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# Living

## Home & Family

# PLASTICULTURE The new face of farming

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The Roberson's garden got a new face lift, courtesy of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture through an agreement with Langston University.

Dorothy and Davester Roberson live south of Chouteau on approximately one acre of land.

Roberson said she has been gardening all her life and is extremely impressed with the Plasticulture method of gardening.

"It's unbelievable," she exclaimed. "It makes all the difference in the world. You don't want to fool with another garden" after having a Plasticulture garden because it's so easy.

She learned of the program through her cousin, Linda Marshall, Porter, and couldn't believe all the things she heard, thinking it must be "too good to be true".

Fortunate for Roberson, the Plasticulture program isn't too good to be true and once she checked it out for herself and applied for the program, she found it was better than expected.

"I just can't believe the way this stuff grows like that," said Roberson. "As a senior citizen with a limited income and my husband needing constant care, I

Anderson explained the State of Oklahoma is introducing the Plasticulture gardening system through small farmers and youth groups, such as school FFA organizations and 4-H Clubs.

focuses on teamwork and cooperation, self-esteem, respect and responsibility, communication and character building.

Afhton explained most of these children aren't able to go anywhere and some

"For those that don't know anything about gardening," said Anderson, "it will produce", but not as well as those who are familiar with gardening already.

The only thing the farmer/gardener has to do is turn over and till the dirt and provide a water hose to attach to the drip irrigation system.

Roberson said, "I enjoy being able to plant and have the garden without work. All I have to do is plant the garden and watch it grow, pick it to eat or sell it to help supplement our income."

Anderson said when he installs the Plasticulture system, he typically brings two flats of tomatoes, watermelons, bell, sweet and hot peppers, cantaloupe, squash, okra and some seeds, like purple hull peas and corn.

"Pretty much everybody wants tomatoes, peppers, okra, squash, watermelons and cantaloupe," he said, adding that this produce really thrives in the program.

The Plasticulture machine creates rows of raised beds of tilled dirt covered with approximately four feet of plastic mulch with the drip irrigation tubing underneath. At one end, Anderson ties off the tubing and the other is left open to attach to a main



"We want to train young people about gardening and farming and through this Plasticulture program," Anderson said, "it makes it more exciting because the stuff grows so much faster."

The Plasticulture program is fairly new to the state and the Department of Agriculture began installing Plasticulture gardens south and east of Oklahoma City approximately four years ago.

Anderson said there are now 10 Plasticulture gardens in eastern Oklahoma, including gardens in Muskogee, Wagoner, Tulsa and Osage counties and with the addition of the Robersons, the program has reached Mayes County as well.

"Agriculture is a big deal in Oklahoma," explained Anderson. He said although people may not realize it, "agriculture affects everybody".

He said by introducing the program, he thinks these gardens are exciting, a little easier and may entice young people to get into gardening.

Patricia Afhton, Idabel, is working her third Plasticulture garden and uses it to educate youth through Project READY, which stands for Recreational Educational Alternative to Drug-free Youth. "This is the best garden we've had...and the kids are so excited."

Each summer, Project READY accepts 60 youth in age categories of 6-8, 9-10, 11-12 and 13-18, with 15 in each age group. The program

don't know how the produce at the store gets there, explaining they were so amazed to see things like watermelon and cantaloupe growing on the vine.



"We need to be knowledgeable about how to grow our own food," said Afhton. "It is an easier process but still, they are learning about survival and how important it is to learn about the ground...and everything on God's green earth. It (the Plasticulture garden) teaches the kids not to look at it like hard work and seeing what their little hands can do makes the kids feel really good."

What Afhton didn't realize is how much she was going to enjoy the garden as well as the kids.

Roberson sent her application to the Department of Agriculture around the end of February or the beginning of March.

Once the application is approved, the Department of Agriculture sends Anderson with the tractor to the applicant's land to install a Plasticulture garden. Roberson's garden was installed April 7 and the first things she planted was tomatoes and peppers, leaving the okra for the last.

water hose.

