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## *Food for Thought*

### Students Learn Sustainable Food Practices in University Peace Garden

Oct. 14, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— The weather app is open all the time on Kevin Ryan's iPhone 5.

That's because Ryan '16 is one of two student managers of Illinois Wesleyan University's **Peace Garden**. And as manager, Ryan can tell you exactly when and how much rain last fell on the garden, when it's forecast to rain again, or if tonight's projected low temperature will dip down enough to destroy the last harvestable basil plants of the season.

For Ryan, an **environmental studies** minor who grew up in the Chicagoland suburb of Deerfield, fretting over overnight lows or a lack of rainfall is a new experience. "I grew up in a suburb with nice, cut grass, and I was never a big fan of rain," said Ryan. "I have a very different attitude now."

The Peace Garden has that effect on the attitudes of students and visitors alike. On a recent fall morning, third graders on a field trip screeched and ran in horror from a spider on a wooden stake – then ran back to investigate it further as Professor of Political Science Jim Simeone explained why "spiders in the garden are our friends."

It's a teaching moment that stretches across generations, socioeconomic background, and life experience with agriculture. The half-acre Peace Garden just north of campus is a tool where students and community members can learn about producing food through sustainable practices. The garden is a place where students in health, environmental studies, social justice, sustainability and other courses put their knowledge into practice.

Students also learn the basic principles of sustainable agriculture. In the Peace Garden, all crops are grown organically, without synthetic fertilizers or pesticides. Rainwater is harvested and funneled into the drip-line irrigation system. Mulching, composting and other techniques are used to improve the soil and maintain its integrity. Once harvested, some of the produce from the garden is sold in a market on campus. Some is donated to Sodexo, the University's food service provider. The rest is donated to food pantries and other social service agencies.



Peace Garden manager Savannah Feher '17 sells tomatoes at the campus market.



Students (from left) Savannah Feher '17, Grace McCarten '16, Becky Fiedler '16, Dominic Gambaiani '19 and Jake Morris '18 dig potatoes in the Peace Garden.

The garden grew from the idea of student Jessica Meyer '11 and other **Peace Fellows** guided by Betty Ritchie-Birrer '47 and Ivan Birrer Endowed Professor William Munro. Under Simeone's advice, **Weir Fellows** Ryan Dyar '14 and Danny Kenny '13 along with Peace Fellow Alex Monzon '13 steered the garden from idea to inception with the first shovel of sod turned over in April 2012. A hoop house (or greenhouse) extended the growing season. This year's crops included potatoes, herbs, tomatoes, tomatillos, spinach, peppers, garlic, lettuce, Swiss chard and more.

While the homegrown spinach, arugula and other vegetables are tasty, Grace McCarten '16 is especially proud of the fact that the garden's pesticide-free bounty is donated to food pantries.

McCarten is vice president of the Peace Garden Registered Student Organization (RSO), a student club that serves as a

link between interns such as Ryan and co-manager Savannah Feher '17, and IWU students who might want to spend an hour or two volunteering to plant, harvest or water.

A self-described “outdoorsy kid” who spent most of her childhood playing in the woods near her home in Rockford, Ill., McCarten had never considered growing her own food or even planting flowers until she joined the Peace Garden RSO. McCarten got involved through her close friend Becky Fiedler '16, an environmental studies major serving as the club's president.

“A lot of students like gardening or knowing more about where food really comes from, but they don't know how to get involved or they're afraid it's going to be a big time commitment,” said McCarten. “We want to make it easy for people to just give it a try, whenever it fits into their schedules.”

Peace Garden RSO members serve as extra hands during busy periods – planting and harvest times especially. On a recent day, members helped dig hundreds of pounds of the Yukon Gold and Red La Soda varieties of potatoes. For their labors, the potato diggers later dined on pizza baked in a portable wood-fired oven and topped with spinach, garlic, tomatillos and green peppers harvested from the garden.

“We like to bribe them with food,” joked Simeone, who also serves as the contact person between the interns and community partners.

Treats were also a sweet reward for RSO members when McCarten and Fiedler organized an off-campus event to pick apples. The group visited the farm of Environmental Studies Program Coordinator Laurine Brown's father to experiment with the best procedures and tools for gleaning local fruit. The students picked 200 pounds of Cortland, Larkspur and Granny Smith apples – some of which have been sold through the weekly campus market.

On market days, Ryan and Feher '17, an environmental studies major from Des Peres, Mo. get a real taste of running a small business, from production to after-markets. Keeping the campus garden going is an integral part of their internships, which is required for environmental studies majors and minors. Peace Garden produce is harvested and transported to campus via the **Veggie Bike** to sell to students, faculty and staff. Proceeds are then plowed back into the Peace Garden's budget. Feher rides her bike to the Western Avenue Community Center and donates whatever produce is left over.



Third graders from a local elementary school learn the fine art of raking on a field trip to the Peace Garden.

If it all sounds very bucolic and pastoral, that's because it can be. In the short time he's co-managed the garden with Feher, Ryan has been surprised at how much he enjoys the hard work that yields an unexpected peace. “I'm graduating in the spring, my friends and I are all looking for jobs, there are bills to pay – it's all very hectic,” Ryan said. “This is a good place to come when I want to clear my head and just get away from everything for a little while.”

Ryan has also discovered an appreciation for the hard work that goes into producing food. “Growing food is such an arbitrary concept for people who didn't grow up on farms,” said Ryan. “For most of us, food comes from the grocery store or some ‘other’ place, but you don't really know where that place is.” Simeone noted less than two percent of the U.S. population is involved in farming. “Our collective knowledge of where food comes from and how the system might be different is at an all-time low,” said Simeone, who teaches two courses in the Environmental Studies program.

“Asking such basic questions is at the heart of the liberal arts,” Simeone added. “Where does our food come from? What is the soil? We ask those basic questions and we set off through many disciplines to form answers.” Using his course “Sustainable Agriculture” as an example, Simeone said topics range from the Dust Bowl, to a two-week composting experiment, to cation exchange capacity, an inherent soil characteristic that influences the soil's ability to hold onto essential nutrients.

“Students learn that soil is more than just dirt,” said Simeone. “It's a living community.”