

Students find community garden an alternative food source

By Brian Fogg

Some Western Michigan University students have found a way to grow their own food inexpensively.

Looking into the garden in early spring, it looks like a pile of mud and tools. But in only a few weeks, the garden will be full with plants, vegetables and volunteer gardeners.

Located on Howard Street behind the Stadium Drive apartments, the [Western Michigan University Community Garden](#) is a 15,000 square foot area open to the public to grow their own produce. The program is run by the [Students for Sustainable Earth \(SSE\)](#) and the [Biology Club \(Bio Club\)](#).

The garden was founded in 2010 by Will Derouin, who was a student at the time. Derouin worked with the project up until this past December.

“I started it because of all of the food problems in our country. Not just on health but availability,” Derouin said.

He also pointed out that working on this project and a similar one at the Gibbs House near Western Michigan University's Parkview Campus have helped him start his career.

Eli Lowry now runs the garden after being a part of SSE and serving as garden secretary last summer. He said he did not have any formal training before joining the community garden.

“Being a college student and not having a whole lot of money for groceries, I thought it would be a good way to get organic produce cheaply. I also wanted to learn about how your food is grown and what it takes to get that food,” Lowry said.

Lowry said that most of his volunteers have graduated, but approximately eight to 10 volunteers will start work in the garden this spring.

“I expect our volunteer base to be really high at the beginning of the summer, then as things get hotter and dryer people start fading off and we need help,” Lowry said.

The first official work day was Sunday May 3 during their Spring Kickoff Event. This is the day set aside to get the beds ready to be planted, get the equipment out, pile the mulch, lay the beds with organic material, and divide the jobs.

“That's when we get a lot of community members, faculty and volunteers. Last year we had a good turnout, we pretty much just get the beds ready to be planted,” Lowry said.

Planting too early is a crucial mistake in colder climates. The risk of a frost in Michigan in May is not unusual.

“We really don't start planting until mid-May just because of the chance of frost damage. We don't want to lose a week of work to the weather,” Lowry said.

Each person with a plot can choose what they want to grow. Last season sunflowers, tomatoes, kale, Brussels sprouts and okra were among the vegetables grown. A group run by the volunteers grew corn, beans and squash, also known as the three sisters, Lowry said.

During the growing season, a master gardener from Common Ground, a Kalamazoo-based gardening program, will come in to provide a workshop for anyone with a plot.

“We rent the tools from them, and we plan on having a master gardener come out for an educational workshop on organic gardening some time during the summer,” Lowry said.

Sandino Vargas is a Western Michigan student from the Dominican Republic, who rented a 5x30 foot lot last year and said he will do the same this coming season. Vargas said he did some gardening in his home country, but not a whole lot. Now as a Western Michigan student he gardens on this plot and also has an indoor garden in his apartment.

In the community garden, Vargas said he grew zucchini, tomatoes, lettuce and some herbs like cilantro and basil last year with a total of approximately 20 plants.

“It's a very nice investment. Say you invest \$30 and buy the starter plants then you just take care of it. They supply the water and fertilizer, so you don't need to spend a lot more than just time,” Vargas

said, “It yields plenty, sometimes I had to go pick it up and give it all to my friends. I wouldn't be able to eat that all every night.”

Vargas plans on growing zucchini, tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, arugula, kale and possibly peppers this year.

Going forward Lowry said he looks to get more connected with the other community gardens in the Kalamazoo area so that they can all help each other do the best job possible.