

UBC Farm: a place for land, food and community learning

The UBC Farm is a 40 hectare model farm located on the University of British Columbia's Campus in Vancouver, Canada. UBC Farm is a student-driven initiative where students, faculty, staff, and the local community have been working together to create a place where people can come to learn, live and value the connection between land, food and community. Eight thousand community members from off-campus visited UBC Farm in 2003, our third year of operation, showing significant interest in the Farm programs. A long-term vision is to integrate some of this programming into the South Campus community as it develops and create an international Agroecology Centre for the study of sustainable agriculture, forestry and food systems.

Three programs form the successful core of UBC Farm: (1) Community-Based Food Systems Program, (2) Education and Outreach Program, and (3) Agroecology Research Program.

What happens in the Community-Based Food Systems Program?

British Columbia is a hotbed of activity in the area of food policy, food security and community-based food systems. UBC Farm's interest in this area is based on a vision of a future food system that provides, for all segments of society, a safe and nutritious food supply grown in a manner that protects health and the environment, and adds value to rural and urban communities.

This program has arguably developed into the heart and soul of the UBC Farm operation. The staff in this program run the UBC Farm Market and Market Garden and the UBC Food Systems Project, as well as support projects like the Musqueam Community Kitchen and the Maya Education Society.

UBC Food Systems Project: UBC Farm is a key player in a collaborative project between students, faculty, food services staff, and other community partners that asks the question: how can we create a sustainable UBC Food system? The UBC Farm plays an active role in this action-research project, contributing both locally-produced food and learning resources for the campus. To our knowledge, we are the only Canadian university that has an on-campus farm that directly supplies campus food services with significant amounts of produce. This year, our produce has appeared on menus at UBC-catered events, many student dinners, cafeterias and dining halls in several residential colleges, and regularly at the award-winning Sage Bistro.

Market Garden: UBC Farm Market Days are held every Saturday morning from May until October right next to the fields where food is grown by our student market gardeners. We have over 60 types of fresh vegetables, fruits, berries, herbs, flowers, eggs, and honey. All food is grown using organic farming methods and many of our crops are rare and heritage varieties. UBC Farm Market connects our customers directly with the people and land that produce their food.

Musqueam Community Kitchen Garden: The garden plot, managed by students and nutritionists from the Musqueam First Nation, addresses nutrition concerns by supplying produce to the Musqueam community kitchen. Crops are planted to meet specific identified nutritional needs, such as diets that are compatible with diabetes, and are integrated into a cycle of community dinners.

Maya Garden Project: The Maya Garden Project is a collaboration between UBC Farm and the Maya Cultural Education Society. Members of the society enhance their vital connections to Maya culture by farming the land using methods and techniques known to the Maya since ancient times. This communal demonstration garden supplies traditional medicinal and nutritional plants to the Maya community, as well as to the UBC Farm Market. The Maya Garden is a place for sharing traditional knowledge; for research, community outreach, and education; and for Maya cultural celebrations, ceremonies, and events.

UBC Farm Bee Project: the farm's seven hives are maintained by students and volunteers, who have used the science of beekeeping to form the basis of several research projects. Our honeybees provide both the service of pollination for many of our crops, and also honey and beeswax for sale at our markets.

What happens in the Education and Outreach Program?

One of the central roles of UBC Farm is to provide experientially based environmental education opportunities. To achieve this we have integrated educational elements into all of our program offerings. Through our many community education and outreach activities we also ensure that these educational experiences extend out well beyond the boundaries of the University.

The mission of the program is to engage people by offering opportunities for participation, learning and social interaction through an on-farm experience. We now have a dedicated volunteer base of over 100 people, and have a growing number of University classes utilizing the Farm. The number of visitors to the site continues to grow, from perhaps less than 200 people visiting in 1999 to close to 10,000 in 2004. Our new organic farming internship program, piloted in 2004, offers an opportunity for both students and community members to participate in an immersive season-long field course that offers in-depth theoretical learning opportunities matched with extensive hands-on experience in the market garden.

Core projects include:

University Courses: Given our educational mandate UBC Farm is open to and actively encourages university-level courses to use the Farm's fields, gardens and forest as an outdoor laboratory and classroom. Since 2001 we have hosted approximately 30 courses from the faculties of Agricultural Sciences, Applied Science, Forestry, Science, Education, and Graduate Studies. Many of these courses are repeat users having now integrated the Farm into their curricula. Course involvement ranges from instructors who use the site for a simple field trip to the recently introduced "The Science and Practice of Sustainability," an intensive, on-site, three-week field course at the farm offered through UBC Earth and Ocean Sciences.

Community Education: In addition to hosting university-level courses, UBC Farm plays host to workshops, lectures and meetings throughout the year. UBC Farm is a 40-hectare outdoor classroom, an ideal location to learn about everything from natural pest control to food policy.

