Skidmore Student Garden Annual Report - 2012 Season

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Summary:

The 4th season of the Skidmore Student Garden was another successful year. After nearly doubling our total amount of land in the spring of 2011 and redesigning using permaculture, new opportunities arose. The new design offered even more educational opportunities so awareness, education and outreach were major goals for this season. We worked with a variety of classes and other groups on campus. We harvested more than 500 pounds of food and raised over $1,000 in donations and deliveries.

Production:

We harvested a total of 513 pounds of food this season and made over $500 from dining hall deliveries. This year was not our most successful year for production. Extreme drought with a few intermittent downpours encouraged pests and disease. Beetles and a powdery mildew attacked the entire cucumber and zucchini crop. The powdery mildew eventually spread to the squash plants. Regular watering during the summer session followed by extreme drought for a few weeks once the manager left caused all of the tomatoes to get sick with end rot and other diseases. By the end of the season, an early frost followed by heavy rains and eventually a hurricane caused the garden to go out of commission before the season typically ends. We also grew many more greens this season than in the past. We harvested over 200 pounds of kale this year. But we only harvested about 60 pounds of tomatoes and less than 50 pounds of cucumbers and zucchini because of diseases. This greatly affected our total harvest for the season since most of our heavy, fall crops were unsuccessful. The summer harvests were quite hefty but dwindled in the fall due to these problems. This was the first year that we planted our own starters and raised them in the biology greenhouse. Our starter project failed somewhat because watering was not as regular as it should be and most of the seeds got cooked. Use of the greenhouse for transplants should continue in the future but perhaps with more collaboration with the biology department.

Outreach:

Despite lower harvest weight totals, this season was still a huge success because we interacted with many new groups and greatly improved our education and outreach strategies. This spring, the garden volunteers decided that the club would be best as separate from the Environmental Action Club. One important choice we made was to have weekly work parties at a regular day and time as well as creating a garden-specific email list separate from EAC. We also tried to bring music and/or snacks to work parties to help with volunteers' spirits. This helped to increase event attendance and create a more diverse group of students involved. We held a few open meetings that were attended by about 30 students. During these meetings, we received feedback and held a visioning session to get ideas about short and long-term goals. A few of these goals were to get a drip irrigation system, a permanent fence and sign, have a pre-orientation, and work with more classes and professors just to name a few. In response to our efforts, Professor Barnes' Environmental Art class did a few projects for us. They made a recycled wind chime, installed bird houses and created a moving billboard for the garden by planting a wheelbarrow with some permaculture crops, painting a sign and placing the wheelbarrow on the green or in front of the dining hall. Sarah Breckenridge's Food Literacy classes in the spring and the fall both visited the garden to have a tour and help with planting or harvest. One of the ES 100 classes this fall also visited the garden for a tour. Josh Ness' Forest Conservation class did a research study at the garden about soil respiration and nutrient uptake? During the summer, Camp North Woods groups came to the garden where they got a tour by participating in a scavenger hunt and played nature games with us. A group of faculty participating in a workshop about sustainability also came by the garden during their campus tour.

In the fall, we planned and held the first garden related pre-orientation for incoming freshman. The program, called PEAS (pre-orientation experience for agricultural sustainability), was a huge success with 11 participants and 2 leaders (Margot Reisner and Will Conway). We worked in the garden, visited Pleasant Valley Farm and Homestead Artisans where we helped with farm work and got to taste some delicious foods. We worked at the community garden at the racetrack where we met with

backstretch workers and talked about the future of the garden there. We also ate a meal at The Local and cooked an entirely local, vegetarian meal in Falstaffs. The student response was incredibly positive and every freshman that participated signed up for the garden email list. These students all recommended that this pre-orientation be offered again next year.

We hosted two fundraisers this season. Beats for Beets is a concert in the spring where we sold bags, stickers and asked for donations. At that event we raised about $300. In the fall, we hosted the harvest dinner which is a free, entirely local, vegetarian dinner cooked by students for students and community members. Many farms such as Pleasant Valley, Saratoga Apple, Denison, Otrembiak, Butternut Ridge, and Kilpatrick donated their leftover produce after the Saturday Farmer's Market. These farms were incredibly generous and donated more food than we were even able to use. Dining hall chefs and managers helped design the menu and supported the student volunteers as we prepared the meal. The menu featured items such as ratatouille, mashed squash, kale chips, fall soup, roasted root vegetables, corn salad, homemade salsa, and apple crisp. Lively Lucy's helped organize the event and recruited jazz musicians for the event. More than 240 people attended the dinner and we raised over $300 in donations.

This has been a great season for community outreach since many more people now know about the garden and work parties and events have been well attended. One great example of our success is the garden blog (canyadigitskidmore.tumblr.com) which is now followed by many people and has received some recognition on the Skidmore website. This season, we realized and focused on the garden's main purpose as an educational and awareness tool this season and it proved to be a very helpful strategy.

Lesson Learned:

We found that it is best to have a few main crops and to plant a larger quantity of those crops. It is also best to plant heavy crops that get a higher price from dining hall such as tomatoes, squash and herbs. We also learned that mulch is a very important item for the garden and it is important to keep the pathways covered with mulch or something else or the volunteers will waste a lot of time weeding. The biggest challenges that we faced this year were inefficient watering methods, mildew, mold, apple rust, Japanese

beetles, cucumber beetles and weeds. These are all avoidable situations. Partway through the season we purchased soaker hoses that helped a lot. More research should be done and made available for future managers about organic pest and disease control. There should also be more collaboration with the biology department, especially regarding using the greenhouse for planting starters.

Next year, the manager should experiment with more companion planting and ground cover crops. This is especially important around the apple and plum trees. An edible fence should also be planted next year to help keep pests out. Compost tea should be made and sprayed on the trees and the rest of the garden. More perennial and native plants should be planted. Winter crops and hoop houses should be used to extend the growing season. The beds should be sheet mulched next winter to grow our humus.

We have been approved to get a permanent fence and sign and the possibility of a new shed is being discussed. Next year, the social space at the garden should be expanded and made welcoming. An arbor or sign should be built. The pathway from the garden to the shed should be defined. More long-term goals include: getting a permanent drip irrigation system, building a water catchment system, building a small composting system at the garden, building a washing station, installing a bird bath and getting more art and sculptures in and around the garden. We hope that all of these goals can be accomplished in the future. The main obstacles are financial and related to appearance because Skidmore, the Broadway Association, and neighbors have many rules about landscaping projects and built structures on campus. But there is a lot of student and faculty support for the garden so none of these goals are unrealistic.