



### **Knoll Food and Garden Educator's Report 2020**

The 2020 season required new levels of flexible, creative thinking and adaptation. It was marked by the COVID-19 global pandemic, nationwide social unrest in response to continued state-sanctioned violence against Black individuals, and ongoing new realities of global climate change. Already complex and interwoven issues, each and all were exacerbated by polarized social discourse in a particularly contentious election year. The Knoll relied on the centrality of its mission to explore food as a medium to cultivate well being in people, place, and the planet. And following the murder of George Floyd, in addition to and alongside [the efforts of our Environmental Affairs and Environmental Studies colleagues](#), we humbly attempted to [state our intentions and commitments](#) to students affirming that Black Lives Matter and that our work in cultivating well being must be rooted in the eradication of oppression. This statement is offered as a point of grounding for our work.

Our mission is to explore food as a medium to cultivate well-being in people, place, and the planet. In doing so, our work begins with understanding and dismantling oppression, with particular attention to the racism, land theft, cultural erasure, and colonial supremacy that built our food system and remain at the fore. As the Knoll, we commit to creating access for people who have been barred access from the freedom to choose whether, and how, to engage with agriculture and the land. We aim to broaden understanding of the political, historical, and cultural frameworks and hegemonies, including white supremacy, that have built our predominant narratives and understandings of the food system, particularly in New England, and in our landscape. These are some of our aspirational goals; we recognize limitations of the site and our programs (e.g., the Knoll is not an ADA accessible site and is only beginning formal conversations around what appropriate land acknowledgment entails, and how it is framed). We hold it as our active responsibility to address these issues in our ever-evolving maintenance of the Knoll as a place for students and the community. We have timely and deep work to do, and the ability to prioritize and center this is full of possibility.

The impacts of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic have also reached far and wide. Experiences of physical disconnection wrought by essential tasks of quarantining, physical distancing, mask wearing, group size capping, enforced campus boundaries and the exclusion of off-campus visitors, among others, combined with the overwhelm of uncertainty this year has only underscored the richness and value of being together, safely distanced, sharing in community, in shared work, and carrying forward efforts to

help provide food for community members on and off-campus. We are incredibly humbled and grateful to have been able to work within the College's pandemic response to operate safely this year, and to provide a community space for students in this year when it was needed more than ever.

### **Spring at the Knoll**

On March 10, students received word that the semester calendar was to be altered, and most all were off campus by Sunday, March 15. We hosted two impromptu volunteer sessions before students' departures to prune perennials and shrubs and tend to some other early spring tasks while saying goodbye. Much of our energy in early spring after students departed was devoted to researching, drafting, and proposing plans and protocols that enabled in-person work at the Knoll for Megan and two Environmental Affairs colleagues with extensive knowledge of Knoll operations, Sophie Esser Calvi '03.5 and Eva Fillion.

We also hosted a weekly virtual call-in to help answer home gardening and plant questions for students growing at home. Joining through this format, College Horticulturalist Tim Parsons mentioned that staff members from Midd Dining were filling in with other departments and so we reached out to see if there might be an opportunity for staff to join at the Knoll.

Upon seeking permission to be on-campus, and clarification about the Knoll's status as an "essential" function at the College in March and April, Megan was able to begin working in the garden and at her home to start seedlings. (We did not purchase hundreds of seedlings from Golden Russet farm, as we typically do due to budget constraints, and were fortunate to have seeds on hand that had been saved by previous years' interns and staff.) Environmental Affairs staff Eva Fillion and Sophie Esser Calvi '03.5 supported early garden work and some ongoing maintenance, which was critical in the early season.



*Pandemic "helpers"; seedlings en route to the Knoll once it warmed enough to maintain them at the unheated hoophouse; Eva and Sophie planting 1500 onions; Asparagus on Instagram Live during a virtual garden tour for Midd-sick students missing the emerging spring in Vermont*

Our typical program offerings were replaced with COVID-19 scenario planning and adaptation. Looking back, it's difficult to underscore the uncertainty of this period, but the College's commitment to "keeping people whole" was a deeply appreciated keystone in our lives as we had to consider re-negotiating everything. With oversight from the incomparable Jen Kazmierczak, we wrote COVID-Safety plans and established protocols for disinfection, volunteer signup, events, food harvest, lab fieldwork, and communications.

