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.

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.

I N 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 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 has 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.

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
summer internships. As interns and volunteers care for the three-acre parcel of land, they gain knowledge that they can use to improve food production on the College farm and elsewhere.

**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, she jumped at the chance to help the farm grow. This year, she also embraced a new role as the Vermont coordinator of Middlebury FoodWorks, an innovative internship program.

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. Her connections to other Middlebury alumni working in agriculture, in Vermont and elsewhere, have enabled her to construct a network of mentors available to students interested in food.

Even though most volunteers and interns might not become professional farmers, Sophie teaches how individuals in almost any profession, from the arts to science to business, can tackle food-related environmental concerns and make a difference.

“I see my job as 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.

- Over the past year, the farm has acquired a coop of chickens.
Volunteers and interns alike help raise the birds both for eggs and meat.

- 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
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.

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

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
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.”