

Guilford Garden

Springs Forth

For more than 30 years, the idea of an on-campus farm had been considered at Guilford College in Greensboro, N.C. This year, it is a reality.

"The idea of having a farm on campus has been kicked around this campus for many years," said Jim Dees, farm manager with the college. "I recently saw a proposal to do something like this that was dated in the '70s. The idea had been kicked around for a long time."

The land used for the Guilford Garden was part of an old farm the college purchased 15-20 years ago. "There was some clearing that we had to do," he said. "The fence lines had overgrown tremendously, so we didn't really clear any heavy virgin timber, but we did have to beat back the fence line pretty substantially."

For Farmer Corey Erb, the farm needed to be up and running quickly. "When I started on the project, we were trying to go pretty fast because it wasn't until mid-March when we got the field ready to go, so we were already traditionally a little behind," he said. "We hit the ground running with the summer crops."

Based on Erb's experience working on Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, he knew what crops would work best at the Guilford Garden. "We decided to just start with tomatoes — Sun Gold cherry tomatoes were a big hit — eggplant and green beans, a lot of summer and winter squash too because the winter squash can actually store," he said. "A lot of the problem with choosing what you are going to grow is choosing things that will go further — that you can either store well or that can go up to frost because students are coming back to school after the height of production. That is the one thing too that we were trying to keep in mind. The butternuts did extremely well. Now we are moving over into the fall vegetables and doing beets, arugala, Asian greens, head lettuce, Swiss chard, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and collards."

All of the produce grown at the farm is sold to Dining Services, which is operated by Meriwether Godsey. "One of the reasons for that is when we are talking about the production garden and the larger farm, we want for it to be sustainable financially as well," said Matthew O'Connell, sustainability team member. "Corey's salary comes from what we sell.

It is run as its own business. It has to sustain itself through what it sells to the dining service."



That produce then makes it to the students' plates.

"Corey and I talk a couple times a week about what he is going to have coming in the next few days so that I can anticipate it," said Chris Blain, floating corporate chef. "As much as possible, we try to feature individual items either in a vegetable dish or roasted or something on the salad bar. We do signage to identify anything that comes from the Guilford Garden. For example, the Sun Gold Tomatoes are probably the most popular, most well-known item that we get from the farm. There are cherry tomatoes on the menu as much as possible. Kids go nuts for them because they are fantastic."

He continued, "We try to look at what the farm is producing and work it into slots in the menu. For example, we do a vegan dish — butternut squash rancheros — with some squash, beans, vegan cheese and salsa to show off something awesome that the garden is producing."

Student reaction to the homegrown produce has been astonishing. "We were surprised, the corporate chef had penciled in quantities for us to start the year off," said Blain. "We have been serving almost double what we anticipated. Last year, the students didn't eat a whole lot of veggies. This year they are really loving them."

O'Connell has seen the popularity firsthand. "The other day I was in the dining hall and the salad bar is situated ironically next to the ice cream. I saw two students walking by with bowls of just the tomatoes. That was neat to see."

Snehal Deshmukh, director of Dining Services, is proud to serve the produce. "Putting up those signs and talking to the students when they come to eat and saying that it is from our Guilford Garden. There is so much enthusiasm there."

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