

Skidmore Community Garden Annual Report 2017
2017 Manager: Ajani Otieno-Rudek, Class of 2020
Sustainability Coordinator for Student Programs: Jen Natyzak
Director of Sustainability Programs and Assessment: Levi Rogers

2017 Annual Report

General Season Overview

Overall, the summer was quiet, cool, and productive. It took until about halfway through July to reach the summer heat, and even then the temperatures varied, but the plants still thrived. A solid portion of the summer was dedicated to recovering from the winter and making the garden look inviting, which meant pulling apart the massive jungles of weeds (some of which were so big they housed a family of rabbits), refilling the beds with compost, dumping and spreading woodchips into the paths and seating area, and planting flowers along the entrance and outskirts of the garden. These tasks took a lot of time, especially without numbers, but they were worth it in the end with all the compliments from passerby's talking about how "they just walked through earlier this week and it looks like a completely different garden!"

My weekly schedule through the summer was as follows; harvest first-thing on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, hula-hoeing and weeding on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, meetings with Jen on Monday and Thursday after lunch, and invoices for the past week's harvest on Monday afternoons. Having this kind of set schedule, as well as plenty of unscheduled time to just get all the tasks done, worked well for keeping the garden productive. The harvests took place in the mornings to avoid the blazing summer heat come afternoon, and would have to be done all at the same time to avoid harvested plants wilting and drying out before making it to the Dining Hall fridge. Weeding was not exclusive to Tuesdays and Thursdays because there are always so many weeds to be pulled, but those were usually the days that I could do the most weeding because there are less scheduled plans during the day, and keeping the weeds down saves the work of pulling excessive and stronger weeds later on. Meetings with Jen were to get someone else's input on what I should be focusing on for the week. Usually it would be a 30 to 45-minute meeting, starting in the office discussing outreach and event planning and eventually moving out into the garden to decide on tasks for the week. Throughout the meeting I'd be taking notes in my notebook so that they are easily accessible when I finish a task and am trying to figure out what to do next throughout the week. Invoices were a rare break from being out in the garden, and usually were a 30-minute to hour-long process of looking in my notebook and adding up numbers from recent harvests.

No devastating problems arose in the garden this year (the worst being rabbits, beetles, and powdery mildew). The plants grew nicely and I was able to sell about 730 lbs of produce to the dining hall (see more in planting summary). Another concern was that a lot of seed used was old and had lower germination rates, so seeding wasn't as productive as possible.

Come Fall semester, work parties have been more popular than the summer or the Spring, mostly thanks to freshman looking to get involved in events and environmental science

students needing volunteer hours for their classes (see more in work parties). However, the main focus of Fall semester was the Harvest Dinner, which was very successful and popular this year (see more in Harvest Dinner).

Planting Summary

- Arugula
 - Planted in late March to early April, and was ready to harvest by early May.
 - Bolts with the summer heat, and becomes significantly more peppery and inedible with age.
 - The young leaves were harvested and sold to the Dining Hall as baby arugula.
- Beets
 - Allowed Camp Reece to help plant in early May, which could help explain their lack of success.
 - Not the most popular plant this year, but here-and-there were handfuls of beets ready to harvested which could be thrown into the next D-Hall delivery from mid-June to August.
- Beans
 - Planted in mid-May.
 - Direct-seeded into one of the long beds in the back corner of the garden. I divided the seeds up into three rows with three different varieties: Provider green beans, Royalty Purple, and Pencil Pod yellow beans.
 - Available to harvest through all of July
 - Planted two other beds at the start of August, which were ready to harvest by late September. The only problem that arose with these were the beetles.
 - For one of the bean beds, several of the leaves were chewed up and left as skeletons. There were also worries about rabbits in one of the beds. To combat this, I poured a spray bottle of 99% water and a tablespoon of soap for scaring off the beetles.
- Carrots
 - Planted a row in-between the tomatoes at the end of April, as carrots and tomatoes grow well together.
 - Didn't take long for the carrot leaves to start popping up. The only problem here is that the carrots are so small, they're hard to see among any weeds that pop up and the hay put around the tomatoes. This means at least once a week coming through to check on the carrots, while picking any weeds that you see.
 - Eventually became a lost cause, as there weren't nearly enough that succeeded to be delivered to the Dining Hall.
- Chard
 - Thrived from late June until September. I transplanted them from the office into one of the small "surfboard" beds, and they have been making for plentiful harvests for the past several weeks.