### **Summer at the Knoll**

The summer was marked by uncertainty about who would tend to the Knoll, but by the end of the season we were overwhelmed by interest and so much collective good will on behalf of so many at the College—at so many different levels.





With the blessings of (and huge gratitude to) the senior leadership group and others, including David Provost, Norm Cushman, Dan Detora, Bo Cleveland, Ian Martin and Megyn Pitner, we were able to start the summer growing season after Memorial Day with additional help. Jeff Emerson and Nancy Ruskamp Parsons (members of the Midd Dining Catering staff) started full-time work in the garden to flex their roles as a part of the College's commitment to wage continuity. In mid-June, Jess Crossman (Atwater Servery) and Nick LaDuke (Ross Dining) joined the team, so that we had a total of five full-time staff.



*Jess, Nancy, and Nick (recycling his collection of rubber bands saved from Ross Dining Hall)*

This was an incredible opportunity to work together, cross-pollinate, and deepen our ability to collaborate more meaningfully in the future. We bridged our mutual understanding of different arms of the College, all too often siloed. The garden would not have been possible without this beautiful extension of our partnership, and it has perhaps never been as tidy as it was to welcome students back this fall! Highlights included Nancy and Nick's final conversion of the Jocular bed into an area with native multi-use shrubs, perennial cutting flowers, and physically distanced seating. Jess's sunflowers nodded smiles in every direction, and Jeff's eye for attentive maintenance (overlooked for years) shored us all up.

Our Midd Dining friends had staggered returns to their standard posts on August 7, 14, and 24<sup>th</sup> as students began to return for fall semester.

In contrast to previous years, we grew larger quantities of a handful of main crops (though when all was said and done there were still more than 130 varieties of annual crops). We tended toward more long-season, storage crops as opposed to multiple successions of readily perishable produce (e.g., more dried beans, winter squash, beets, carrots, potatoes, collard greens, drying flowers; less sugar snap peas, lettuce, salad radish, summer squash). This simplification of our garden plan was a helpful choice in a year with so much other uncertainty: at the outset, for example, we did not know much about fomite transmission for COVID and so did not know whether and who would be able to safely harvest crops once they matured. We were able to maintain the Grazing Garden with signage sharing guidance about harvesting.



*The Grazing Garden contained 40 different crops, flowers, and herbs; this year's heirloom tomatoes grown out from seed saved by the 2017 summer intern crew*

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## **Fall at the Knoll**

Student returned to campus earlier than originally planned, with the first wave of arrivals on August 18 and classes beginning September 8. Students underwent pre-arrival quarantines at home, were tested upon arrival, and under room-quarantine until they received a Day 0 and Day 7 negative covid test results. After that initial period, there was a campus-wide quarantine students flocked to the Knoll by the hundreds each day. It was a sight to behold! Roger and Patty Scholten were grazing their dairy cattle in the pasture adjacent to the garden path, and they were perhaps the most photographed cows in the country. Students voiced, over and over, how powerful and restorative it was to be able to be at the Knoll in this peculiar fall, and in large part we were able to operate the space in similar ways.



*"Welcome" ...in buckwheat. Nancy's whimsical touch welcoming students to new perennial seating area; The Scholten Family Farm's Dutch Belts basking in the sunshine of their social media heyday*



As in the past, we focused our efforts on the following commitments and community partnerships:

Midd Dining and Retail Operations: We sold our core group of crops (Swiss chard, kale, tomatoes, and herbs) to Atwater Dining Hall and the Grille.

Cut-Your-Own Flowers: synonymous with walking down to the Knoll was walking home with a handful of flowers. Students were invited to come and clip in the annual and perennial flower beds, which are also cultivated as insectary areas for pollinator and beneficial insect food, habitat, and overwintering sites as part of agroforestry schemes.

HOPE (Helping Overcome Poverty's Effects): As in past years, we arranged with HOPE to grow a few specific crops to supplement their gleaning efforts that supply the food shelf in Middlebury (Addison County's largest). These totaled almost 1700 pounds of produce distributed to our local community (see table above).

