Learning from the Land
A farm becomes a classroom and community center

At the Middlebury College Organic Farm, food matters. Cultivating crops enables students to explore the natural sciences, to confront global challenges on a practical level, and to create a space for discourse and discussion—all while producing delicious fruits and vegetables.

In 2003, a group of Middlebury students borrowed whatever equipment they could find and started gardening on a plot of College land. With the encouragement of Professor Emeritus John Elder and Schumann Distinguished Scholar Bill McKibben, these founding students set out to learn more about plant life, sustainability, and environmental issues by growing food.

Since then, as Food and Farm Educator Sophie Esser Calvi ’03 says, “The garden evolved into a farm.” Not only has the scale of production increased, but the students and mentors who run the three-acre farm have also found new ways to give back to the community and connect the farm to College academics.

By the Numbers

- Up to 20 student volunteers work at the organic farm on any given day in season.
- >50% of the College’s organic vegetables supplied by the farm.
- 45 student summer internships in the past 10 years made possible by the generosity of benefactors.
- 764 community members who have signed up on the organic farm’s e-mail list.
- 5 Middlebury College classes, from biology to dance, taught at the farm this fall.
- 1000 pounds of produce donated to local food shelves in 2011.
MAKING CONNECTIONS

Although the daily duties at the farm might entail anything from weeding beds to carefully harvesting vegetables, every small act adds up to big, local responsibilities. Students launch outreach programs and coordinate with area farmers. Their crops supply College dining halls, restaurants, and local food shelves with organic produce. The farm likewise offers a thought-provoking setting for Middlebury College classes in subjects such as biology, architecture, psychology, art, and dance.

Of course, the organic farm is itself a classroom, providing precious experience in the science and practice of agriculture through four popular, funded, summer internships. As interns and volunteers care for the three-acre parcel of land with their hands and minds, they gain knowledge that they can use to improve food production on the College farm and elsewhere. It’s a beautiful cycle.

FAMILIAR FACE, NEW IDEAS

Sophie Esser Calvi was one of the first student interns to work the acreage on the knoll, and she conducted a children’s garden program on the land as her senior thesis. So when the College invited her to return to Middlebury in a new role, she jumped at the chance to help the farm grow.

Having earned her master’s degree in food culture and communications from the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy, Sophie is well equipped to coach her students as they turn their curiosity about farming into a stronger commitment to food and sustainability issues. Even though most volunteers might not become professional farmers, Sophie teaches students how individuals in almost any profession, from the arts to science to business, can tackle food-related environmental concerns and make a difference.

“What I see as my job is mentoring these students who are interested in food and finding how I can support them and help them find the right avenue to pursue their passions,” she explains.

KEEPING IT FRESH

Sophie’s experience with the College and with the land on the knoll also gives her a fresh perspective for integrating farming with the liberal arts. “You can pick any discipline and we can talk about food, be it history, psychology, architecture.”

Her knowledge and enthusiasm can be contagious. Whether cooking meals or teaching food economics, “Sophie’s an incredible resource, and she’s just what Middlebury needs,” says intern Katie Michels ‘14.

More broadly, Sophie hopes that the farm will inspire greater awareness of food and the impact of its production among students. “The College has taken a strong stance on climate change, and food is an important part of that sustainability. We need to talk about food and we need to create leaders in food production who can solve the environmental problems that the world is facing right now.”

ROOM TO GROW

Sophie’s vision for the acreage as a “food and farm center,” a space for education and dialogue, is prompting new and exciting opportunities for Middlebury students. She and farm volunteers recently started work on a “reflection garden,” radiating from a round bench of Vermont marble. The project will help define the farm not only as a place of study, but also as a refuge.
KATHERINE “KATIE” MICHELS ’14

HOMETOWN:
Missoula, Montana

MAJOR:
Environmental Studies and Geography (double)

Tangible Benefits: An Intern’s Experience

Katie Michels had always enjoyed working in her family’s garden, so as a first-year student at Middlebury, she started attending organic farm meetings and volunteering on the knoll. Not only did she find she had a lot in common with the students and mentors there, but she also took comfort in the hands-on nature of farming which, according to Katie, “complements the things we learn on campus that are all in our heads.” In order to explore her budding passion for food and cultivation further, last year Katie applied for one of the funded internships at the farm.

Getting Her Hands Dirty
Looking back on her summer there, Katie reflects, “I thought I would like it a lot, but I actually loved it!” In fact, Katie liked the experience so much that she signed on as student codirector of the farm. During the 2012–13 school year, she is supporting Sophie by coordinating volunteers and organizing community events. While going about daily garden tasks, Katie discovered how rewarding and enlightening such physical work can be, and she wants to share this awareness with her fellow Middlebury students. “I just want them to come down and see what food looks like before it’s prepared…. I think it’s important to remind them of the cycle.”