- Strangely, there was a lot of bok choy mixed in with the chard that I had to go through and weed from the surfboard after noticing. We're unsure if this was an issue during seeding in the office, or an issue with the seeding company.
- Given the rainy weather, the plants stayed quite small, so the harvested chard was 5-10 inches in length.
- Cucumbers
 - One of the more enjoyable planting tasks of the summer. In late-April I molded small mounds of soil and transplanted three small cucumber plants (which had already been seeded indoors) into the mound. We then brought out the netting and wrapped it around the wooden structure beside the strawberries, and as the cucumbers grew I trained them to wrap through the netting. I did the same for the tall wood tee-pee in the middle of the garden in mid-May.
 - To prepare the tee-pee for cucumber growth, I wrapped netting around three of its sides, leaving one side open for entry during harvest. The rest of the netting provided ample space and height for the cucumbers to climb. However, this construction always seemed to produce fewer cucumbers than the shorter, longer row of cucumbers. I was only able to spot one cucumber if any in the tee-pee per harvest.
 - Did very well, with the only worry being that the netting and configuration of everything makes it difficult to weed in and around the cucumber plants, so it didn't take long for the first bed of cucumbers to be surrounded by grass. This isn't to say it's impossible to weed since you can climb behind the cucumbers near the strawberries and pull the grass, it is just a time-consuming and tiring process.
- Eggplants
 - Another plant grown indoors and transplanted into one of the surfboard beds. The planting went fine, but the plants were unproductive because of the lack of heat and the rainy weather. The plants were also overcome with weeds for a month, but after they were cleared they yielded a dozen or so pounds of fruit.
- Garlic
 - Scapes were plentiful throughout the summer and served as a nice extra treat sold to D-Hall.
 - This October Jen and I put an hour to harvest all of the garlic and string them up across the shed. We held onto 3 or 4 of each variety (a large purple variety, small purple, and white variety) , and broke them up into individual cloves to serve as seeds for the next generation of garlic. That Sunday I had volunteers at my Work Party plant all of the garlic seeds (where the peas and beans were once located). We planted two rows side-by-side, and zig-zags for the skinnier beds. I was hoping to take up as little space as possible, but we ended up having to use multiple beds to fit all the seeds.
 - Let the garlic dry a little too long, so it was very tough when it came time to prepare and chop the garlic - which we used entirely for the Harvest Dinner.

- Be cautious about planting the garlic in the Fall. If it's supposed to be cold weather but you still have hot days, better to play it safe and wait, or else the garlic may be confused on a hot day and begin to pop up a year early.
- Kale
 - Planted from mid-March to mid-April.
 - The most consistent plant of the summer, with a kale harvest every week. We have 2.5 full long-beds of kale, with varieties including Red Russian, Dino, and Vates Blue Curled Kale. It was nice to always have something guaranteed ready-to-harvest throughout the summer.
 - Sticks around until it gets chilly in the Fall and survives a few frosts. It was harvested the weekend before Harvest Dinner so we had a lot available for braising.
- Lettuce
 - Both transplanted from the office and direct-seeded into the garden throughout the course of the summer. Because you harvest it once and it's done, and lettuce is well-liked, it's good to plant the lettuce in bulk so that you can harvest a bunch at once rather than a couple heads during different weeks.
- Nasturtium
 - Planted in the front of the garden, but were quickly obscured by weeds.
- Peas
 - Had their period of success in June, but soon got covered in "powdery mildew," a fungal disease that affects a wide range of plants. To prevent the fungus from spreading, and because it was already killing the peas, we were forced to wipe out the entire bed of peas and compost it.
 - Attempted a second, smaller row of peas, but it had small harvests before it too was lost to the Powdery Mildew.
- Peppers
 - Also planted in two of the surfboard beds. Varieties used included King of the North, Sweet Chocolate, and Doe Hill from Hudson Valley Seed Co.
- Radishes
 - Watermelon radishes were planted in small rows near the compost bin in early-May. There was confusion about when they are good to harvest, since if you wait too long they become incredibly spicy and if you wait even longer, they become woody. We decided to harvest them while they were small, and since we're unsure what the D-Hall would think of them, sell them for cheap.
- Scallions
 - Seeded in small bunches, transplanted in the same small bunches. Two rounds were harvested - one in the summer and another in November for the Harvest Dinner.
- Spinach
 - Had a few good harvests in the beginning of the summer, but didn't last long before shooting up and flowering. Because they only do well being planted in March, April, and May, I only harvested spinach in the very beginning before they shot up and flowered.

