50 SHADES OF GREEN

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Sunday afternoon -the skies are sunny, and the crops are calling. Work boots, seven pairs of Birkenstocks and bare feet walk the aisles of the greenhouse. Dirt-covered fingers plunge into the earth, sowing seeds and pulling up weeds. The water pump gurgles and two girls stand drinking out of hollowed-out green bell peppers and laughing. Leafy green kale and plump, red tomatoes decorate the various plots. Four hours of plowing, digging, raking, watering, and nurturing. Aching arms throw down the shovels and gather at the picnic table for pizza. Same time next week.

Sophomore John Youmans says he joined Elon's Garden Club because "it never feels like a commitment. Almost everything is optional and that means that, in general, everyone who comes is genuinely glad to be there." He adds that, from the outside perspective, the club drew him in because it seemed like a "fun, calming way to relax and unwind."

The Garden Club is run by current seniors Ellen Lana and Alyssa Adler. The club came to fruition last fall, when Allison Hren and Eric Lagueruela, both members of the class of 2015, got the ball rolling. They started the formal application process, then passed it on to Lana and Adler when they graduated. Since the Org Fair, Garden Club has amassed over 130 members! They hope to appeal to a wide range of students with many interests to provide a hub for building connections.

As a brand new organization, Garden Club hasn't had the opportunity to apply for a budget yet. They gained provisional status in the last week of September, but according to Elon University standards, they must be a working club for at least a year before they are granted recognition by the university and allowed the perks that other clubs have access to - like renting spaces or applying for a budget.

According to Lana, "the mission of the garden club is to promote a sense of responsibility to the Earth, positive self-image, and cooperation among students and other organizations on campus." They hope to provide for students the "opportunity to experience the commitment demanded and gratification brought on by gardening and farming, both within Elon's Community Garden and on Loy Farm."

Lana elaborates on what that feeling of gratification is for her. "Nothing compares to the satisfaction of taking home dinner you have grown from seed!"

Both Lana and Adler first found their passion for gardening through Elon professor Michael Strickland's garden studio class, a semester-long course that teaches students successful gardening techniques through hands-on experience at the Elon Community Garden, the Elon greenhouse and Loy Farm. This class offers participants an inside look at Loy Farm that most of Elon's students do not get the privilege to experience.

For many, this course and others like it go hand in hand with the Garden Club. It is just another way to broaden their horizons and practice the techniques they learn in class in a

real-world farm setting. Many of the members of the Garden Club are environmental studies or environmental science majors, although that isn't a qualification to join the club. Adler says that above all else, what they "really want is for any student, regardless of their major, to find peace and relaxation away from the stress of school life."

Outside Involvement:

One course offered by Elon's environmental studies department is a senior seminar called "Environmental Impact Assessment and Policy Development," taught by Professor Strickland as well as Professor Janet MacFall. In this course, students "work as a design and management team" on a semester-long environmental project that recognizes the value of community partnerships.

This year they have decided to create a comparison farm bed - one half will be planted using commercial farm techniques, while the other side will employ biointensive farming techniques.

Commercial farming refers to farming for profit, where farmers use large machines and mass-produce crops to be sold on the market rather than solely to be consumed by their family. Biointensive farming refers to the use of "double-dug beds," which are essentially beds with the soil loosened two feet straight down in order to facilitate root growth, improve water retention and aerate the soil so the crop can breathe. Biointensive plots are invigorated by the use of compost to provide nutrients, and beneficial insects are encouraged. A focus on production of calories for the farmer and carbon for the soil ensure sustainability and satisfaction on both ends.

Many of the members of the class are also members of the Garden Club, and have a strong appreciation and respect for the earth and what it is capable of producing. Their goal with this project is to define and utilize the most environmentally-friendly and sustainable technique of farming. This will allow them to yield the most amount of crops possible, while using the least amount of resources possible. Having the bed at Loy Farm right next to the greenhouse allows for a lot of crossover between the two groups, and makes it possible for members of the Garden Club to walk over and help out with construction if needed.

How it Works:

The bed being constructed at Loy Farm by the students will employ both of these tactics in a split-screen fashion in order to provide contrast. One side of the bed will employ commercial farming techniques while the other side uses biointensive techniques, but all other elements are the same between the two plots. This allows the class to monitor the difference each technique makes in the growth and health of the crops, without the possibility that it could be attributed to another factor.

Within the senior seminar, the students will analyze these beds and monitor their growth to compare the effectiveness of each farming technique on the development of the Austrian

winter field pea. They anticipate drastically different results, as biointensive farming techniques allow farmers to grow crops using 67-88% less water and 50-100% less soil. Overall, this technique uses 99% less energy than commercial farming would require to yield the same amount of crops, and significantly less resources.

