

COS Summer Research Grant Final Report-Campus Garden

By Jane Gray Morris

This past summer started as a dream to transform space into place, and with the land around the cafeteria as my blank canvas, I began to paint a cohesive picture of herbs, vegetables, and native plants growing side-by-side to nourish the Williamsburg community. However improbable, the pre-established garden plots, as well as the newly-installed herb garden, shared a great potential which had only to be unlocked. In order to make the space one for community from the start, my first step was to contact students and faculty with an interest in the project to introduce my ideas and see if there could be ways of working together to realize them collectively. Members of the Geology, Environmental Science, Biology, Architecture, Art & Art History, and Community Studies departments each played a crucial role in the unfolding of the space, lending time, ideas, equipment, and enthusiasm to the project. Without their support, as well as those countless students, community members, and College staff who selflessly donated themselves to the betterment of the gardens, there is little chance the area would have blossomed as beautifully as it did this season.

Even with this effort, the gardens as they have been currently set up are not the answer for food sustainability at the College of William and Mary. Only with a major extension could they begin to put a dent in the volume of food being consumed at the College – indeed, Dickinson College is able to provide produce for their college’s dining hall, a food bank, and a cooperative store only by maintaining a 180-acre working farm. Run by paid staff members, student workers, and interns, Dickinson’s operations set a model example for William and Mary in food sustainability.

Though, currently, they cannot meet the need for more sustainable food procurement, the gardens we maintain here on campus serve an important and even vital function in their capacity to help students realize a connection both to place and community. Through my time working on the gardens, I have come to grow and understand the stories of the individuals that underpin the College: students, staff, and the surrounding community included. These tales are uniquely woven with tragedy, curiosity, excitement, and above all, a hope that these simple plots of vegetables will serve a higher symbolic purpose. Through time and literature, gardens have functioned as a medium for individuals to come together and realize that, barring our separate backgrounds and aspirations, we can all work selflessly for the betterment of humanity and our environment. Those who I met at the crossroads of the garden are no exception to this truth, and each represented a unique history that had brought them to the plots where I worked. My efforts this summer were interlaced and fueled by a countless number of these stories, which arguably comprise the foundation of gardening and sustainability at the College.

The first, a recent William and Mary graduate, had started the gardens in 2007 with a spark. Inspired by a PowerShift convention and the example set by the farm at Dickinson College, Virginia Jenkins understood clearly that William and Mary could take steps to connect their students with a local food base. She found the solution to be a simple one, and working with the Student Environmental Action Coalition she teamed up with fellow classmates Connor Horne and Zack Miller to procure a plot for vegetable gardening. Though they were granted a neglected area of campus, behind the cafeteria parking lot and bordering an athletic turf field, the students were able to work with Facilities Management to transform the barren plots into abundant gardens, generously producing squash, garlic, tomatoes, and a variety of herbs. The Farmers and Gardeners student group then began to upkeep the gardens, holding weekly meetings to discuss planting schedules, weeding and watering maintenance, and host skill-sharing workshops which would collectively broaden the group’s knowledge base about the sustaining power of the soil.

It was through Virginia’s enthusiasm that I first got involved in the gardens and was attracted to their simple beauty. Though the plots were surrounded by a plain wire fence and designed around a

series of cinder-block raised beds, Virginia's inspiration for the area was evident, and her enthusiasm was contagious. It wasn't long before I began attending weekly meetings to help as I could, picking up speed as I learned and witnessed the hidden wealth inherent in what was once a derelict plot of land. For me during this year, gardens came to represent community, the common space where individuals of diverse backgrounds could, magically, transform small seeds into nourishing, earthy fruits to share, to feed, and to enjoy together.

The first step on my journey was to polish the herb garden, which had been established in April with funding provided by the Committee on Sustainability. The ground had been broken by a "Double Digging" workshop led by Virginia Jenkins, powered by hands and shovels (and not by fossil fuels). With herbs purchased at the local farmer's market, and a few more hands to get them settled in the ground, the herb garden was already on its way. Still, a few elements were missing, and with the intention of emphasizing resourcefulness and creativity as staples of sustainability, I sourced discarded bricks from a local construction site, as well as rock samples from the newly established School of Education to complete the pathways and line the beds. These same bricks served a similar purpose in the vegetable gardens, and were used to create a pattern of pathways which organically curved around a new series of beds. Many of the materials I used during the project were sourced from local businesses and the waste stream, including glass bottles from the Cheese Shop, highway sign posts that now hold up the new fence, and stone from a sidewalk removed outside the Campus Center. Additionally, I was able to use the copious (invasive) crop of bamboo growing by the Crim Dell to construct a picket fence that will deter hungry pests. One of the most powerful skills I honed this summer was the ability to see Williamsburg through a creative lens, one which showed "worthless," discarded items as truly valuable.