- Strawberries
 - Came in excessively towards the beginning of the summer. The two biggest strawberry harvests were 13.5 pounds in the third harvest, and 20.4 pounds in the fourth harvest.
 - During their prime, they require you to take a full morning or afternoon out of your week to collect them all. Schedule out your strawberry harvesting however works best for you so that they don't take up too much of your time. But do always keep an eye on them on harvest days even if you plan on skipping them to make sure you aren't missing out on a gold mine.
- Tomatoes
 - Grew well this summer. Every new height they reach means tying a new line of string to keep them growing upright. They also require regularly coming through and picking off "suckers" which stunt the growth of branches that'll actually fruit. I planted carrots in-between the two rows of tomatoes per row, as tomatoes and carrots grow well together. I also put hay down to control weeds and protect the tomatoes from disease.
 - Used a Florida weave style of trellising, so cotton twine was woven between stakes. Also, new stakes were purchased - only 1x1" stakes were to be found all across town. A 2x1" stake is preferable if available.
- Basil
 - Did mostly well, other than a few holes on the leaves from beetles and nibbled corners from rabbits stopping by for a quick snack. The basil (specifically the lemon variety) also had issues with becoming very flowery, which would make the leaves bitter or sour and eventually inedible. They would require at least once a week coming through and pulling any sections taken over by the flowers.
 - Only grown in the summer, and bolted when it got hot.
- Cilantro
 - Planted and harvested consistently throughout the summer.
 - In prime, consistently harvestable and reliable.
- Parsley
 - Long germination period from late March to mid-May.
 - Ready to be planted by mid-May.
 - Ready to be harvested by July.
- Herbs (Oregano, Thyme, Parsley, Sage, Mint)
 - Transplanted into the herb spiral mid-summer. Did well with little maintenance (just occasional cleaning).
 - Harvested well for the Harvest Dinner. Dining Hall appreciated mint.
- Flowers
 - Planted around the outskirts of the garden from mid-April to mid-May. Flowers like Big Bug Blooms could be found in any open areas around the garden. I planted Morning Glories around the garden entrance to grow up the sides and top of the garden walkway. Flowers are always a good idea for the garden to appeal to those walking by, and they are easy to plant, grow, and maintain without much attention.

- In the fall it is a bit of a process to detach the morning glories from the wooden garden entrance; save that for any tall Work Party helpers that come your way.
- Morning glories were planted mid-summer. The seeds must be prepped before planting - the hard thick seed coating must be nicked with nail clippers or a knife, and then soaked overnight so it's easier for the plant to develop. The flowers were planted by the arbor at the front of the garden and the vines were lush and full.
- Sunflowers
 - Planted along the outskirts of the fence myself in May, and with some of Camp Reece. They were transplanted from the office, and were easy to pop in around the garden. Easy planting task for kids coming in, and rewarding to see the flowers shoot up so quickly!

