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St Mary's Garden, Where Spirituality Grows

By Sophie Braccini



The community at work in St Mary's Garden (L to R): Cherie Grant, Lynda Deschambault, Rob Lucacher, Julie Welch Photo Sophie Braccini

According to Julie Welch, the Garden Steward at St Mary's College, working in the garden is not just a part time job, it is living some of the Lasallian principles that inspire the school: social justice, quality education, inclusive community, and of course, says Welch, where better than in a garden can you feel the presence of God.

The almost mystical quality of this endeavor may explain part of the success that the garden has been meeting with faculty and students alike. Steve Woolpert, Dean of Liberal Arts, was at the root of the project. "Many people wanted a garden," says Woolpert, "and I invited them to share their ideas for a sustainable campus." Some wanted a botanical garden, others a food garden; then key individuals came into play: Sharon Jones, parent of a student and avid permaculturist*, and Julie Welch, who had experience in managing a large vegetable garden. "The catalyst for the College was a theme chosen for this year for the freshmen: 'Feast or Famine'," adds Woolpert, "a garden was a perfect way to bring the idea down to earth."

The garden had to be ready for the beginning of the school year. The first site that had been chosen by the College, along St Mary's road, was rejected by the Moraga Planning Department. "When the verdict reached us in August, we had to react quickly," remembers Woolpert, "but the new site we chose, in the back of the campus, is in fact more conveniently located for the students, there is water, but it was not flat."

Shawny Anderson, Associate Dean of Liberal Arts, organized all of the logistics: grading, planning the gardening beds, getting the supplies and setting the work shifts. Most of the work was and is still done by students and faculty, who have given a total of 850 hours of volunteer work.

As the freshmen came in and took ownership of the project, it became apparent that a permanent position had to be created to insure continuity. "We worked a great partnership with Sodexho," explains Woolpert, "they get all the food produced by the garden for free and in exchange they pay (Welch's) salary."

"Our company has a huge sustainability drive," confirms Mat Carroll, the full time Sodexho manager who works at St Mary's with his team. He is responsible for serving 4000 meals per day, plus retail sales and events. Carroll directs six full-time managers on campus, and 100 employees. "Schools, hospitals, and corporations are asking that we use locally grown and possibly organic produce in the kitchens; that is why the partnership with the College's garden is very good for us." It is unlikely that the garden will ever be Sodexho's sole source of produce, but Welch believes it can cover a significant portion of the salad bar. Right now the garden has about 500 sqf of beds already planted with greens, lettuces and radishes, and a very large section of the plot will be developed directly on the ground according to permaculture principles.

Supplying the salad bar is not the garden's only mission. "We want to be a sustainable garden that goes full circle and closes the loop with the kitchen," says Welch, "we want to reduce food waste on campus and will compost some of it on site, and use it as fertilizer." She points out that the beds were built with recycled wood benches, the compost bins from re-used crates.

The garden will be a resource for teaching as well. A green house will be added, an outside teaching structure, and a space to come relax and meditate. The links between the garden and the curriculum will happen over time, believes Woolpert. "Food activism and social justice are linked and that is why the freshmen have decided that the garden will be their legacy project," he explains. The students are also exploring the use of gray water or runoff to water the garden.

The garden is a great example of community inclusiveness as well. Moraga Garden Center gave seedlings to the garden, Mc Donnell Nursery gave fertilizer, Fadelli Farm gave horse manure, and the faculty of the Schools of Economics and Business can be found on weekends working alongside community members and students. "We want to have a pesticide and herbicide free garden," says Welch, "this is very labor intensive and we want to thank all the clubs and organization who continue to help us make it happen."

*Permaculture: the term coined by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren during the 1970s, is an acronym for "permanent agriculture" that aims at developing perennial agricultural systems that mimic the structure and interrelationship found in natural ecologies. The ultimate purpose is the constitution of self-sufficient human settlements.

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