Totals By Crop		Total Pounds: 1,696
Crop	Pounds	
Beans	12	
Beet Greens/Chard	35	
Carrots	61	
Garlic/Garlic Scapes	39	
Kale	8	
Mixed Roots	40	
Onions	212	
Potatoes	103	
Winter Squash	1,186	
Total	1,696	

Totals By Item	
Item	Amount
Plants/Starts	40 individual

This report was generated by [The Vermont Gleaning Collective](#) on December 17th 2020

Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk-Abenki Nation: We were able to continue the second year of growing heirloom Abenaki and indigenous beans for Chief Don Stevens of the Nulhegan band, though due to uncertainty around our working conditions, we paused in the corn hand-pollination and seed saving aspect of our partnership. We were also able to share a harvest of some 300 pounds of produce, primarily winter squash, sweet potatoes, and dry beans.



## Growing Conditions

This was an excellent year to have additional person-hours at the Knoll due to drought conditions and increasingly hotter temperatures. In the 8-month growing season from March to October, Middlebury typically receives an average of 26.02 inches of precipitation; this season we saw 16.07 inches, only 62% of the typical total. The entire months of June and July saw less than three inches. Most of this precipitation came in short, periodic storms, and the summer was characterized by long stretches of bright, hot (especially early on, in June) days. With the additional help, we were able dedicate more time to hand-watering, mulching, and adaptation to changing conditions, which proved to be essential as we are still without any kind of irrigation system at the Knoll. Many who have lived in the area for extended periods of time remarked on the superlative conditions, between heat, drought, and general plant stress.



*Aerial views from July; drought visible in the brown top of the Knoll indicating shallow depth to bedrock*

Frost and the end of tender annual crops came early; we had an unusual stretch of three consecutive nights below freezing starting September 18. This wiped out our (unheated) high tunnel tomato production and a number of tender flowers. The wide variations in and interrupted patterns of climate change felt particularly noticeable this year. Increasingly, students seek out the Knoll as a place that reflects and allows for embodied experience with large, sometimes seemingly intractable problems like climate change. It's at times a testing ground, a data set, a home to hold them, a container for grief and mourning, a mirror; but always a part of our Middlebury community rich with lessons in resilience, reciprocity, place-making, relationship, stewardship, and care.

### **Fall Interns**

Interns are the beating heart of the Knoll. We are grateful for their massive generosity and intelligence, demonstrated through their flexibility and ability to welcome so many peers into our shared work.



This fall's crew included Hannah Laga Abram '23, Isabela Bahadorzadeh '23, Regina Fontanelli '22 and Nate Gunesch '21. Given, especially, new protocols around COVID safety and the politically charged environment, we increased student work hours to hold additional time for critical functions like talking through new protocols, peer support, and plain old disinfection.

We had hired four new spring/fall interns and five summer interns in February to begin their training and introduction to the garden in the spring, as has happened in the past. With the College's closure in March,



everyone demonstrated incredible flexibility of imagination and dynamism to try to make the safest and best choices possible in accordance with local and national conditions, as well as emergent policies, for which I am deeply grateful. So, in Fall (typically our busiest season) we rushed to train our incoming interns in the midst of an incredibly busy fall Garden Volunteer Hours season.

New Perennials Project intern Raechel Zeller '22 also supported a project that built out a garden plant inventory and digitized some of our paper records. Two interns continued to work through Winter Term of 2021 to work on program development, including program assessment; student intern position crafting, recruitment, hiring, training, and leadership development; cultivating and developing anti-racist, transparent, and decolonialized modes and approaches to our work; and developing and hosting a BIPOC affinity-space focus group conversation for feedback about the Knoll, for which participants would be compensated.



### Garden Volunteer Hours

Based on College-wide COVID-safety measures, we were able to begin hosting Garden Volunteer Hours on Tuesday, September 8 through Friday, October 30. This year, due to changed course schedules that necessarily adapted to remote learning and time changes (as well as personal challenges around reduced childcare hours for staff), we held five Volunteer Hours sessions each week with the schedule as follows: Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Sundays from 9-11am, and Fridays from 10am – noon and 1-3pm.

