

# A new Tilth chapter sprouts



Photo by Madeline Maldonado

*Swiss chard planted with a layer of compost and deep mulch ready to face the winter.*

BY TERRY O'DAY

What does English literature have to do with organic gardening? Thanks to the B-Street Project, students in the new Environmental Studies program at Pacific University are finding out.

The B-Street Sustainability Project is a new Oregon Tilth chapter and a product of a partnership between Pacific University and Forest Grove community members. The Project integrates classroom learning with complementary out-of-classroom experiences by involving students in the

development of a demonstration farm. The farm serves as an outdoor laboratory that provides opportunities for students to learn about organic gardening practices, educational outreach, policy development and sustainable community and housing design. "The B-Street Project offers a terrific opportunity for students to fulfill the internship requirement of their Environmental Studies major," says Deke Gundersen, head of the Environmental Science Department at Pacific University. While most participating students are currently from the natural sciences, students in the arts, humanities and social sciences

have a role to play as well. Though it has been less than a year since its conception, the site already draws from 5-20 students every Saturday morning at nine to work alongside faculty and community members.

The site is a three-acre Metro-owned property along Gales Creek, about a mile from the university. Its features include a small house, a one acre field, a small orchard and a native riparian area. Using permaculture design principles, students, faculty and community members are developing an outdoor kitchen/picnic area, a

research garden, a market garden, integrated domestic animal housing, a native plants nursery, as well as restoring native habitat. Future plans include designing and planting edible landscaping around the house and installing a rainwater harvesting and grey-water system.

Support for the project comes from many sources. Along with private donations, funds for training and infrastructure were provided by a grant to the Pacific University Humanitarian Center from Learn and Serve America through Oregon Campus Compact. Charlie Graham of Flamingo Ridge, a local organic farm, donated tomato transplants and irrigation equipment. The city of Forest Grove has donated picnic tables. Other donations include lumber, compost, and gravel for building structures, garden beds and pathways.

"Right now one of our major efforts is to institutionalize biomass recycling systems at the university, such as composting food waste from the kitchens and grass clippings from landscaping services," says Terry O'Day, art professor and B-Street Project director. "The soil in the gardening area is completely depleted from years of overgrazing and we see these materials as essential in helping to restore fertility to the soil." Other sources of organic material are city leaves and chipped wood, both of which are deposited at the site by city workers for distribution to the garden beds and paths. Chicken tractors are also in use to mow weeds as well as contribute fertility. While the first season's produce included melons, tomatoes and potatoes, the emphasis for the first couple of years will be to improve the worn out soil rather than to produce food. Students are getting a chance to practice soil testing and to learn about the role of cover crops, organic mulches, and animal manures in restoring soil life and fertility.

Students are also working on individual research projects related to their areas of interest. In addition to the expected science applications, students are devel-

# The B-Street Project in Forest Grove

oping relationships with the local K-12 schools in order to establish the site as an educational field-trip destination, creating publicity materials (web site, brochures etc.) and even making a documentary film about the project. "I'm so excited to be able to combine my interests in community service, health and nutrition and education through my work on this project," says Madeline Maldonado, a student who is working at the site through her Peace and Conflict Studies class.

In addition to classroom participants, 20 members of the Students for Environmental Awareness club will volunteer time weekly to various projects on the site such as invasive species removal, planting native species along the creek and building owl houses. Efforts are underway to bring environmental activist and singer Emily Richards to campus for Earth Day to help raise awareness of and participation in the project.

Beyond providing a site for experiential learning activities, the project seeks to link community members who wish to improve their eating habits to sources that provide locally grown organic food. As part of this effort, B-Street is partnering with Adelante Mujeres, an organization dedicated to the holistic education and empowerment of low-income Latina women and their families and to helping these families attain economic security through the development of small businesses. Many of these families have agricultural experience and want to start organic market farms. The B-Street Project has set aside half of the gardening area (about half an acre) as a business incubator for this group. Greg Shipp, a local landscape contractor with over 30 years of organic gardening experience, is teaching organic growing techniques to the Adelantes members who have an allotment at the site. "I'm having the most fun I've had in years working with this group. They are eager to learn the techniques, and the produce they grow will be a big benefit to the community," says Greg. After a few years of practice at B-Street, these members



Photo by Madeline Maldonado

*The Humanitarian Center's Ellen Hastay works with students Xander Reeder and Lucion Holyfield to stack straw bales for a winter greenhouse structure.*

will move on to start their own businesses, leaving space for new members to take their place at the project site. The organization already has been contacted by local landowners who are interested in supporting the development of environmentally sensitive, local food production by leasing their land to graduates of the B-Street program. "This is the kind of collaboration we all dream about; building a community around growing healthy food, providing training and access to land to those who have the skill and desire, but few economic resources, bringing diverse groups of people together...for the good of all," says Bridget Cooke, Adelante Mujeres Executive Director.

In addition to accessing information about where to buy locally grown food, community members who visit the site will be able to buy locally adapted vegetable transplants at the correct time for planting in the Forest Grove area, as well as see demonstrations on soil preparation, planting, pruning, edible landscaping, food preserving, cheese making and keeping backyard chickens and bees. Plans are also in the works for harvest festivals and bring-your-own-apples cider making events. The

hope is that parents and their children will use the picnic area and enjoy the site on a regular basis. These gatherings should serve to build strong connections between community members.

And the English class mentioned at the beginning of the article? Environmental Studies students take an Environmental Literature class taught by Brent Johnson in which they discuss readings by Thoreau, Emerson, Leopold and Muir among others. These readings give students a historical perspective on the human relationship to place and environment and serve as a foundation on which to build their own thoughts about the choices they make as they go forward into their careers. By planting garlic, building an owl house or giving a tour to a group of kids, college students give meaning to their classroom experience and make a positive impact on their community.

*Terry O'Day teaches ceramics and jewelry at Pacific University. She and her husband Steve are certified permaculturists, who together are directing the B-Street Project. They live in Forest Grove and are raising three children.*