



Shane Brill, Interim Director of Sustainability and Regenerative Living for Washington College

food connection

Washington College's Campus Garden offers students a bridge between past and future

BY AMELIA BLADES STEWARD

1 **Have you ever** wondered how someone foraged for the first mushroom or knew what fruits and berries were edible? As permaculturist Shane Brill explores this question of trial-and-error, the boundary between humans and the environment gets blurry. His work at Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland uses food to reconnect with the innate wisdom of the human body. By aligning people with their personal capacity to thrive, he shows that individuals will collectively do what is in the best interest of themselves and the earth.

“We are part of this living planet,” Brill, Interim Director of Sustainability and Regenerative Living for Washington College, explains. “We internalize our environment through the food we eat, and how we perceive our environment shapes our use of the nutrients we consume. Because our culture provides the lens we use to interpret our place in the world, there’s a relationship between stories, the experience of living, and the health of our bodies.”

Brill is helping students rediscover the ancient human story of living in harmony with natural patterns. The Campus Garden at Washington College in Chestertown,

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“Many [students] see themselves as ambassadors of goodness.”

— Shane Brill



Top: Washington College students harvest fresh honey; Bottom: Students manage the campus garden compost bin.

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Maryland is addressing food sustainability, food access, and dietary and social health, using ancient and traditional processes — helping its students and the community healthily connect with food while taking care of the planet.

The Campus Garden uses the Eastern Shore food-shed as its primary context. Although developed as an educational experience for the students at Washington College, programs in the space serve to educate the community at large through hands-on experiential learning from how food is defined to how it is grown and prepared.

The garden sits on a college-owned property that was once a gravel parking lot. Brill has been involved since the garden’s inception. Not only has the site itself been transformed into a natural wonder, but the students at Washington College have benefited in transformative ways from their exposure to the garden’s plants and ecosystem.

About a dozen students come weekly to work in the Campus Garden each academic year, including students who come for ecology labs, clubs, and extracurricular activities. Last year, the garden launched a compost team that manages a drive-thru bulk compost area where people from the community can drive up and drop off their food scraps. They can produce finished compost in three months.

“Only a small portion of our students come here with previous gardening knowledge. Many are intrigued to engage with nature by sitting by the garden’s pond or camping out under a tree to journal or photograph what they

are experiencing. Students connect with each other by learning about the plants together. By the time they graduate, they have expanded confidence and develop a kind of philosophical look at the world and their place in it. Many see themselves as ambassadors of goodness,” reflects Brill.

The Campus Garden is also a great demonstration project for the community to see the benefits of plants that you don’t normally see in our gardens. Brill adds, “We are practicing permaculture here — a design approach and philosophy that meets the needs of people while

improving the vitality of the planet. It assumes that we evolved in a world of abundance and we can return to that world by restoring our current place.”

Based on the work of ecologists in Australia, Brill and his students are aiming to create an environment in the garden which includes 70% native plants and 30% non-native plants — making the garden highly edible as well as functional. This plant ratio supports the insect populations that help sustain a resilient environment where every plant contributes.

With the abundance of plant variety in the Campus Garden, students are engaged in several activities.

Washington College’s Anthropology Club built an earthen oven in the garden, insulating the base of the oven with glass bottles that were recycled from on campus. The students then made sourdough pizzas topped with cheese they made from scratch as well as herbs from the garden. The garden is also home to beehives, as well as fruit trees and berry and nut bushes. The students have even grown hops to use in beer-making workshops for Oktoberfest. Local elementary school kids visit the Campus Garden to learn how to forage and to think about their place in the world — showing them how food and nature connect. The

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creating **MINDFULNESS** while eating

Preparing for the meal is as important as eating it.

Include gratitude practices before a meal and deep breaths before eating to aid the digestive process.

Eat seasonally to get the appropriate carbs, proteins, and fats we need each season.

Create rituals for dining undistracted by the television or other electronic devices.

Make your meal settings attractive – place flowers on the table or light a candle before a meal to create a calm and welcoming environment.

Take your time eating the meal, pausing for conversation or reflection.

Put your fork down between bites.

Savor the flavor of food. Chew 15 to 30 times per bite.

Make meditation a daily ritual.

Splash your face with cold water to relax.

Try yoga.

Make exercise and movement enjoyable.

Smile.

Spend time outdoors.

Go barefoot if possible.

goal is to show that where food comes from doesn't have to look like a giant farm. And like their ancient ancestors, they express human intuition in their work by approaching themselves as extensions of the world that nourishes them. Trial-and-error is guided by reverence, curiosity, and a sense of discovery.

“We evolved in a very nutrient-rich environment, where there was drinking water that was full of minerals and dirt that was full of probiotic spores that helped us digest our food. We had access to a variety of plants and animals and thrived on everything. Our ancestors carried forth the patterns of their ancestors. By design, they would restore the land base they were living on simply by the way they were cultivating and using the plants — in such a way that created more habitat for animals that they could then consume,” Brill explains.

He adds, “Specifically, our ancestors operated in a perpetual ‘parasympathetic state,’ which means they were relaxed and at peace in their relationship to their food sources. This is the opposite of the ‘sympathetic state’ in which most of the world’s inhabitants are living today where disturbances, such as even the perceived shortage of food and supplies during the recent pandemic, can cause us to have a ‘fight or flight’ response where our bodies start producing hormones to help us survive.”

“Whether we’re stuck in traffic or agonizing about what’s happening at work or even caught up in a suspenseful film or TV show, these hormones interfere with our natural digestive process and our body’s ability to absorb nutrients and process our food internally. I believe we can reclaim our health by how

we interact with food and use food as a healing modality.”

Student engagement through the Campus Garden is setting the stage to work with the community on this issue. In the process of becoming a Nutritional Therapy Practitioner, Brill is engaging students in culinary wellness and health and teaching them why they should be selective in what they eat, where it comes from, and how they eat. One way that Brill says that people can take charge of their health is by connecting mindfulness to the preparation and eating of food.

“You can awaken something innately human in yourself being in a garden. Gardens can be equalizers. Regardless of how we have been primed by our culture, the garden helps us get back to what we were

formed to do. Our work is based on how humans have eaten for over 300,000 years. We can’t digest the food we eat if we are not in a state of mindfulness,” he adds.

An annual spring celebration hosted at the Campus Garden is the Medieval May Day Celebration, in which Permaculture Interns, student beekeepers, and students enrolled in a Chaucer course prepare historically inspired nutrient-dense foods that might represent a food secure future. Using traditional processes, students create a feast of bioavailable food products including apple cider vinegar, bone broth, butter, cheese, dried fruits, fruit leather, fermented vegetables, kefir, kombucha, maple syrup, mead, sourdough crackers and bread, sprouted nut milks, wild

greens, wild teas, and yogurt.

Brill states that in the end, we are all striving for homeostasis — that place of balance and peace between our bodies and the environment. He adds, “We have an illusion of separateness between people and plants, people and the soil, and people and animals. Permaculture, which is the structure we have created with the Campus Garden, helps us take off these lenses and realize we are all connected.”

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

on permaculture, regenerative practices, and the intersection of sustainability and wellness, visit washcoll.edu/sustainability.