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.

Learning from the Land

In 2003, a group of Middlebury students borrowed whatever equipment they could find and started gardening on a plot of College land, located on a knoll off Route 125. With the encouragement of Professor Emeritus John Elder and Schumman Distinguished Scholar Bill McKibben, these founding students set out to learn more about plant life, cultivation demands of plots, and harvesting with the aid of a few simple tools rather than with heavy mechanized equipment.

This choice limits the consumption of fossil fuels and allows the garden to participate in the College’s sustainability goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2016.

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. In addition to producing hundreds of varieties of fruits, flowers, herbs, and vegetables, the farm is a catalyst for discussions in many disciplines from history and architecture to art and dance to biology and psychology.

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.”

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 and a natural laboratory, providing precious experience in the science and practice of agriculture through volunteer work and four funded scholarships.

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. For instance, volunteers and interns run programs geared toward educating local citizens, from schoolchildren to adults. Events throughout the summer and harvest season and an e-mail list keep interested people in the area connected to the land and its yearly cycle.

Giving Back

“...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.”

SOPHIE ESSER CALVI ’03
Vermont Coordinator of Middlebury FoodWorks

In addition to producing handfuls of varieties of fruits, flowers, herbs, and vegetables, the farm is a catalyst for discussions in many disciplines from history and architecture to art and dance to biology and psychology.

notes, “The walkabout was also a chance to connect with the farm. We get to know each bed and see 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.

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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.
- 50 student summer internships in the past 10 years made possible by the generosity of benefactors.
- 5 Middlebury College classes, from biology to dance, taught at the farm this fall.
- 1,000 pounds of produce donated to local food shelves in 2013.

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Cultivating honeybees not only produces rich honey, but also contributes to the successful pollination of crops in the garden.

Sophie and the interns recently launched a cultural gardens project, growing plots of fruits and vegetables that are staples of different global cuisines. “The cultural gardens are about creating more diversity and inclusivity at the farm,” Sophie says. “Food is a great way for people to connect!”

Sophie and farm volunteers are developing a “reflection garden.” The tranquil garden will encircle a round bench of Vermont marble, that was blessed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama on his visit in 2012. 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.”

FOOD FOR THOUGHT
During the summer of 2013, the organic farm hosted a second cohort of Middlebury FoodWorks, a summer internship program also located in Louisville, Kentucky.

The FoodWorks model 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 and leaders in agriculture makes the knoll an ideal focus for a FoodWorks cohort.

A DAY AT THE FARM
For summer interns working on the organic farm, every day begins at 8:00 a.m. with a “walkabout.” This is a time for the 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