Their specific plot is being erected as part of the Elon University Loy Farm Land Lab, a 40-acre tract of land given to the environmental studies department by the university for the purpose of practicing sustainable farming techniques. The plot sits directly behind the greenhouse that houses the plots the Garden Club works on, so the groups see a lot of each other during workdays. Members of the Garden Club often drift over to the plot to lend a hand in the construction and maintenance of the biointensive bed. In addition, members of the senior seminar class are free to assist the Garden Club in planting, weeding, watering and harvesting their plots . So far, the Land Lab area of Loy Farm has developed significantly, seeing such additions as composting toilets, a solar-heated greenhouse, irrigation, tool sheds and a teaching area, among others.

Community Partnerships:

Both groups have been working together on Loy Farm to facilitate a lot of growth this season. Lana and Adler have been teaching members of the senior seminar class how to grow plants from seed, and how to tend to them in their early stages so they will be healthy when it is time to plant them. Both groups can be found at Loy Farm on Sundays between noon and 3pm, and Lana says she often sends members of the Garden Club over to help with the construction of the biointensive bed when they have extra hands.

Walking along the aisles of the garden, students will see a variety of crops - tomatoes, flowers, peppers and some of the herbs - that were planted last year by the Garden Studio class. According to Lana, “the herb garden is a mix of perennial mint that has been in place for years and basil that we planted last spring.” The pea bed and personal plots were put in last week, and plants are still being added to them. The rest of the garden includes plants like green beans, kale, cabbage and flowers, planted and maintained by the Garden Club as well as Strickland’s Garden Studio class.

It is difficult to predict exactly when plants will need to be harvested and how much will be reaped from each plant, as they can be affected by extreme weather like intense storms, early frost or excessive rainfall. The Garden Club began harvesting last spring’s crops this semester, and will continue to do so as long as possible. Students who planted personal plots in the gardens will be able to harvest their vegetables soon as well.

Future Growth:

The Garden Club is behind a number of events on campus each year, including the Annual Fall Pumpkin Festival, which is open to all students and takes place in late October.

Students can carve pumpkins, enjoy some baked goods, get their faces painted and listen to music in the community garden next to Hillel House.

The club strives to create a finished product they can be proud of. They want people to be aware of the wonderful things a garden can bring to a community beyond just vegetables. So far, it has provided a means for those interested in bettering their environment to meet others who are in the same boat and just as passionate. Events like the Pumpkin Festival allow the club to bring outside students into the garden to see what it's all about.

The Garden Club will also be holding the Strawberry Festival in the Spring, and is looking into projects like building pizza ovens or organizing farm-to-table dinners. In the same ballpark, Ashley Gherlone, one of the students in Strickland's senior seminar class, has suggested that the class is looking into developing some sort of farm-to-dining hall plan, but as of right now this is just a consideration of the biointensive project and nothing is set in stone.

Get Involved!:

For students that are interested in getting involved, there are many ways to do so, and your contribution may mean more than you realize. According to Adler, a "vast majority of the vegetables we grow go to Campus Kitchen, who delivers and cooks the food for Allied Churches who distributes the food to families in need, so people working on the garden and farm can know that their work is truly making a difference in someone's life."

The Garden Club has workdays on Fridays and Sundays from noon to 3pm, and anyone is welcome to come out and get to work. These hours even count as service hours! Some people come for experience, some for a therapeutic break in their day, and still others just to learn.

Club member Charlie Perschau, a current junior at Elon, says he joined Garden Club to be "a more active part in the production of his food." He also says the club attracted him because he "knew almost nothing about gardening but is eager to learn more about it from and with the other members." Prior experience is not a requirement for membership! Members come from a variety of backgrounds, and often come with a wide array of experiences with the outdoors. Some have grown up tending a family garden, others have dabbled in herb gardens, and some have never even planted a flower. However, Lana reminds students that "farming is an extremely demanding process that requires a good deal of energy and resources. There is a bit of a learning curve to effectively planting and harvesting healthy crops."

Whether it be getting down in the dirt pulling weeds and wiping sweat, or among rows of green beans searching for the ripest ones, members of the Garden Club are always eager to lend a hand to one another. Youmans says of the club, "it has the feel of a group of friends rather than just an organization." Laughter carries over the beanstalks and greenhouse walls. Four tools are shared among ten people, and not a single person gripes or complains. The members of the Garden Club bring so much passion to their work that it no longer feels like work. These crops

are not only evidence of the hard work and energy these people have put in, but will soon be a delicious, long-awaited, and well-deserved reward.