



²
FROM

FARM

²
TO

FORK

BY CAROLE LEIGH ENGBLOM

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOM ROSTER



**WHILE FOOD MAY BE AN “ABSTRACT IDEA” TO
URBAN CONSUMERS, AS AUTHOR WENDELL BERRY
SUGGESTS, MAKING IT REAL IS A PRIORITY FOR
THE STUDENTS WHO WORK AT STOGROW.**



ANNA ELIZABETH MARTIN '12 HAS always understood the fundamentals of sustainability. A native of Kansas City, Missouri, Martin says her mother was an environmentalist and raised Anna and her brothers to “take care of the earth in every way we can, especially by eating healthy, locally grown food.” Healthy living was also a priority in Elizabeth Harness’s family. She and her sister, Emma, participated in a variety of outdoor activities, from camps to mission trips, “played in the dirt,” and ate vegetables that grew in the backyard garden of their Southwest Minneapolis home.

English major Peter Hanson '11 says his family also had a garden back home in Baldwin, Wisconsin, but his only interaction with it came when he helped his parents with the weeding — and then only with “considerable persuasion.” Micah Marty '10 grew up in Roseville, a northern suburb of the Twin Cities, and though he has long known the importance of eating healthy food and generally understood some of the environmental impacts of organic farming, “I couldn’t distinguish a tomato plant from an eggplant a few years ago.”

Senior Laura Carpenter became interested in sustainable agriculture after reading *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* by Michael Pollan in an introductory environmental studies class. “Realizing how complex our food system really is and how many problems there are with it, I began to question the system in place,” she says. Joey Fleming '10, an art major from Alexandria, Minnesota, has always enjoyed the outdoors. He likes the solitude of weeding, the teamwork of harvesting, and watching things grow. It’s as simple as that.

These six students are the backbone of the 2010 St. Olaf Garden Research and Organic Works project, better known as STOGROW, a student-run organization established in 2004 by Dayna Burtress '07 and Dan Borek '07. Located at the

James Farm House about a mile west of campus in the shadow of the college’s wind turbine, St. Olaf provides students with an acre of fertile soil for vegetables and plenty of surrounding space to grow berries, keep bees and chickens, and train their peers in the art — and business — of organic farming.

“I think it’s important that people know where the food they eat comes from,” says Marty, who graduated this past spring with majors in biology and environmental studies. The complexities of industrial agriculture, the widespread use of chemicals on crops, and the inevitable damage to the environment are issues that concern Marty and all of the students who work at the farm. “One of STOGROW’s key missions is outreach and teaching students about food production,” he explains, noting that he knew little about farming and food before volunteering at STOGROW. “To the extent that we are successful in the latter endeavor, more students like me who don’t really know where food comes from can start to learn about the food they eat.”

Since its inception, STOGROW has strived to increase campus sustainability by providing a source of local, organically grown food, raise agricultural awareness among students, and increase the richness of learning opportunities at the college.

While other colleges have organic gardens, STOGROW is unique because of its relationship with the college’s food provider, Bon Appétit Management Company (BAMC), which uses all of STOGROW’s fresh vegetables in the college’s daily meal plans. At the beginning of each growing season, STOGROW students meet with BAMC General Manager Peter Abrahamson and Bon Appétit head chef Matthew Fogarty and decide on what vegetables to grow.

“We’re privileged at St. Olaf to have such a strong connection with Bon Appétit, a company that is dedicated to bringing healthy, organic food into our cafeteria while supporting Minnesota’s local farmers,” says Martin, a Spanish and sociology/anthropology major who is concentrating in environmental studies. “I love that we are participating in the change that needs to happen by eating locally and organically.” ►

◀ “Come visit the farm. We’ll show you how your food grows!” The STOGROW crew (and chickens), from left: Peter Hanson, Joey Fleming, Elizabeth Harness, Micah Marty, Laura Carpenter, and Anna Elizabeth Martin (with Harpoon and Sven, the Jaerhons, Regina, the Araucana hen, and Julie, the Plymouth Barred Rock hen).

