

GARDEN *from A1*

The garden is managed by AKHS educator Matt Hall, who also runs the Kennedy Conservation Corps, a school program which has for more than a decade been putting students to work in capacities which prepare them for their transition into a post-graduation life.

Gardening is one of the many skills on the list for the conservation crew.

This year, the garden is featuring a new element – dry farming. Appropriately timed considering recent drought conditions, the gardening strategy makes do without regular irrigation or precipitation by relying on the efficient storage of moisture already within the soil.

“We planted all the plants a couple feet apart so there would be more moisture in the ground for them to absorb,” explained recent AKHS graduate Devon Gosset. “And that way they should hopefully produce and grow as much as they’re supposed to without running out of moisture.”

The method is experimental for the garden, but could be a regular feature if it yields results.

Students dug deeply, past the hardpan (the dense layer of soil below topsoil) to plant squash and a variety of tomatoes about a month ago. The plants were watered once upon planting, but not since. The entire month of June only saw about an inch of rain.

Most of the squash died right away, said Hall, but the tomatoes so far seem to be bearing well. However, the experiment’s success in this “dry run” won’t be fully measured until this fall. Next year, Hall wants to put corn beans and squash in the dry farm.

While discussing the dry farming methods between shallot picking, the program’s charm is revealed. Hall and the students sidetrack from time to time with questions and answers about the plants and their gardening needs, mixing educational tidbits into the conversation.

Much of the pedagogy of the class functions in such a manner, providing students with instant knowledge relevant to tangible

materials in front of them. Along with teacher who satisfies their curiosity so readily, students were effusive in their appreciation for the opportunity Hall has provided and noted that the experience has caused real change in their personal lives.

“It’s really rewarding work because you can see what you’ve done,” said Isabella Dove, who also recently graduated from AKHS and has worked on the crew for years. “And you can come back and this whole plant grew because of you. You can eat this food off this plant that you grew.”

As well as garden work, the crew also does clean-up and restoration of areas such as Quamash Prairie. This year, Hall said, students have been working two days per week in the program.

The current program runs for six weeks, but may extend another week this year.

The crew is even paid through the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps, which was established by the Oregon Legislature in 1987 to provide programs

to increase educational, training and employment opportunities for youth.

When Hall’s program runs out of its awarded \$21,000 this year, students will be paid out summer school funds, he said.

Kennedy Conservation Corps also worked to clear areas of the prairie after the 2019 snowstorm which brought down a great number of trees.

“It was just really nice to see how everything looked after we cleaned up that area,” said Gosset.

Students said the jobs had given them a newfound appreciation for the work others do on local nature and bike paths and can make nature walks that much more gratifying.

Crew member Trinitie Fenn pointed to other benefits.

“Not only are we getting that knowledge, but we also get [school] credit while we’re here,” she said. “We also get the meals from the school that are provided – and the boots.”

Students sported their work boots with a hint of pride at the mention of them.

“It’s actually made me

more productive at home, too,” said student Nikita Smith. “I used to be so lazy before I started working here. ... And now I do more stuff at home. We garden at home and I pull the weeds.”

Other students confirmed that the program had imbued them with a desire to stay active and spend more time outdoors.

“And on top of that, I also feel like I’ve been a little bit more positive and more motivated to do things like this. This has just totally changed my entire perspective,” said Gosset.

“It’s a form of group therapy,” joked student Hailey Carter.

Several of the crew even said they were itching to come back during a recent week off from the program.

Hall himself has been overjoyed to have students back on site. Last year, coronavirus restrictions severely limited the amount of workers he could ask to come out. Hall had to do much of the gardening himself just after the garden had increased by an additional 2,700 square feet that spring.

And since then, it has grown even more. The native plant nursery has been allowed to expand and several more plants have been added to the inventory.

Hall could hardly put a finger on exactly how much its grown.

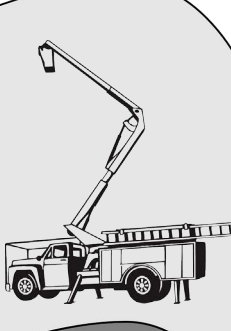
“Everything’s just gotten bigger,” he said, taking in the site.

In August, a new greenhouse was built next to the orchard, but has only recently begun to get power and water utilities. Once ready, the plant population will expand once more.

With a garden and student crew which have proven able to adapt through heat, drought and pandemic, the program seems set to impact the lives of students for years to come.

“What I like about it is Al Kennedy chose a student from every different kind of background,” said Fenn. “Everyone here has their own reason why they’re here. Mine is, I wanted to graduate and get credits. I’m 20 and I didn’t think that I’d be able to come back to school. Kennedy gave me that opportunity to come back and try that.”

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