Garden volunteer hours have typically been offered in a similar fashion. However, **participation and interest this year were wildly unprecedented.** Due to the necessity of being able to contact trace interactions should an individual contract COVID-19, we created a system for online advanced signups using the Signup Genius platform. We capped attendance at 6 students, two interns, and one staff so that we could be under the threshold of the maximum group size during Phase 1. We offered over 230 individual Volunteer Hours spot signups at the outset of fall; they were 100% full within two weeks. During Phase 2, we were able to increase signups to 10 students per session on Fridays and Sundays, but due to limited staff capacity we were not able to increase the total group size for each session. By the end of the fall we had offered 278 individual slots, 92% of which were filled. If we had been able to offer additional signup times and dates, they most certainly would have been filled, and we heard over and over again from students that they wished they had been able to attend, but were unable to do so because all of the spots were filled so quickly.

Adapting to hosting 12-person groups three times per week, and eight person groups two times per week was a significantly changed landscape from previous years, when interest tended to wax and wane based on weather.



*Harvesting swiss chard for Atwater Dining Hall, threshing beans, amending soil with compost and planting garlic were among the many, many ways to learn from and engage with the garden*

The pattern of attendance this year was quite different from the past, in that we did not require previous signup, and large groups would often materialize spurred by a social gathering, like Friday Work Parties followed by Thank You Pizza. These fun events would often attract 30-40 participants at a time, and provided rich opportunity to integrate garden work with celebration of shared food. We look (longingly) forward to returning to the relaxed spontaneity of Friday Work Parties and Thank You Pizza to share in community.

### **Physical Education Credit**

Learning to garden, including developing skills around composting, soil cultivation, food harvest and handling, and teamwork, builds physical, social, mental and emotional well-being of students, and enriches their holistic learning experiences and builds lifelong habits of good health, stated goals of the Middlebury Athletics and Physical Education programs. Based on conversations with peer institutions and a model at Dartmouth's Organic Farm, we proposed to colleagues in the Athletics department a Physical Education credit for participation in garden volunteer hours. A combination of factors, such as off-campus instructors not being able to visit, the pivot to virtual teaching, the need for safe outdoor physical activity, budget limitations, and perhaps even and overall increase in home gardening efforts came together to make this happen. For this pilot fall semester, students who attended at least four sessions (eight hours of gardening) were able to receive a PE credit. This has been a natural fit and we are grateful for this new offering; we are also interested in addressing disparities in how time, energy, and embodied practice are honored and folded into the appreciation for a liberal arts education. Additionally, by honoring this introduction to lifelong learning experience with physical education credit, it allows more students access to the programming itself. Participation is not just at-will volunteering for a select few who are in-the-know or in one social circle, but instead more broadly accessible to all and with its own stated goals. We are excited to be able to extend these types of opportunities for students to take part.

### **Fall Course Collaborations, Visits, and Student Support**

In spite of all of the disruptions and changes of plans to a typical year, we were able to host and partner with a number of groups. These include:

- ENVS 112 annual fall experiment with Professor Kathy Doyle continuing to build our data set on regenerative and standard tillage organic practices. Four lab sections were divided into small



groups, staggered in their timing, and came out to the Knoll for in-person, hands-on carrot digging and data collection. Special thanks to Kathy for her help in planting this year's carrot sample areas

- BIOL 201: Invertebrate Entymology with Professor Greg Pask – virtual course visit, self-guided student engagement at the Knoll, and supporting their local data collection with the iNaturalist inventorying app.
- FYSE 1563: Landscapes of Central America: Past, Present, and Future in-person introduction and visit at the Knoll with Professor Pete Ryan
- FOOD 281: Food, Power & Justice with Professor Molly Anderson: student interview
- FOOD 280: Intro to Food Systems Issues with Professor Molly Anderson: students were assigned the task of visiting the Knoll to address prepared questions for a “Foodprint” assignment addressing the site, its practices, and how the Knoll is situated on campus
- ENVS 0332: The Perennial Turn in Ag and Culture with Professors Marc Lapin, Nadine Barnicle, and Bill Vitek. Megan served as a Partner/Practitioner in the Food/Agriculture sphere of the Community Connected Learning component of the class. This entailed being partnered with a group of four students for two in-person, on-campus meetings and attending final presentations by the group. The whole Perennial Turn class visited the Knoll on a couple of occasions
- Student support for an individual's project work at the Knoll for ART 348: Oil Painting Outdoors – Visually Interpreting the Landscape Around Us with Professor Jim Butler



