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It Takes a Garden

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Plants and vegetables
bring community together



it takes a
GARDEN

BY SARAH FULLER



ON THE LAST Friday morning in January, a line of patrons stood behind SFA's agriculture building, patiently waiting for their first pick from a variety of freshly harvested produce grown only a short walk away. When the doors of Sprout Garden Market opened, the customers were met with an enthusiastic welcome from Dr. Jared Barnes, SFA assistant professor of horticulture.

"Every Friday, we have people come here from all areas of the campus and community," said Barnes, who also serves as the market's director. "They interact, and we build relationships with them."

It is the establishment of these connections that guides Barnes and Dawn Stover, SFA Gardens' research associate, as they expand the SFA Sustainable Community Education Garden. Stover helped establish the garden located along the eastern border of the SFA Intramural Fields along Lanana Creek Trail in 2012. Now known as Sprout, the garden is living up to its name with plant trials and raised beds that are available for rent.

The tagline of Sprout is "a garden for tangible growth." The real growth, however, transcends the obvious reference to germinating seeds and thriving produce. According to Barnes, the garden facilitates personal development by providing SFA students and the surrounding community with an opportunity to engage with plants, work the soil and interact alongside others who share similar interests.

In true professorial form, Barnes also takes time to foster intellectual growth among market patrons, sharing the history of certain cultivars available for purchase. Mâche, a mild winter green also known as corn salad, was once a staple forage of European peasants, he explained to a patron while sacking her purchase.

Thanks to the abundance of produce generated from the garden and ongoing trials, the market is now open once a week, year-round and offers a unique variety of colorful produce. This fall, Barnes conducted a trial of 15 Swiss chard cultivars, ranging in hues from hunter green to vibrant pink, to determine which varieties are best suited for the region's fall and winter gardens.

"What we want to do is take all of this trial data and use it to create user-friendly PDFs people can view on their iPad or download," Barnes said. He added the data would then be made available to local farmers and growers, providing them with solid science upon which to base their future plantings.

On campus, Sprout recently partnered with the SFA Hunger Jacks, a student-led organization dedicated to helping alleviate hunger on campus and in the community. As a result of this new partnership, Hunger Jacks now offers Fresh Food Fridays outside of the Baker Pattillo Student Center, providing the donated produce to students for free.

Dr. Miranda Terry, assistant professor of kinesiology and health science and Hunger Jacks faculty adviser, said the collaboration provides students with fresh produce that is typically inaccessible on a college budget.

Barnes also is incorporating Sprout into his class curriculum. This spring, his herbaceous plants class will help produce cut flowers for the garden market, and during the upcoming fall 2015 semester, his fruit and vegetable production class will focus on growing, marketing and distributing Sprout produce.

"You can learn about plants all day long, but it just doesn't compare to being out here and working," said Jordan McGee, a senior horticulture major who works for Sprout. Community members also have the opportunity to expand their knowledge of horticulture through Sprout.

Retired school superintendent and Nacogdoches resident Charles Bradberry worked steadily over a seed tray as patrons filtered in and out of the final January market. When Bradberry began volunteering with SFA Gardens three years ago, he was a novice. "I've gone from someone who didn't know anything about plants to someone who has built his own greenhouse," he said.

Barnes and Stover plan to establish volunteer Saturdays, providing more opportunities for individuals unable to volunteer during the week. They also hope to create an outdoor classroom environment in the garden area, using informational signage to provide visitors with messages and facts about the produce.

"The question is how do you really make the garden something that's remarkable, memorable and also something people feel invested in?" Barnes asked. "Food and gardening is a way you can connect with others across the community."



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