Herb Garden

The herb garden looked surprisingly healthy going into the summer (maybe an unknown hero kept it thriving?). Other than stopping by maybe once a month to pull a handful of weeds, the garden seemed to be doing well for itself. The garden came in handy for collecting the herbs for flavored waters during the Harvest Dinner!

Work Parties

We hosted a handful of work parties this summer, but only got one volunteer. This was obviously underwhelming, but fortunately we were still able to get extra work done with Jen, Levi, and the North Woods Stewards when they came out. The people I knew on campus during the second summer session told me they would come, but that they're always at work or busy during the work parties. We attempted two different meeting times; 3:00 pm and 5:00 pm (the 5:00 pm time brought us our one volunteer of the summer). We advertised by putting posters all over campus and buying a chalkboard to put in front of the garden, but didn't see many results. Outside of work parties though, there have been a few occasions of students walking by with nothing to do and randomly asking to help out.

This Fall was a completely different story. With the Skidmore community back on campus, there was a solid number of volunteers every week, made up of people who were either interested in the garden (even a few hoping to become the next manager), or who needed work hours to put towards their Environmental Science/Studies requirements (Intro to Environmental Studies, ES 100 and Politics of Food). The number of volunteers ranged from zero to 15 depending on the week, but usually I could depend on at least 4 or 5 helping hands to show up. Techniques that worked for attracting people included creating Facebook events, putting out the chalkboard in front of the garden, and putting up posters around campus.

Harvest Dinner

The Harvest Dinner was a success, and definitely one of the biggest highlights of the Garden Manager position for me. This year we brought in about 275 students to the event.

About a month before the dinner, I made calls to the managers of nearby grocery stores and asked for donations. We decided to try out grocery stores this year to expand the garden's network, and to give farmers that traditionally offered us products a break. We singled-in on Hannaford, Healthy Living, and Market 32.

I got an immediate "no" from Market 32's manager, who informed me that they already donate all of their leftover food and that this event didn't fit their donation criteria.

Hannaford informed me that they regularly accept requests like this, so it'd be no problem. Hannaford asked Jen and I to drive to their nearby store and fill out a donation request form. About 2 weeks before the event I received a call from their manager who informed me they'd provide us with all the apples and onions we needed, along with a \$25 gift card for tomatoes (which ended up being just enough!).

9 Miles East was a huge help. I was in contact with 9 Miles East since I started working on the dinner just in case we'd need them, and a week-and-a-half before the event I called them and asked for donations. They were eager to help out; we got 2 crates of lettuce donated and purchased potatoes and rutabagas that weekend outside of Atrium Café.

I tried getting Ice Cream from Stewart's,¹ but was mere hours late for their three-weeks-in-advance requirement for food requests. Stewart's phone number is also manned by a robot, and I left a few messages but was informed via email a week later that it was, as I feared, too late to make requests. Luckily, John Winnek in Dining Services has connections with Gillette Creamery, who donated the vanilla ice cream instead. He was also able to obtain milk for cooking from Battenkill Creamery, another connection of his. It's beneficial to work with John for acquiring some donations because he has direct interactions on a weekly basis with a number of local sellers and growers.

As for live performers, I reached out to the Skidmore Jazz Department and was able to get three of the best musicians to agree to playing in a trio: guitar, drums, and bass. We were cautious about using amplifiers and speakers as the space can get loud. The mix of instruments created a pleasant atmosphere, and the genre was appropriate for the event. The Jazz Department could be used as a backup option for future Harvest Dinners, although it may be necessary to pay to get them to come; I was able to convince them due to my personal connections in the department and with the performers.

I advertised for the dinner by hanging posters around the school and creating a public Facebook event, which spread quickly. I also put our chalkboard in the Case walkway saying "Free food in Spa!" during the event for anyone passing by who might've missed the memo.