A Sunny Outlook
Katie says that her experiences at the organic farm cemented her desire to go into food as a career. Although she is not yet sure what form that will take, she feels that the lessons learned at Middlebury’s farm will guide her through her chosen profession.

For Katie, the farm fosters the positive values at the core of a good education. “The farm is a really great place to put into practice many of the things I believe in: coming from a place of hope rather than despair, acting with intention, doing something well and beautifully, and deeply enjoying it.”

WHAT WILL THE HARVEST BRING?

Sophie ensures that students at the organic farm divide their efforts between in-demand crops and more labor-intensive vegetables, fruits, and projects for teaching purposes. Here are some of the plants that students have been cultivating recently:

- Artichokes
- Beans
- Beets
- Berries
- Carrots
- Chard
- Cucumbers
- Eggplant
- Flowers
- Grapes
- Herbs
- Honey
- Kale
- Lettuce
- Melons
- Peppers
- Pollinator plants
- Radishes
- Squash
As Sophie observes, “Students need to get away to somewhere that’s peaceful and mindful. These are the places where seeds of change—if I may make the pun—are planted.”

Looking forward, she hopes to add a teaching barn, which could serve as an all-season classroom, and perhaps a few animals to the organic farm. This coming summer, the knoll will house a new iteration of Middlebury FoodWorks, a hands-on food studies program piloted this past summer in Louisville, Kentucky.

The FoodWorks program brings a group of interns together in the same community and encourages each student to work on a facet of the local food economy, from government to marketing to agriculture. The already interdisciplinary focus of the organic farm and its ties to Middlebury-area businesses would make the knoll an ideal focus for a new FoodWorks cohort.

### A DAY AT THE FARM

For summer interns working on the organic farm, every day begins at 8:00 AM with a “walkabout.” This is a time for the four students to check in with Sophie while making the rounds of the garden’s plots and coming up with the day’s priorities together. As Katie Michels notes, “The walkabout was also a chance to connect with the farm. We got to know each bed and saw how it changed over the season.”

The special cultivation demands of each crop and each bed determine the students’ tasks for the rest of the day, from dealing with an insect problem to picking mesclun greens in the morning before they grow bitter.

Sophie expressed the joy that infuses even the most mundane tasks at the organic farm: “It was just so wonderful to be outside with students who are learning how to farm and talking about food issues!”

### HANDS-ON

Students at the farm do much of the cultivation work by hand, completing most of the planting, weeding, edging of plots, and harvesting with the aid of a few simple tools rather than with heavy mechanized equipment. This choice to put a limit on the consumption of fossil fuels allows the garden to participate in the College’s sustainability goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2016.

Moreover, the insistence on manual labor ensures that the skills learned at the farm are scalable: throughout their lives, students will know how to grow their own organic food with just a set of garden implements.

### CAUSE AND EFFECT

The organic farm also serves as a place where students hone their judgment by figuring out which actions will best benefit the crops and the land. As Katie recalls, “Sophie was there to guide us, but at a certain point, we also had the skills and the place to learn for ourselves.”

The land acts as a natural laboratory where interns can observe the impact of their decisions. For instance, this year, when the group noticed an imbalance in soil nutrients, they were able to set the plot aside, treat it to fix the chemistry, and steward the land in a way that would be difficult for a commercial farm. On rainy days, interns apply their critical-thinking skills to research garden infrastructure and plan potential improvements for the space.

### ENGAGING A COMMUNITY

At the organic farm, food nourishes, teaches, and does good, catalyzing meaningful relationships among students, mentors, and their community in Middlebury and beyond. The garden expanded its reach to sponsor and host the 2011 Campus Cultivation Conference. This event brought representatives from East Coast colleges together to discuss how agriculture can supplement curricula and facilitate new insights in higher education.

Student interns also run programs geared toward educating local citizens, from schoolchildren to interested adults. This year, at the farm’s Harvest Festival, student volunteers and Addison County residents lent a hand pulling up the crops on a cold October morning and were rewarded with cups of hot cider and an organic feast.

### GIVING BACK

The interns also meet with area farmers and discuss how they can best collaborate to accommodate community food demands. According to Sophie, “We help the dining halls link up with local farms and support them, and then, whatever they can’t get from those farms, we try to grow for them.”

For student and mentor alike, the principle of food justice—the idea that everyone has a right to good, clean food—guides the organic farm. As Sophie notes, “Since the beginning, we at the farm have given food to the local food shelf. That’s part of being a community. You share.”