After the plots had been established, delineated with pathways, beds, and fences, the next step was to plant! Here, again, I reached out to the community for mentorship and guidance. Stopping first at the Master Gardener display at the local farmer's market, I met with Carol Fryer, a dedicated gardener and invaluable resource. Carol would visit the gardens on a weekly basis to check up on my progress and offer helpful hints that came to her only through years of experience. She gracefully taught me lessons about sowing dates, successive plantings, smart water use, and the importance of native plants.

Natives are species that have been growing in this climate since before human contact, and are thus well-adapted to live in natural communities with similar moisture, soil, and weather conditions. With this advantage over introduced species, the plants are hardier to drought, insects, disease, and local weather patterns. Additionally, these native varieties provide food and shelter for desirable wildlife, enrich the soil, and improve water quality with root systems that help rainfall percolate slowly, thereby reducing erosion and runoff. Some of these plants also played a significant role in Native American culture, and have reported value as food, medicine, cordage, textiles, dyestuffs, or similar domestic purposes. With this lesson under my belt, I also reached out to Buck Woodard, manager of the American Indian Initiative in Colonial Williamsburg, to educate myself about the relationship between Native Americans and local plants. Buck spent hours with me in the college bookstore going over geography, food cultivation practices, and plant uses of the tribes which inhabited the local landscape before European contact, so that I might be able to incorporate some cultural aspects of Native Americans into the gardens.

After meeting with Buck, I traveled down to the monthly meeting of the John Clayton chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society. Here, I met with Carolyn and Ralph Will, two avid lovers of plants and community alike. The couple offered me a list of over 100 plants to donate to the gardens, including Beautyberry and Sweetspire bushes, Lobelias, Black-Eyed Susans, Coneflowers, Mountain Mint, and Bee Balm. A specific item on the list caught my eye, an Arrowwood viburnum variety which Buck had mentioned was used by Native Americans in the area as a shaft for fastening spear and arrowheads. With this addition to the garden, I was able to honor (in a small way), the heritage of those who came before us on this land. The remaining plants were placed with the help of Carol to feature blooms at

different times in the season, varying heights, and an array of scents to bring in beneficial insects. With these blossoming, perennial native plants growing next to seasonal vegetables, the gardens are all but guaranteed to remain perpetually fruitful.

Regular work parties were scheduled through the summer to encourage involvement from a variety of groups on campus, and to help students get invested in the gardens as a community service project. Summer Resident Assistants, the Office of Community Engagement (with the Seven Generations Program), and countless individuals contributed to laying the foundation for the gardens as they stand today. One community member, after talking with me about my own history as they related to gardens and sustainability, even donated two gallons of primer in addition to a brand new set of shovels and hard-pronged rakes. Employees of Dining Services have also played a major supporting role, continuously encouraging my work by coming out to the space, picking herbs, asking questions, and even anonymously dropping off donations of freshly-baked cookies in the morning. Contractors managing the construction sites on campus were instrumental in helping me to locate and transport supplies, continuously checking in on the project and updating me with “waste” materials they would periodically come by. There is no possible way to give credit to all the contributing actors who supported me this summer, but this is a perfect illustration of my intentions for the gardens at the start of the season: a place for disparate parties, cultures, ages, and mindsets to come together through one common ground: food.

The most recent fan of the gardens has opened an exciting new door of opportunity for community engagement at the College. Dr. Jamiah Dawson, a dentist from Newport News, stumbled upon the gardens on a chance bike ride after reading about the inspiring work of the First Lady, Michelle Obama, in her gardening campaign. Seeing my work, Jamiah excitedly took me on a tour of her office facilities, a dentistry clinic not far from Christopher Newport College in Newport News, Virginia. Her clinic, located next to a food bank and trailer park, also sported a beautiful plot of land in full sun which she dreamed could be planted with both vegetables and native plants. After the plots are established, it is her hope that the food bank could benefit directly from the fresh produce growing outside their storefront. As the summer winds to a close, I have been acting as a consultant to her on gardening matters, including plot design, planting succession, and ongoing maintenance. It would be an understatement to exclaim my excitement being able to plug her in with OCES and other community projects at William and Mary. As time goes on and the project begins to unfold, it is gratifying to know that my project, however limited in size and scope, is inspiring similar projects across the state which will begin to feed those in need.

1. As I was laying the brick beds in the herb garden, I also happened to stumble across two small artifacts: a blue and white plate fragment (possibly from the colonial era), as well as a Native American spearhead.