

Six years on, UGArden thriving, making friends for UGA and feeding people

By Lee Shearer

Posted Jul 13, 2016 at 5:41 PM

Six years after a group of environmentally-minded students convinced skeptical University of Georgia administrators to let them plant a small community garden on South Milledge Avenue, the UGArden, as it's called, has blossomed into something not even its young founders may have imagined.

“It's become so much bigger than any of us expected,” said Shannon Wilder, director of the UGA Office of Service Learning.

At the beginning, some students despaired they'd ever convince UGA officials to give it a green light. University lawyers worried about liability, while other administrators wondered whether a student-run garden would actually last, and what university unit would be willing to take on overseeing it.

– [View more photos from the UGArden in our slideshow.](#)

But when UGA horticulture professor David Berle came across the students' plans online, things began to fall into place. The UGArden would fit perfectly into a grant proposal on sustainable food systems Berle was putting together, and horticulture department head Doug Bailey was an enthusiastic backer right way. Before long the garden began sprouting on about 3/4 of an acre near the horticulture department's South Milledge Avenue greenhouses, which was just moved from the main UGA campus to make way for an addition to the pharmacy building.

The original plan was not much more than having three garden plots in rotation, tended by about two dozen students in what is now the UGArden Club.

“Then we started teaching a class in sustainable community food production,” Berle said, and soon another class followed.

The classes brought, and bring, students out regularly to work the garden in addition to club members. But other community members began helping out, such as members of Athens Area Master Gardens and interested folks like Maize Loo, who began a medicinal herb garden soon after the UGArden began. She and other volunteers dry the herbs, then package them in a variety of combinations to be used as herb teas, some soothing, some anti-allergen, some with other properties.

Graduate student (now UGA materials reuse coordinator) Chris McDowell pitched in, bringing his program of recycling used building materials to build raised garden beds and other structures for the garden - even a small greenhouse made of recycled lumber.

The UGArden has grown into closer to five acres, some in lush cultivation of tomatoes, peppers, squash, asparagus, cabbage and other vegetables at any given time, some resting and rejuvenating under cover crops, protected by a high fence - donated - to keep hungry deer out.

One small plot is faithfully tended by families home-schooling their children. Nearby grow fruit trees and bushes - the UGArden had a good blueberry crop this year, Berle said.

But perhaps the most interesting growth has come outside the garden proper.

Berle already began working with a Clarke County middle school to start and sustain a community garden. This year all four middle schools will have gardens.

Clarke Middle School is one of three places where anyone can buy produce from the UGArden - Monday evenings from 4 to 6:30 p.m. They sell more of their produce at a mid-day market at the Athens Community Council on Aging on Wednesdays, and on Thursdays at 4 p.m. at Coile Middle School near Winterville.

Memberships, available to anyone, cost \$35 and allow members to buy produce at half-price; if you receive food stamps, membership is free.

“It’s a pretty good deal,” said UGArden manager Johanna Biang. Prices are a little more than supermarket prices, a little less than typical farmer’s market prices.

The young gardeners also hand over part of their produce to another student organization that’s succeeded beyond expectations, Campus Kitchens. The group prepares and distributes meals to more than 200 “clients,” said Kaeli Evans, a VISTA volunteer working with the program this year.

Working with the Athens Community Council on Aging, the Campus Kitchen students distribute some of those meals to grandparents who are rearing grandchildren; some are distributed by Meals on Wheels volunteers to older people and shut-ins.

It's now a place visitors regularly tour, featured in UGA promotional materials; students use it for experiments on soil properties.

Another class has been added - building a tiny house.

The garden's definitely fulfilled the prediction of Mary Ora Carlson, one of the students who pushed to get it going six and seven years ago.

"I believe there will be a growth of not only plants but relationships," Carlson, said in 2010.

It now has a professional manager, Biang, but students, along with volunteers, still provide most of the work, as well as the innovation.

The garden's not certified "organic," but in practice, it is organic, with environmentally friendly practices.

Some people would like that official designation, but others aren't so sure. "Organic" still carries a kind of counterculture stigma for some people, Berle explained.

Biang was one of those a little skeptical of the "organic" tag when she started here as one of Berle's graduate students.

Now "I love this place," she said - partly because she now knows about the sustainable principles embedded in the garden, which will produce about 20,000 pounds of food this year.

But it's more for what it does for the students involved in it.

"It's a uniter. Everyone is here for a common cause," she said.

Students get confidence after they learn things like driving a tractor, or plant seeds and see them come up, or take up a hammer and nails for a repair job.

"It sounds all pie in the sky, but I've seen it happen," she said. It's a safe space to learn. When you're out here, you get to know people and connect with them. It's a pretty cool thing to watch."

What do they learn?

“They learn to use a shovel, for one thing. I never thought that learning a tool was something you needed to learn,” she said. “You learn to make mistakes. You think you’re coming out here to learn how to grow vegetables, but it’s all those other things you learn.”

“It’s like a teaching farm. You learn so much out here you’d never learn in a classroom,” said UGA third-year student Teri Rakusin, president of the UGArden Club, who’s learned how to drive a tractor, turn compost, and plant out here.

Rakusin, whose summer job this year is working in the garden, also likes being in the garden because of its connections outside the university, she said.

“UGArden is so in the community,” she said. “We feed so many people with our produce.”

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