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# Permaculture at UMass-Amherst: Garden Share Project

Madeleine Charney

Granby

Like a circle of late-season sunflowers, heads bowed in the autumn warmth, we drank in the welcoming invocation: "Planting, harvesting, learning, sharing, resting, and planting yet again." These words, thoughtfully intoned by John Gerber, professor of Plant and Soil Science at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, reminded us of the interconnected cycles of humans and the natural world. The group, Five-College students new to the Garden Share Project (GSP), as well as a few founding members, shared personal vignettes. A majority of the students grew up with a family garden while others have worked in the growing industry. Several were experiencing gardening for the first time. Twenty pairs of hands were eager to make contact with the earth.

GSP was started in 2001 by a group of UMass undergraduates who shared a passion for gardening with intention. In contrast to the straight-row conventional gardens around the campus, GSP integrates innovative and ecological principles into its 1/2-acres. Permaculture is the guiding philosophy, design and practice here. Forest gardening and biointensive planting also make this parcel sustainable and constantly evolving. Converted from a horse pasture (with vestigial sumac and burdock to prove it), GSP is now a lush and productive demonstration site located on Tillson Farm Road on the edge of campus.

Students, besides learning how to grow vegetables, assimilate an understanding of the value of eating organic, local foods. Another lesson is community building. Most of the produce is donated to the Survival Center, an Amherst-based organization that provides food for families and individuals in need. Some is also sold to EarthFoods Cafe, a collectively run, nonprofit organization, operated solely by UMass students. Through these connections, GSP plays an active role in strengthening the webs of local economy, ecology, and community. Participation in GSP can earn 5-College students one credit through Gerber's course, Sustain-



*Now that's a good tomato! Students Helena Farrell and Matthew Sullivan at a work day at the UMass Garden Share Project.*

able Agriculture Plant and Soil Science 265. During the course, students visit other sites that uphold their ideals, such as the Food Bank Farm in Hadley and Seeds of Solidarity in Orange. As the site becomes more established, GSP has the potential to become a full-credit course in its own right.

After learning the tasks for the day, work groups fanned out. For the next few hours, a living classroom took shape, further inspired by reggae music from a nearby car stereo. Founding member Helena Farrell gave her peers a lesson on building compost piles—how to layer materials in proper proportions. Mike Keeney, another founding member, led the forest garden crew. Soon to be underplanted with perennial berries and low-growing herbs, the young fruit and nut trees will become an integral part of a three-tiered edible forest. Carsten Homstead demonstrated how to cut brush with a scythe, celebrating its efficiency over fossil-fueled equipment. Garlic was planted, ornamental Native American corn was admired, and weeds were pulled and added to the growing compost piles.

"The 'golden rule' of Garden Share Project is to set goals but realize that they will always be constantly changing and shifting," says Farrell. She views the project as "a phenomenon and a social activity with good leaders and good followers.. a place where students, teachers, and community members give and receive." Keeney, a self-proclaimed

"worker bee" and "weatherman," encouraged the group to accept the abundance of nature. He pointed out that while burdock is highly invasive, it also produce a nutritious root.

Incorporating a hands-on component into the course brings it to life. Katie Lichtig, a student in international relations at Mount Holyoke College, described Prof. Gerber's approach to teaching. "He is far more interested in the process than in the outcome," she says. Gerber's implementation of a sustainability concentration in the UMass curriculum speaks to his dedication to the principle of permaculture. In the words of Bill Mollison, the main founder of the movement, permaculture is "allowing systems to demonstrate their own evolution."

GSP empowers people to take responsibility for the earth, to make choices about what to grow, and to select the growing methods with care. This process promotes the evolution not only of the land, but of every person who passes through the gates. True to the GSP mission, schools, community organizations and local citizens are also invited to teach and learn these sustainable methods and assist with maintaining the garden. Just wander down Tillson Farm Road some day until you see the hand-painted rock that greets you with the words, "Welcome to Garden Share Project!"

For more information about Garden Share Project, contact John Gerber 413 • 545-5301 or [jgerber@psis.umass.edu](mailto:jgerber@psis.umass.edu).