

University urban farm grows in esteem

Prof wants gardens on campus

For what may be the first time in its history, the University has achieved national recognition for its efforts in agriculture.

The recipient of the new-found fame is the University's urban farm project, the six-year-old brainchild of landscape architecture Prof. Richard Britz. The farm recently was included in a catalogue of model alternative resource projects published by the Center for Renewable Resources, a national organization funded by the federal energy department.

The farm thus becomes a model for organic farming projects throughout the country. For Britz, however, the goals of the farm stretch far beyond demonstrating the utility of non-chemical agriculture.

"It is our premise that reconsideration and reorganization of our existing systems begins at home and in our places of learning," Britz has written. "The evolution of change stands its

best chance by springing from our own personal environments."

On a one and a half plot north of campus, Britz and his students are attempting to bring rural life a little closer to city dwellers. Britz sees a world where the values and needs of those in the cities have come into increasing conflict with their counterparts on the land — and he thinks both are poorer

for it. He suggests that if lasting improvements are to be made in the situation, the changes must begin in the city.

"One way to do that," he says, "is to bring agriculture into people's backyards." Currently, city planning is "crunching" agriculture in the state, Britz says.

"The point of my work is that people can reverse the trend," he says.

With that philosophy in mind, Britz and the students and faculty members working with him have developed a system that they believe will enable city residents to participate in farm life at home.

The urban farm, as it had developed under Britz' direction, is virtually a self-contained operation. For example, water will soon be drawn from the millrace through a windmill that was constructed as part of a class project last year.

Another vital element, fertilizer, is provided by the obliging group of rabbits housed at the farm site.

The plants are grown on raised beds — a gardening technique developed in France and China — which Britz says are particularly suitable for the poorly drained soil that abounds in the Willamette Valley. Britz observed raised-bed gardening first-hand on a trip to China last year.

Britz has plans to expand the farm's operation. He wants to plant vegetable gardens around the University campus.

"The campus could literally bloom with gardens," he says.

Britz says a five-acre filbert orchard that stands on University property adjacent to the farm site has been pruned this spring in an effort to bring it back into production.

Rather than focusing on the immediate, practical aspects of the farm, Britz views it as a prototype that could be adapted for use in any major city. Britz believes city residents could grow a large portion of their own food by utilizing the land lying dormant in backyards, alleys and streets.

Britz envisions a block-by-block network of miniature farms where neighbors have torn down their backyard fences.

Britz has summarized his vision in a book titled "The Edible City Resource Manual" that will be available June 1.

"Sharing and exchange of resources may be the main concern for our world citizenry for our immediate future, and maybe exercising these opportunities at the neighborhood scale will give us these experiences," he writes.

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