Internships: Introduction to Organic Agriculture: In 2004, the UBC Farm piloted an internship program in our market garden. In this learner-centred program, small groups of interns gained a mix of theoretical instruction in the classroom and hands-on experience in the garden. In coming years, we hope to develop this internship program to incorporate both

students who participate in the program as a for-credit university course and the general public who may want to participate in the program out of general interest.

Volunteer Program: At UBC Farm, our volunteers learn through hands-on experience the art and craft of running an organic farm. From early morning to late evening, volunteers are out in the fields helping us to grow, harvest and sell farm fresh produce for our weekly farmer's markets. Other volunteers attend public events, lead school tours and help with special Farm projects. Aspiring farmers of all ages are invited to participate in UBC Farm's volunteer program. Currently, over 100 dedicated volunteers support the delivery of UBC Farm's core programs and projects.

Schools Program: The farm offers tours and workshops for visiting school groups. Our programs give children a chance to get their hands dirty, perhaps visit a real farm for the first time, and gain an understand where their food comes from. Many of our fall tours feature pumpkin harvests, and our spring tours might involve the harvesting and creation of a fresh, healthy salad.

Land, Food and Community Teaching Garden: The Land, Food, and Community Garden is an outdoor classroom designed with children in mind. Currently, the garden features vegetable and flower gardens planted and cared for by students and retired farmers participating in an innovative program led by the Department of Curriculum Studies – the Intergenerational Landed Learning Exchange. The Land, Food, and Community garden is also home to a demonstration cob (a building technique using clay, sand and straw as the primary materials) building project and a rainwater harvesting system. The aim of the Land, Food and Community Garden is to improve the opportunity for urban children to learn not only where their food comes from, but also the greater role that food plays in their community, environment and economy.

Intergenerational Landed Learning Exchange: This project uses the Land, Food, and Community garden as a base for a grade seven class, who, working with retired farmers, plan, grow, and care for gardens. The work in the garden is incorporated into the school curriculum, and the intergenerational learning exchange fosters a deep appreciation of where food comes from. This innovative project is being developed through the Department of Curriculum studies in UBC's Faculty of Education.

Additional offerings include:

Farm Tours and Events: For many people, a trip to UBC Farm is their first taste of farm life. The 40 hectares of working farmland, including open fields, intensively cultivated horticultural plots, forest land, and wild areas form a backdrop for special events, festivals, group tours, and socials. The farm has hosted student orientations and celebrations, training sessions, fundraising concerts, retreats, and meetings.

Artist in Residence Project: Working with Landscape Architecture students and artists throughout the community, the farm hosts a number of artists-in-residence who create and display works of art on the site. This project is interesting as it is not the traditional-farm project, but rather will connect our landscape to the community through the dimensions of cultural and artistic expression.

Downtown Eastside Learning Exchange: clients with the Learning Exchange have worked with students in a number of projects at the farm. The farm site offers a good setting for

students and clients to participate in community service learning, engaging in projects that leave a tangible, beneficial legacy.

Agroforestry Trail: Work has begun to develop an agroforestry trail network through a wooded area on the Farm and eventually open it up to the public and students and faculty for use. The trail will wander through a surprisingly diverse piece of West Coast rainforest, highlighting cedar stands, non-timber products, blowdown and natural regeneration among many things.

What happens in the Agroecology Research Program?

UBC Farm is viewed as a critical piece for the UBC Faculty of Agricultural Sciences as it provides a unique opportunity to connect theory with applied learning and research on issues related to land, food and community. As a potential agroecological research and teaching facility, UBC Farm is unique in North America in its connection to two faculties with growing agroecological and agroforestry programs, its location within an internationally respected university, and close proximity to a world-class city.

Research to date has involved students studying rotational livestock grazing, market garden management strategies, landscape design, companion planting, season extension, organic forest mushroom production, non-timber forest products production, irrigation and composting strategies, and organic pest control. UBC Farm is actively engaged in connecting the Farm to other University faculties and departments in an effort to encourage more on-farm research.

In Summary

There is growing public interest in the balanced consideration of ecological, economic and social issues associated with the cultivation of land for food and fibre. At this time there are few places in North America where these issues can be studied in a truly integrated way. UBC Farm, has good soils, a temperate climate, and is located in an internationally recognized university within a world-class city. The farm is ideally situated to actively consider issues related to sustainable agriculture, forestry, urban development and food systems.

The University of British Columbia, through the UBC Farm initiative, has a unique opportunity to demonstrate how existing forest and farm lands can be successfully integrated into a community development in a manner that supports its academic mandate and demonstrates how working landscapes can benefit and sustain their surrounding communities.

UBC Farm

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