

Urban Farm

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Students learn about plant physiology, gardening practices, soil science, propagation and early greenhouse skills.

"It's a fun class," said Lisa Ryan, a sophomore environmental studies major. "It's definitely things that I'll be able to use forever; it's not a class where you'd want to return the book."

The class plans what to grow in the spring and summer. Then they plant seeds in small pots and trays to cultivate "starts," which are later transplanted in the actual garden.

"The idea behind 'starts' is that they're only about this big," said Bettman's husband Tom, as he held his thumb and forefinger about two inches apart. The idea is to plant the "starts" in the greenhouse rather than plant the seeds in the garden to prevent the weeds from taking over the growth outside, he said.

One of the difficulties of the class is that the gardening schedule does not match the school schedule.

"We have to superimpose the academic calendar over the gardening calendar," Bilbao said. "After summer but before fall, no one's here to harvest, and that happens to be the most abundant time."

Most of the crops are donated to Food for Lane County, a non-profit organization that gives food to low-income households. Students

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Lauren Bilbao
Associate professor

take home some of their labor, and for the first time last year, some of the crops were sold to Sundance Natural Food Store. The proceeds from the sale were put into a fund to pay for the summer caretaker who used to be paid by a grant.

Urban farmers learned another lesson from their farm-touring field trip last week. Different community farms have different philosophies behind their operation, Bilbao said.

Both gardens that students toiled at are sites used to grow organic vegetables for the Food for Lane County charity.

"Good, fresh organic produce is hard to come by," said Keith Perchemlides, the farm manager at the Springfield Youth Farm where the class visited recently. "We grow it, harvest it, box it and donate it."

Perchemlides said the Springfield farm is primarily powered by youths between the ages of 14 and 18 that for one reason or another

have been labeled "at risk" or "disadvantaged."

Work on the farm is paid and is also a chance to learn much needed job skills. It is not a punishment for the youths, he said.

"Overall, I think it's good job experience," Perchemlides said. "Many of them have never had a job before."

The University's 23-year old Urban Farm is also more than a source of charity.

Originally, it was the experimental vision of Richard Britz, a former landscape architecture professor. Britz's idea, called the "edible city," was a plan to utilize the wasted space found within a standard city block. If each city block could grow a garden in the center, it would foster a sense of community while feeding that community at the same time.

"I enjoy the people in this context," Bilbao said. "Community that is grouped together by agriculture is a choice that I've made. I enjoy living in a community of gardeners. I enjoy eating well, and I enjoy working hard, and I enjoy sharing those things with the people I love."

Bilbao said the Urban Farm is an exemplary example of one type of gardening philosophy.

"It's community serving, community building and there's stuff growing here. It's productive," she said.



Anne Bibbens cuts the bottoms of leeks while talking with classmates.

Nick Medley/Emerald



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