

## Youth Ecology Corps gives teens knowledge, experience



**MULCHING** —Sullivan France and Marcus Calder laying mulch at the Windsor Community Garden. The pair have been participating in the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps, an eight-week program to improve gardens and parks around the county. - photo by Robin Hug

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This summer more than 200 youth participated in the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps eight-week program to better the gardens and parks around the county.

The SCYEC employed youth from Cloverdale down to Cotati who worked to clean, restore and maintain local nurseries, community gardens, parks and creeks. The crews were taught to lay mulch, build garden boxes, remove invasive plant life and perform seed propagation and most importantly, how to hold a job.

"I have learned so much," Sullivan France, 16, said about his time in the program. "I can now identify so many native plants that I see around here in nature."

Sullivan worked four days a week for four hours a day noting that it didn't feel like work since he spent the time with seven fellow classmates from Windsor High School. Each crew is formed depending on the area of the county the youth resides.

"I got to work with others, learn about communication, responsibility and how to do interviews," Sullivan joked about being interviewed by the newspaper.

SCYEC participants are paid minimum wage and work approximately 16 hours per week. In addition to their paycheck, youth receive job skills training, an opportunity to enroll in an online career assessment tool and environmental education.

"Most of these young people will receive their first paycheck through this program," said Supervisor Efren Carrillo. "This is their initial taste of the work world, and our goal is to provide them with skills they can use in future jobs."

The work readiness program assess their youth workers upon completion of the program and found that 98 percent found the program helped them build job skills and 92 percent said that they had a valuable experience.

"This is my first job and it's a hell of a job," said Alexandra Hidalgo-Aguero, 17, of Windsor. "What I mean is that, not too many people can say they climbed a tree at work."

In addition to the summers jobs program the SCYEC has partnered with the City of Healdsburg for the last 12 years to work on city neighborhood improvement programs. This program helps senior citizens with home repair, landscaping and fire abatement.

"It is important to be environmentally aware and it is also important to help your community," said France.

Last year, the environmental stewardship program completed 15 miles of creek improvement, 12 miles of trail and park walkways, propagated over 2,000 native plants and 5,000 vegetables and removed tens of thousands of cubic feet of invasive plant life among other projects. This year organizers say they hope to increase those numbers.

The SCYEC was created in 2009 by a partnership of the Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board, the Sonoma County Human Services Department, the Sonoma County Water Agency, the Sonoma County Office of Education and the nonprofit, New Ways to Work. The program is funded by the federal Workforce Investment Act dollars with matching funds from the Sonoma County Water Agency.

For more information on how to get involved visit, [www.scwa.ca.gov/scyec](http://www.scwa.ca.gov/scyec).