*ENVS 112 data collection and carrot planting; tending our Kernza demonstration plot, gifted by the Land Institute via the New Perennials Project in fall 2019*

### **Events Hosted at the Knoll this Fall**

Events this year were marked by the need to both plan ahead and stay flexible and adaptive to changing protocols and safety conditions due to COVID-19. In close collaboration with the Events Management team, student organizations and departments were able to hold some **25 events for on-campus groups, 19 of which were held in-person**, in addition to **over 32 days worth of in-person educational programming**. This was a remarkable feat considering the particular parameters of our pandemic fall.

To do our part in helping groups to access the site, this fall we began providing a “COVID safety kit” (including hand sanitizer, disposable gloves, sanitizing spray, and wipes) and a “campfire kit” (a garden cart filled with firewood, kindling, fire starter, matches, a fire extinguisher, buckets to haul water to extinguish fires, and instructions). This minimized the need for students to make off-campus visits to purchase campfire materials, which are subject to increasingly stringent guidelines around moving

firewood. It also reduced student need to drive vehicles in to access the site for setup (and subsequently spend time together in vehicles). Importantly, too, it consolidated the firewood drop-offs made by our colleagues in Facilities and freed some of their time from making individually-requested deliveries.



*The Knoll's "Campfire kit" with all the fixings to host a campfire gathering (except, of course, the official Burn Permit and Event Confirmation, which must be sought in advance)*

Toward the end of the fall we also began offering to groups that a Knoll intern could meet and welcome organizers to the site for a quick site orientation, to help clarify COVID safety protocols if needed, and for assistance with getting campfires started. We expect to continue to offer this kind of intern support in spring to help make the space—and its full use—as safe, friendly, and welcoming as possible.

### **List of Fall 2020 events:**

An Orientation group comprised of SPECS, MiddSafe advocates, and Midd Peer Health Educators held a gathering for early arrivers.

Many MiddView Orientation Groups held informal group gatherings at the Knoll.

As Franklin Environmental Center at Hillcrest, we held a group virtual Information Session for first years, which was poorly attended as everyone adapted to virtual interactions and came to know Zoom fatigue.

Megan participated in an alumni panel for a virtual Admissions webinar on Environmentalism and Sustainability.

As a part of MiddView Orientation, and co-sponsored by MiddView, we hosted a conversation with Chief Don Stevens of the Nulhegan Band of the Abenaki and Megan Brakeley to share about “Abenaki at the Knoll” and update participants about our collaborations. We were pleased that, in the very busy window of MiddView Orientation, we had some 130 virtual signins for this Zoom presentation.

September 26, The Sustainability Solutions Lab held an in-person gathering with pizza for first year students as an Energy 2028 Study Break

September 25: The Religion Department held a Colloquium at the Knoll

September 30: LA Posse held a campfire organized by mentor Susan DeSimone

October 3: The Vietnamese Student Association planned a campfire but canceled due to foul weather

October 16 and 6: The Middlebury Mountain Club held two campfires for club members and trip leaders

October 9: The Knoll hosted a small campfire gathering for BIPOC environmental leaders to gather and to share in a meal and lightly facilitated conversation

October 16: the Globemed student organization hosted a campfire gathering

October 17: Hillel hosted a Havdallah campfire gathering



October 19: German House hosted a Kaffeestunde Lagerfeuer gathering

October 22: Megan walked down to the Knoll and participated in a conversation with the RAISINS (Radical Asians) student organization about experiences on campus, in the outdoors, and with food

October 24: The Prajna student organization hosted a Mini Retreat and the Italian Department hosted a Buona Forchetta campfire gathering

October 30: the Vietnamese Student Association planned a campfire but canceled due to foul weather

October 30: SNEG Feelings Space Collaboration with Scott Center and student group

October 31: Religion Department Colloquium and the Quidditch team hosted a campfire in the afternoon

November 5: folks from the Health and Wellness Education team planned a Stressbuster Labyrinth walk but canceled due to few signups

