

COMMUNITY GROWTH

THE ANDREWS UNIVERSITY STUDENT GARDENS PUT DOWN ROOTS

by Samantha Snively

It's mid-August, there's a slight chill in the morning air, and the ground is still damp from heavy rains last night. Garth Woodruff is leaning out of the truck window, discussing the plans for the piles of just-harvested potatoes in the Andrews Student Gardens with Arthur Mulyono, a student worker and horticulture major. Since today and tomorrow will be gloriously sunny, Arthur says the potatoes can be field-dried before making their way into CSA baskets and the nearby farm stand.

The field Arthur and two other students are working in previously grew nothing but corn for years. Corn, if not part of a rotation of crops, is ruinous to soil: it strips out nitrogen and nutrients, and puts almost nothing back in. (Part of the reason farmers must put thousands of pounds of fertilizer onto their cornfields every year is to artificially restore this balance, while trying to supply a market that demands a nearly unsustainable stream of corn.) When the Department of Agriculture wanted to expand the garden, the soil samples sent out for testing returned with an expensive prescription: it would cost \$15,000 to restore the proper nutrients to the starved ground. "And we told them we didn't even have \$1,500," says Woodruff, instructor of horticulture and garden production specialist. So the students tried the old-fashioned approach: they planted two-thirds of the field with red clover and other nitrogen-fixing plants, letting the field lie fallow while the plants regenerate the soil. The other third holds a vegetable and flower garden, which the students plan to rotate around the field, so that in a few years the soil will be full of diverse nutrients again.

A few miles down the road, Nasta Tishina is picking blackberries at an extension site of the Student Gardens. She's surrounded by rows of sweet corn, bell peppers, lettuce, squash, and six or seven varieties of heirloom tomatoes. Up the hill, a tightly packed orchard of trellised apple trees looks out over a scene so idyllic and fruitful it would keep

an English Romantic painter busy for weeks.

And then there's 80 acres of Concord and Niagara grapes ripening in the vineyard, plus a 10-acre peach orchard, two greenhouses, a small plot next to the athletic field, and somewhere near campus, 800 acres of corn for dairy cow feed. For students in Andrews University's agriculture program, the Student Gardens are an ideal place to cultivate the practical skills that go along with their degree.

The garden's roots (pun intended) reach all the way back to the early days of Andrews University, when what was Battle Creek College moved to Berrien Springs. One of the primary attractions of the Berrien Springs site was its suitability for extensive agriculture. The college administrators envisioned vast gardens and orchards, producing much of the school's food and giving the students a place to develop their bodies as well as their minds. In their heyday, the turn-of-the-century gardens produced all of the food for the College, plus enough extra to ship to Chicago.

But as the college grew, the gardens shrank, until they were mostly small plots in faculty backyards. Then, about 10 years ago, Ralph Wood, former faculty member in the Department of Agriculture and an avid gardener, began a small crop of fruit and vegetables. The garden was intended primarily as an academic lab for agriculture students, although Wood hoped it could become a University industry alongside the dairy. A small donation led to five acres of peach orchards, and the garden grew from there. When Wood retired in 2011, he'd developed what was "already a healthy little garden," says Woodruff, consisting of eight acres of vegetables, an acre of brambles, and three acres of apple orchards plus the peaches.

When Woodruff took over two years ago, the gardens were producing enough food to supply a farm stand and the occasional meal in the cafeteria, "and now the staff needed to do outreach and marketing,"



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says Woodruff. Picking up on trends in cooking and sustainability sweeping the nation, the gardens became almost entirely organic and the students advertised a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program. Within days, the CSA had 40 subscribers, mostly from St. Joseph and the surrounding community.

Now, the CSA has expanded again to include flowers, much to the delight of several local brides. Over 50 varieties of fruits and vegetables find their way into CSA baskets and the farm stand every week, the Andrews cafeteria incorporates the Gardens’ produce into their meals, and the extras get donated to Neighbor to Neighbor, a local food pantry.

The Juvenile Center of the Berrien RESA just joined the CSA this year, and every week their CSA share has a little extra produce for the 300 students staying there. Woodruff is pleased, because it means that “these kids who are essentially in jail aren’t necessarily cut off from healthy lifestyles, good opportunities, and a little education as to what life could be when they get out.”

The students who work in the gardens see their work as “one of the outreach components of the University, because we’re carrying part of the university mission—healthy lifestyles—into the community.”

The Andrews Student Gardens are just one of many small farms across the country dedicated to eating nutritiously, supporting local economies, and resisting the tide of industrialization sweeping our

grocery stores. “Growing your own food is essentially growing money,” Woodruff likes to remind his students, and it’s also a tasty way of sharing the Christian message. Spiritual welfare goes hand-in-hand with physical, environmental, economic and community welfare—and in an area next door to Benton Harbor, fresh and affordable produce can literally change lives. The connections in the community are invaluable—through the weekly CSA baskets, “we’re inviting the community to share in our great lifestyle,” says Woodruff.

