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Organic Gardening Club one of campus's newest student organizations

Summary: Students enjoy the fruits of their labor and share the produce with others.

(July 24, 2009)-This summer, take a stroll from the University of Minnesota, Morris campus—past darkened residence hall windows, past streams of swimmers flowing in and out of the Regional Fitness Center, past the vast East Parking Lot, past the biomass gasification plant smoke stacks, past excited elementary school kids rounding the bases. There, in a field of knee-high grass scattered with purple wildflowers, you will find a quiet, unassuming garden hidden away. It's an organic garden, the project of one of the campus's newest organizations, the Organic Gardening Club (OGC).

Alex Bible '11, Maple Grove, was one of the co-founders who organized the new club last summer. The Institute of the Environment, an organization based on the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, with goals to discover “new solutions to the world's most pressing environmental problems through innovative research, leadership development, and partnerships,” provided funding for seeds and plants. The institute also awarded funding to Morris's student Minnesota Public Interest Research Group (MPIRG) to establish a composting program that will provide fertilizer for the garden.

Pesticides are not used in organic gardening. Rather, various nonchemical methods are used to protect the plants from harmful insects. Bible allows helpful ladybugs to eat the harmful aphids. To deter spider mites, he rubs the plants with common, everyday soap. Because milkweed plants attract butterflies that help with pollination, they are allowed to grow alongside the vegetables and fruits.

The club uses strategic planting to increase yields. Beans, for instance, add nitrogen to the soil, which benefits the corn. And the corn stalks become the “pole” for the climbing bean vines, points out Dave Swenson, director of student activities.

Although raccoons like to munch on the corn and deer sometimes jump the organic garden's fence to eat the sunflowers, Bible, a pretty mellow fellow, doesn't have a problem with sharing. “They don't eat much,” he says. He notes that the benefits of the organic garden far outweigh the minor hassles: “Organic means I know exactly what I'm putting into my body,” continues Bible. “Plus, I have the joy [of watching it grow] from seed to fruit.”

The garden, in its second year, continues to evolve. This year, the group bought tomato plants, because they learned growing them from seeds is very hard. They planted the garden crops earlier this year, and they solved last year's problem of planting too deep. Surprisingly, wild radishes plague the garden, but they are working hard to turn that situation around, too, all within the rules of organic gardening.

The group does have an unavoidable issue with timing. Member Collin Sandoe '12, Rochester, says, “One problem with OGC is that there isn't really much to do in the off season, and that is when all of the students are in Morris. Only a few members who are around during the summer get to participate in the majority of the planting.”

Bible handles most of the weeding and watering, but says, “Anyone can get involved by simply going out to the garden

and tending to it.”

“A lot of vegetables were harvested last year, and students who helped got to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Some of the vegetables were given away at last year’s activity fair,” said MPIRG and Organic Garden Club member Jenna Sandoe ’10, Rochester.

Donna Bauck, Food Service general manager, helped prepare the activity fair snacks and has grand aspirations for the garden’s future. She said: “I love the idea of having a garden and would love to see it become bigger every year. I will support them in any way they choose.”

Some of the vegetables currently growing in the organic garden include potatoes, peppers, carrots, and tomatoes. One fruit of the club’s labor, pumpkins, were used as autumn decorations around campus last fall.

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