November 6: Co-sponsored and supported by the Anderson Freeman Center, the Knoll hosted a BIPOC affinity space Post-Election Reflection space. Over thirty students participated in peer-led events set up as stations offering activities including: creating gratitude bouquets with dried flowers from the summer season; written reflection, origami, and release; meditation; a dance party; labyrinth walks; and planting daffodil bulbs for spring

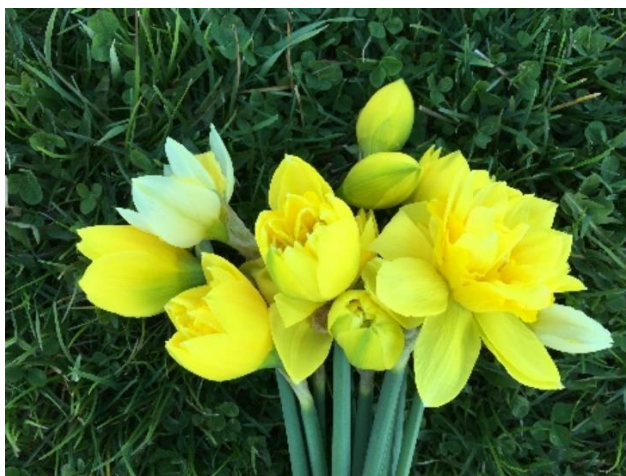
November 7: The Campus newspaper held a pizza lunch gathering on an unseasonably sunny day

November 11: Sunday Night Environmental Group hosted a campfire

January: Megan hosted two 1.5 hour-long Winter Term Workshops for beginning and seasoned gardeners

## **Recommendations and Seeds for the Future**

- The Knoll is maximally adapting to the specific constraints of our site (e.g., no electricity or permanent plumbing, no maintenance of the site in winter, no indoor event planning space) but in order to achieve College goals around accessibility and inclusivity, we would greatly benefit from a master planning process, particularly to address immediate safety and accessibility issues.
  - In the short term this entails creating a safe pathway access and road crossing via a route that conforms with Universal Design standards, replete with appropriate lighting
  - In the longer term this process could evince the need for a permanent structure that addresses suitable restroom facilities, food wash, pack, and storage requirements, and educational programming space.
- Sustaining this work principally through one part time (0.575 FTE) position is quite a long stretch; deepening the work within the current staffing regime is not feasible.
- Increasing opportunities for equitable involvement, including specific affinity spaces, should be a primary program focus for the future.



## Gratitude

To the land, this place, and its forebears for sharing its abundance with us.

Thank you to all of our colleagues at Middlebury College as we weathered this year together. For support with the Knoll's day-to-day operations, we wish to thank our colleagues in Facilities, Dining Services, Midd Catering, Events Management, Student Activities, Public Safety, and at the Midd Recycling Facility. Thanks to the entire Environmental Affairs team to support the efforts at the Knoll from the safe distance of your isolated home offices, chugging behind the scenes. To our summer crew for the person-power, laughter, conversations, rubber bands, waxed boxes, and garden love.

A special shoutout to the non-stop work by the Senior Leadership Committee. In a year where they were asked to step up to lead on any number of challenges ranging from budget shortfalls to national unrest about equity to a global pandemic to global impacts of climate change to American democracy at stake, many took voluntary salary reductions and continued to provide essential leadership and worked doubly to communicate new protocols for everything, no small task.

To Jen Kazmierczak and Dr. Mark Peluso, we owe an enormous debt of gratitude for your tireless work, collegiality, and leadership during this time.

To long-time garden friends Jay Leshinsky and John Derick for their continued guidance and counsel.

To our dedicated Addison County community, who we dearly missed sharing opportunities to learn and grow together: thank you for adapting to the changing landscapes of our partnerships to put the safety of students and community members first. We look forward to your return to campus, whenever that comes, to restore the vibrancy and richness of interaction, friendship, and collaboration.

And of course, to the students who dreamed up and continue to collectively continue to dream what the Knoll is: for each other, for all of us.

*All photos courtesy Megan Brakeley except drone photos, courtesy Gus Brakeley*

Prepared by Megan Brakeley '06, Food & Garden Educator

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