provided by the Church of Christ in Menard. Participants learn how to plant, water, care for, harvest and eat their production.

The group also performs community beautification projects around this rural West Texas town of 1,300. But their latest bounty is perhaps their biggest, Kniffen said.

The group has been awarded the 2009 National Junior Master Gardener Group Service and Achievement Award. They will be formally recognized at the International Master Gardener Conference March 23 in Las Vegas, Nevada.

The Morning Glories received the award for exemplifying excellence through hard work, personal achievement and service to their community, according to the award requirements. They were among three groups that made it to the finals in their category. The other finalists were the Midway Junior Gardeners of Powder Springs, Ga. and the Riverview Raccoons of Brooklyn Park, Minn.

Menard Elementary/Junior High principal Kyle Chambers lauded the program and the young people it involves.

"The leadership, responsibility, community involvement and confidence these students learn through the program are of immeasurable value," Chambers said. "The program not only teaches these values, it also is an incentive for students to achieve at high levels.

"Our school is 70 percent economically disadvantaged and 80 percent at risk," Chambers said. "The program gives these students opportunities to be involved in activities that no other program can provide. It's a true asset to our school and community.

"It is key to keeping our school beautiful, but its top value is giving some of our most needy students a positive productive way to be successful and self-confident."

The program is under the leadership of Kniffen, said Jerry Kidd, AgriLife Extension agent for agriculture and natural resources in Menard County.

"Mrs. Kniffen and her husband Billy practice the lessons they teach their Junior Master Gardeners," Kidd said. "The couple's home, gardens and greenhouse and the native and acclimatized plants they propagate and raise are watered solely by rainwater harvested through an extensive rainwater harvesting system the home employs."

Billy Kniffen is also AgriLife Extension's water resources specialist for rainwater harvesting headquartered in Menard.

To date the group's activities have included beautification projects at the local fire department, library, elementary and junior high schools, garden club and at locations serving senior citizens.

For more information about the Menard Morning Glories contact Billy Kniffen at [b-kniffen@tamu.edu](mailto:bkniffen@tamu.edu) .

To learn more about the Junior Master Marketer program click on: <http://jmgkids.us/texas/> .

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