In addition to planting core crops, students are encouraged by Abrahamson and Fogarty to try new vegetables. In 2008, STOGROW harvested and sold more than 30,000 pounds of fresh produce to Bon Appétit. The numbers for 2009 were abnormally low because an early frost cut the growing season short, but the students expect to reach, if not surpass, their 2008 numbers. The arrangement with Bon Appétit allows STOGROW to be profitable, which in turn means annual growth.

STOGROW PROVIDES STUDENTS WITH AN ACRE OF FERTILE SOIL FOR VEGETABLES AND PLENTY OF SURROUNDING SPACE TO GROW BERRIES, KEEP BEES AND CHICKENS, AND TRAIN THEIR PEERS IN THE ART — AND BUSINESS — OF ORGANIC FARMING.

This is Laura Carpenter's second summer working at STOGROW. An economics and environmental studies major, not only is Carpenter making smarter food choices these days, but STOGROW has also helped her "to understand what it takes to run a successful business, which is a very valuable skill."

STOGROW employs three lead farmers and two to three interns who are hired each spring. Most, but not all, are majoring or concentrating in environmental studies, biology, or participating in campus sustainability projects. What unites the students, past and present, is a love of the outdoors and a shared passion for sustainability in general and organic gardening in particular. "We work well together, on and off the farm, and that makes the work itself more enjoyable," says Harness '13.

Each makes a two-year commitment, with the lead farmers teaching and guiding their protégés throughout the year. When the lead farmers move on, either graduating or ending their term, the interns take over the lead position, and the teaching-learning cycle continues. They rely heavily on the help of volunteers, especially for the fall harvest, and training the volunteers is also part of the job.

"When large groups come out for harvesting, we do our best to delegate tasks and teach people what qualities we're looking for in the fruits that we harvest — color, size, firmness — so that they can harvest effectively, too," says Fleming.

Work begins at STOGROW when snow is still on the ground. When the lead farmers needed a place to grow the bulk of their seedlings in early spring, Leif Knecht '73 didn't hesitate to offer space in his greenhouses at Knecht's Nurseries and Landscaping. Two hundred students also raised seedlings in their dorm rooms as part of STOGROW's new "adopt-a-seedling" program. The carefully nurtured seeds were planted at the end of May, followed by composting, mulching, watering, fertilizing, trellising, weeding, ridding the garden of pesky bugs, and finally, harvesting.

...

STOGROW has four core crops: eggplants, peppers, squash, and tomatoes. This year the six students planted 340 squash plants, 920 tomato plants, 130 eggplants, and 200 peppers. They're also growing bushels of beans, sweet potatoes, onions, carrots, radishes, beets, peas, basil, lettuce greens, brussels sprouts, and cucumbers — all grown from seeds and all destined for the St. Olaf cafeteria. An herb garden is filled with oregano, sage,



In addition to produce, STOGROW also has flowers, honeybees, and twelve friendly chickens — who are not only components of its farm ecosystem but also great teaching tools. Micah Marty says STOGROW's success is becoming widely known. "We receive emails about once a month from students at other schools across the country, asking for assistance putting together proposals for their student-run gardens or asking for advice with how to negotiate a contract with a food service company."

thyme, and dill. Honeybees are new to STOGROW this year, and so are mushrooms (reishi, maitake, shiitake, oyster, and chicken of the woods) and raspberries (patches of June-bearing, ever-bearing, and black-cap).

The students credit local small farmers, Northfield retirees, professors, alumni, and peers for broadening their interests in — and understanding of — organic gardening and for lending support, offering advice, and mentoring them in new ventures. "All of these people inspire us, motivate us, teach us new things, and help us rejuvenate," says Marty.

Each student's STOGROW experience, whether short- or long-term, is meaningful to them. Some come away with a better appreciation for fresh food and farming, some reconnect with the land and nature, others take their hands-on education in sustainable agriculture a step further, questioning the way America feeds its people, raising awareness about living healthy and eating locally.

For Peter Hanson, STOGROW has given him something he never expected to find in a garden: "Hope." 🐣

CAROLE LEIGH ENGBLOM is editor of *St. Olaf Magazine*.

