

# GCC's sustainable food initiative plants seeds for growth



Recorder/Paul Franz  
Tony Reiber and Abrah Dresdale teach farm and food systems at GCC in the new permaculture garden outside the new energy efficient green house at the Greenfield Campus.

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The new triangular, 40-foot-tall greenhouse at the southern end of Greenfield Community College reaches skyward, and has a new, multi-pronged permaculture garden being planted at its base.

It's as if to say the sky's the limit for this most grounded of GCC's new initiatives: Farm and Food Systems.

At the close of the first year of sustainable food and farming as a major, with 18 students participating, the enthusiasm is as palpable as the humming of bees in one of the four "re-skilling" courses being offered.

The nearly \$600,000, near-zero-net-energy greenhouse — with heavily insulated walls, solar-heated water to warm growing beds and ventilation for passive cooling — isn't yet inaugurated, and the perennial garden planned by students a year ago is still in its initial stages. But there's already plenty of activity behind the scenes and preparations for growing the agricultural offerings the college has started for students and the rest of the community.

From courses being over-enrolled in the first pilot year last year, with waiting lists, the first year as a major was successful enough that the offerings are being expanded, beginning with a new "wild foods foraging" re-skilling course this summer, establishment of a Sustainable Agriculture and Green Energy (SAGE) center at the GCC campus to train students and teachers from around the region, as well as investigating a certificate program for farmers and professionals who want to earn less than an associate's degree.

It's not like this enthusiasm for learning about foods and farming is taking place in a vacuum, either.

With the University of Massachusetts introducing a new degree program in sustainable food and agriculture, there are opportunities for GCC graduates to transfer and get a bachelor's degree for a field, literally, that seems to be wide open. The UMass major, which had just three students in

2003 when part of a soil science concentration, now has nearly 90, as the sustainable food and farming degree program gets under way.

“Much of that popularity’s come over the last five years,” said John Gerber, who coordinates the program there. Thanks to the proliferation of farmers markets and other local-food movements, accentuated by the writings of Barbara Kingsolver, Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser as well as Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture activities locally, “It’s just exploded. I get a sense students are looking for something real, that has meaning and purpose in their lives. “Growing food can be a really satisfying way of making a living. It doesn’t pay a lot, but it’s meaningful.”

At GCC, believes program coordinator Abrah Dresdale, the hunger for courses in beekeeping, permaculture design, food preservation and storage, and mushroom foraging and cultivation comes in part from an unconscious “instinct to growing food, to being outside and tending living things,” as our ancestors did in the near or distant past. There’s also an “ideological motivation” to help repair the planet by growing food locally, by repairing land that’s been degraded, and by working to provide fresh, nutritious food for all people, she says.

At a community planting day recently that drew about 30 students, faculty and staff to plant perennials and annuals in the new garden, there was also evidence of the “strong community spirit” in the program as well, says Dresdale. A perma-culture club holds weekly planting parties and comes together for “skill swaps,” “seed swaps” and potluck meals outside of class time as an expression of the community-building aspect many participants feel.

“It’s about the work we’re doing, the progress we’re making, the connections that we’ve been growing,” says Ian Watson, a student from Michigan who came to Greenfield by way of the Northwest. “I think there’s a growing consciousness that small, diversified farms are the way of the future. For me, it’s like reverting back to an ancient wisdom.”

Now Dresdale — who came to GCC after co-authoring a “Feed Northampton” report for that city — gets e-mails from parents excited about the sustainable food and farming option for their kids, like one student from Maine who has already signed up for next fall.

“With tuition rates going up in private schools, and even state schools, we imagine we’ll be seeing students coming in to community colleges, and hopefully GCC can be a magnet for students who are interested in local food and farming,” she says.

Along with courses like “Issues in Sustainability,” “Introduction to Food Systems” and botany, as well as the hands-on “re-skilling” workshops taught by local experts, the college is developing a “Food and Farm Entrepreneurship” class to assure that majors graduate with a solid understanding of marketing and business planning.

While building its demonstration permaculture garden — with perennial plants to be raised in a way that mimics nature to fix nitrogen in the soil, prevent erosion, sequester carbon, and retain soil moisture while providing food and attracting pollinators — the college is preparing a “micro-orchard” on an adjacent pie-shaped lot as a “sustainable outdoor laboratory” that can also be used for teaching.

Maintained by a dedicated permaculture club that sees that the cafeteria’s food scraps get recycled as compost, aided by a barrel of “red wiggler” worms, the garden will include juneberries, blueberries, strawberries, raspberries and Nanking cherries, as well as Turkish rocket, sea kale, and more, plus elaborate retention pools to make use of rainwater.

Students can grab a leaf or two of chocolate peppermint or lemon balm to make tea, and between perennial herbs and annual vegetables planted nearby, the dining common can prepare a weekly “hyper-local” meal as well.

Sharing seeds

GCC, which according to Dresdale has become one of the nation’s pioneering community colleges in sustainable agriculture programming, has another shoot growing out of its initiative this September: its SAGE education center to help train the college’s students, as well as visiting

students from schools around the region and teachers who can build their own curriculum around sustainable energy and agriculture.

Some of that training is already taking place, with help from a GCC student intern who worked with horticultural and culinary students at Franklin County Technical School to design a permaculture garden there that could be built with a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant that's being sought.

The grant would also pay for a permaculture course to be offered there.

The aim is for SAGE to become "a resource center for other teachers and institutions, K-12, and other college instructors to come here for professional development and continuing education," Dresdale says.

And, together with the new greenhouse and sustainable studies laboratory incorporating geologic and botanical gardens, the new center could sponsor workshops and conferences and an envisioned summer academy to help students, teachers and the larger community understand the overlap between the food and energy systems.

Since the idea of sustainable farming is aimed as much at trying to undo decades of environmental damage from the global food system as it is trying to improve nutrition and bolster the local agricultural economy, the momentum is toward translating the information to larger audiences.

"The leverage point around cultural change and the way we view our food system can be through the younger generation," Dresdale said, adding that there are solutions to the realities of climate change, the distances our food now travels and the limited supply of fossil fuels that now feed much of industrial-scale farming.

"So if we get school gardens going, and students learn to grow their own carrots and beets, they're going to be excited about fresh food, and they'll grow up with that culture of gardening and composting. We see that trend radiating out to their families, then their parents get interested

in it. So starting education at younger ages is an important way for this cultural shift to happen more quickly.”

And if the GCC sustainable food and farming initiative — a complement to renewable energy and energy efficiency programs — is sprouting new ways toward a greener future through education, it’s also radiating out its work through a dozen internships as part of a USDA community food project grant, helping Stone Soup Cafe, the Greenfield Winter Farmers Market, Just Roots. It’s also working to help develop a new Franklin County Food Council to ensure food security around the region.

All told, it’s plenty to chew on.

[www.gcc.mass.edu/farmandfoodsystems](http://www.gcc.mass.edu/farmandfoodsystems)

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