Recently, Anderson improved the system even further by adding shut off valves on each row, so each can get as much or as little water as the produce needs.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life," said Roberson, explaining all she has to do is poke a hole in the plastic, plant the seed



or plant, put dirt around the hole, turn the water on and reap the benefits.

"There are all kinds of advantages of having the program, such as excellent fresh food, earlier crop production, increased yields and all with less work," she said with a smile in her eyes.

Anderson said there are many benefits of a Plasticulture garden and they are easy to see by planting the same produce both inside and outside the Plasticulture garden. He said one man did just that with corn and the "difference is a m a z i n g ...It's pretty dramatic".

Marshall said the benefits she saw from her garden, which was planted May 21, 2005, was "earlier crop production, improved quality, reduced leaching of

fertilizer, weed problems, evaporation and saturation of soil, soil compaction, pruning, and enhanced soil fumigation and increased yields."

Roberson said she planted purple-hull peas Sunday evening, June 18, and by Wednesday, Anderson pointed out that they had already sprouted.

He said with this system, you "get better fruit, bigger fruit and more of it." He joked that some have a hard time keeping up with the harvesting and Roberson agreed saying she couldn't imagine trying to harvest an entire acre.

She said with a big smile that her Plasticulture garden produces almost twice as fast as a normal garden, explaining that "this here really puts it out".

Roberson said Anderson has been so helpful in getting their garden started and helping her upkeep the rows of raised beds. "He's on the ball with this stuff," she boasted.

"Everybody's excited about it," said Anderson. "Without this system, it (Robersons' garden) wouldn't produce near as much."

Roberson said when Anderson came to install the system, "people just came by to look" at the machine and she had people calling, saying, "Mrs. Roberson, what you got going on there?", she joked.

"That thing (the Plasticulture machine and trailer) is so long," she said that people just kept driving by and couldn't believe what they were seeing.

"My garden is a way for me to release the tension and stress of everyday life by doing something I enjoy that I would not have been able to do if it wasn't for the Plasticulture program and the wonderful people who provided it," she said with a gleam in her eye.

Anderson, along with the Department of Agriculture, wants to inform the public of this program and this method of gardening, which has mostly been passed along by word of mouth.

Marshall bragged, "the Plasticulture program is a way to have better food with less work and the

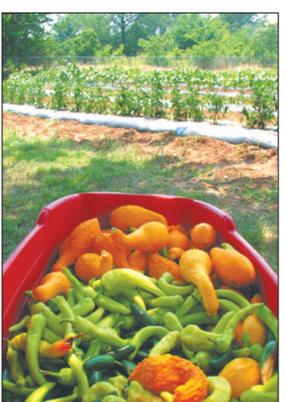
opportunity to become a healthier society."

Afhton said the Plasticulture program is a great opportunity to improve the lives of the youth and the community at large. "If anyone could do anything positive in their community, then this would be the greatest thing they could do for their youth," she said.

"Everyone should take advantage of this program," recommended Afhton.

Micah Anderson (top going clockwise) and Dorothy Roberson hold up vegetables from Roberson's garden. - Anderson points out a watermelon, which wouldn't be at this stage if not for the Plasticulture system. - The irrigation tubing connects a shut-off valve to each row. - Weed eating at the end of the rows is just something Anderson does to help the Robersons keep up their garden. - Cantaloupe is almost ripe for the picking. - Almost an entire row is dedicated to peppers. - Yellow squash thrives in this system of gardening. - In one afternoon, Roberson harvested this entire cart of vegetables. - Okra was accidentally planted outside the plastic and the difference in size is dramatic, like Anderson said it would be.

**Photos by Sommer Woodward / The Daily Times**



find having a garden therapy for us both."

Micah Anderson, Market Development Coordinator with the Department of Agriculture, said one of the department's goals in



bringing the Plasticulture program is to try and help communities better themselves.

"The average person over here doesn't know about it," said Anderson, explaining he has only run across one man who has the Plasticulture machine.

He said the department is trying to "stay ahead of things" by encouraging small minority farmers as well as non-minority farmers to hold onto their land and by doing so, Anderson hopes to better these communities and educate the youth at the same time.



Courtesy photo / The Daily Times

The Plasticulture machine used by Anderson.

