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Roger Gates: Medicinal herb program at UGArden offers expanded product line

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Meteorologists, professionals who study the weather, consider Dec. 1 the first day of winter. Recent temperatures in our region would confirm that winter is upon us, well before the winter solstice, which occurs on Dec. 21 this year. The solstice, to be precise, will occur at 5:21 p.m. on that Friday. It marks the point at which the tilt of the Earth's axis and position of the sun combine to reverse the shortening of day length. Longer days include a greater duration of solar radiation, gradually leading to the warming of land and water surfaces and ultimately spring and then summer.

However, the first day of spring is still three months away. Those for whom winter temperatures are less appealing may find minimal relief in the December Outlook released by the Climate Prediction Center. The current prediction "shows that the month is leaning towards warmer and wetter conditions than normal. First two weeks may be near normal or even a bit cooler than normal once a cold front moves through the region." Warmer conditions are anticipated for the last two weeks of the month. Conditions are expected to be wetter than normal for most of the month.

The arrival of winter corresponds to the year's holiday season. Finding a special gift may occupy considerable time, creativity or expense for some. Gift seekers near the University of Georgia might consider the products resulting from a novel collaboration of several units.

“Experiential learning at the University of Georgia gives students hands-on opportunities to connect their academic foundations to the world beyond the classroom in ways that change their perspective and insight,” according to Scott Pegan, interim director of the Office of Experiential Learning. “The Office of Experiential Learning offers more than 70 competitive scholarships for students to use toward approved activities each year. Students participate in activities locally, across the state, country and world ... Experiential learning challenges our students and is one more reason they are a step ahead of the competition.”

One experiential experience centers on the medicinal herb program at UGArden, the University of Georgia’s student-run farm. This program has grown, and an expanded product line now includes teas, salves and soaps that students prepared for the annual holiday market. All of the products are locally grown at the university farm and prepared by the students. “It’s cool because there are all these students in different programs that wouldn’t necessarily be coming out to a farm,” said Noelle Fuller, the manager of the program. “They get hands-on experience with different parts of this student-run business, and it’s accessible to a lot of people.”

Fuller received a bachelor of science in nutrition science and a master of science in horticulture from UGA. Now a trained herbalist, she started as a volunteer in the herb garden during her time as a student. After completing her master’s degree, she began managing the herb program. A grant of \$20,000 from the Office of Experiential Learning has contributed to the growth of the program and supported its expansion across campus. Fuller has been able to spend more time in the garden with student volunteers and interns as they maintain the garden, harvest plants and process dried herbs.

Partnerships have been formed with students from the College of Agriculture and Environmental Science and other colleges including the entrepreneurship certificate program of the Terry College of Business. Students and faculty advisers from the Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development and the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication New Media Institute have been involved. Students have worked together to develop promotional items related to marketing, outreach, branding, a sustainable business model, a new website and a record-keeping app.

The holiday market was staffed by students in a First-Year Odyssey class called Local Food Entrepreneurship, who had studied the business model of the herb program all semester. Ten all-natural herbal teas, holiday bath and beauty boxes, salves, lip balms, infused oils, locally grown loofahs and a new shiitake mushroom seasoning blend are products currently marketed.

“We’re trying to make it very holistic by giving students opportunities to be involved in the business in different ways and by incorporating a bunch of different perspectives,” Fuller said. “There are students that would never come out to work on the farm, but they can now help in other aspects of the business.”

Roger Gates is the agricultural and natural resources agent for University of Georgia Extension, Whitfield County. Contact him at roger.gates@uga.edu.

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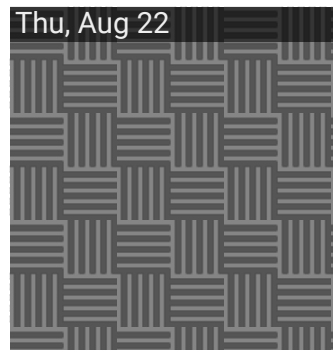
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