The days in preparation for the event went perfectly. That Saturday (the day before the event) was a huge work day; chopping vegetables, spreading apple crisp, and chopping more vegetables. We had a good number of volunteers who were either working for D-Hall at the time anyway, needed hours for their major, knew me, or just wanted to be involved (if it's election

¹ Donation request form found here: <http://www.stewartsshops.com/online-donation/online-donation-overview/>

season it's worth investigating names on the sign-up sheet to see if community members show up). By Sunday there was little to do besides wait for the event to start, which is the best way to go about it. When the event started we didn't have enough volunteers for the dream-come-true scenario of two serving tables to shorten the line, but we still had people serving at the table, people behind them ready to bring in new trays of food when something ran out, and people behind them just enjoying the scene.

My advice for future Harvest Dinners would be to start with calls to grocery stores (or farmers) as soon as possible, probably closer to 2 months before the event rather than one. This would give you breathing room so that if someone like Healthy Living or Market 32 is not responsive, you'll just be able to move onto the next connection with no problems. You'll also be happy you were on top of it, or else the job gets very stressful for those last couple weeks before the event as things seem like they're crashing and burning around you (even if they aren't), and the climax of everything is poorly timed with midterms. However, don't panic! If you stay composed and don't let the heat of midterms and Harvest Dinner prep get to you all at once, everything will come together (but not before making an excessive amount of phone calls!).

Partnership with Dining Services

The partnership with Dining Services went well this year. Dropping off the veggies in the fridge is an easy process, and most of the staff are friendly and happy to see fresh food coming in. I'd had a few conversations with Ben in Emily's garden, who said that he enjoys the food whenever it comes and that it's much fresher than the vegetables they bring in. Ensure that Chef Rose and Joe Greco are contacted if and when food is forgotten.

Community Outreach/Garden Visits

We hosted multiple visits from Camp Reece (a local special-needs camp, ages 8 to 17) and Camp Northwoods (kindergarten to 4th grade) in the garden over the summer. Camp Reece helped with weeding, planting sunflowers, and seeding beets during their first visit, which went very efficiently for the young age group. The counselors, along with the camp director, Octavia, were very helpful and supported me as they helped motivate the kids, keep them on task, and knew when they needed breaks. By the end of the summer Camp Reece had helped weed several beds, plant beets, sunflowers, beans, and lettuce, and painted signs for the garden. This is definitely a great program to keep in touch with in the future.

Camp Northwoods also paid a visit to the garden. In total, there are 72 children aged kindergarten to 4th grade in the camp, and the director recommended splitting that number up into two groups of 36 so that the first group could visit the garden while the 2nd group spent time with the Northwoods Stewards, and then we'd switch groups for their next visit.

I prepared an educational workshop for the kids since there would be too many to keep track of all at once in the garden. I typed and printed sheets of paper with pictures of bugs and

creatures that you may find in the garden, with facts about why they are beneficial or detrimental to the garden. My reasoning behind this activity was that when I was younger I didn't care at all about plants, but bugs and animals were my favorite things to talk about. We split the 36 into two groups between Jen and I, ran through the facts with our groups, and ventured into the garden at scattered times to harvest plants and try to find some of the insects we'd learned about. When they returned to their seats, the children were asked to trace whatever plant they'd harvested (I tried to get them to stick to harvesting the leaves of plants in order to not kill the entire garden). It's helpful to prepare something very structured like this so that you don't find yourself lost, because chaos may ensue with so many kids with such short attention spans around you.

Reflections and Suggestions for the Future

I would love to see the garden expand to the outside community somehow. What drew me to urban farming and gardening years ago was being able to directly impact and benefit the community around me. The Community Garden didn't feel quite as rewarding since everything you put your hard work into eventually disappears into the dining hall (although that is still rewarding, just in a different way).

It's a lot of pressure to try to expand to the outside community as the one garden manager without much free time or energy during the work day (and even less during the school year) to spare. The job is also very short, and the money brought in from selling to the Dining Hall is vital to maintaining the garden. Also, the garden is under a contract and food is required to go to the Dining Hall over anywhere else. This means that likely the best form of community outreach would be to draw community members into the garden for volunteer events. Maybe if the garden continues to have low attendance from Summer at Skidmore students, see if there are ways to expand, even slightly, to the Saratoga Springs community for educational workshops!