The farm-to-fork lifestyle that can remind the Adventist community at Andrews of

their calling to care for the earth and serve others, and a lifestyle that invites everyone to eat mindfully. One of the side effects of pre-packaged food on the supermarket shelf is the way it disconnects us from its origins in a complex ecosystem. It also distances us from the incredible amounts of work and highly specialized knowledge that go into producing fruit and vegetables. Just listening to Woodruff explain the work that goes into peaches is dizzying—the peach trees have to be pruned back in the winter and protected from frost in the spring; when the blossoms appear in the spring they have to be thinned out by hand, with 6–9 inches between each one; then each of the six varieties appears at a different time; and when the tree is loaded with fruit it also has to be thinned and neatened; then the peaches are harvested by hand, and the whole cycle starts again.



The Andrews Student Gardens occupy acres of vegetables, fruit orchards and vineyards. Produce is used at Dining Services, sold at a nearby farm stand and distributed on a subscription basis to dozens of customers during the summer months.



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And that's just peaches. Multiply that by 50 different crops, three growing seasons, and five different locations—not to mention the knowledge of soil composition, plant culture, weather patterns, rain-fall and pests required to keep the plants healthy—and you'll have a pretty good idea of just how busy the students are, and just how much knowledge they need at the ready. A knowledge of crop and soil and land is rapidly disappearing from our cultural consciousness, as the average age of the agricultural workforce hovers around 60 (compared to a national workforce average of about 40). Farmers are desperate for younger workers to bring new knowledge and advancements in agricultural science to the fields. The market is responding: of the top majors with the lowest unemployment rates, agriculture is the third most popular.

Woodruff has seen this trend in his own department—the agriculture programs grew by 40% one year, and 60% the next. “Our program is one of the fastest-growing on campus. Of course, when you've only got 12 students, that sounds more impressive than it is,” but the Department of Agriculture has about 70 students in its related programs now, including many in a new International Agriculture Development program.

The Department of Agriculture has also partnered with Zaoksky Adventist University in Russia to allow Zaoksky students to complete their degrees and get hands-on training in the Student Gardens. Nasta, our blackberry-picking friend above, is one of the students from Zaoksky. Arthur Mulyono is from Indonesia. In fact, the majority of students in the agriculture/horticulture programs are international students. Many plan to return to their home countries with their knowledge, and improve farming practices. Others have started small farms of their own.

When Arthur first arrived on campus, he knew he needed a job to pay for tuition and expenses. Decades ago, he could have paid his entire school bill working in one of the college industries, but times have changed—however, he and his fellow gardeners still make a considerable dent in their bill.

Arthur has been working in the gardens since 2011, and just graduated with a degree in horticulture. In three growing seasons, he's become Woodruff's righthand man, leading the harvest and weekly CSA basket-packing. Arthur plans to become a farmer “and feed the world,” he says. “I also want to change how the world envisions agriculture. People need to know where their food comes from. We have a tendency to demand food, but everything takes time and effort.” Time and effort

that contribute not only to physical development, but mental and spiritual as well. And fresh, good produce grown just down the road with a little of the farm dirt still on it is a powerful way to bring a community together.

Together with the farm stand, the CSA, the donation of extra produce to local charities, and the hundred or so 30-by-30 rental plots for international families in University Apartments, the Gardens' many programs are all about community outreach.

Much more can be done in the communities surrounding Andrews, and the Gardens' staff is hoping to grow even larger. They put a grant together, and are now currently fundraising to conduct educational programs and obtain space to sustain a year-round growing season. Just up the road, the town of Benton Harbor is a food desert—a place where healthy, affordable food is hard to obtain. Even the village of Berrien Springs, actually, is considered a food desert. “And we have the largest vegetarian restaurant in the country, not to mention we're surrounded by farmland,” says Woodruff. Although the Gardens are plentiful during the summer, the harsh winters mean that off-season access to food is limited to what's available in the stores.

A food desert is defined by more than just access, however—people need to know how to use the food once it arrives. “But how do you juice when you can't afford a toaster? How do you spend an hour cutting up vegetables for a healthy dinner when you've just worked a 12-hour workday for \$5 an hour, and a cheeseburger is 99 cents?” In Benton Harbor, this is too often a reality. The Gardens hope to alleviate a little bit of this through their proposed expansion program—all they need now is the funding.

“We're growing 20–30 acres of produce, and with that comes an education to the community of how to grow it themselves, how to preserve it, how to work it into their diet so that a small home in Benton Harbor can start adding fruits and vegetables to their diet that give them better nutrients and a better lifestyle,” Woodruff says. It's a lifestyle people are eating up throughout the country, and it's a tasty way of spreading the mission of Andrews. ■

Samantha Snively (BA '13) considers this piece “one of her favorites this summer.” Samantha was a graduate writer for Integrated Marketing & Communication at Andrews University this summer and is now pursuing doctorate studies in English literature at the University of California-Davis.