The On-Campus Vegetable and Herb Garden at San Diego Mesa College

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Abstract

After several years of neglect, student leaders at San Diego Mesa College revived the on-campus vegetable and herb garden in 2015. This three hundred square feet plot serves as an outdoor learning lab and a therapeutic space to connect with nature. Further, it provides the College with a tangible way to achieve several strategic directions, including building a sense of community, providing opportunities for interactions outside of the classroom, acting as resource stewards, and creating applied learning experiences. Community garden research suggests that these opportunities often result in improved physical activity, dietary choices, and social relationships among participants. In addition to building community, student volunteers learn effective gardening techniques related to soil preparation, integrated pest management, cultivation, and harvesting. Through support from the SEEDS Scholars Program, Mesa College Facilities staff, the faculty Environmental Stewardship Committee, the Mesa Foundation, the Associated Student Government, and the student environmental sustainability and conservation club, plans to expand the on-campus garden are underway.

Introduction

During the Spring semester of 2015, San Diego Mesa College’s environmental sustainability and conservation club, TerraMesa, developed a proposal to utilize an organic garden plot on campus that had not been used for several years. Members of TerraMesa, the Associated Student Government, the Environmental Stewardship Committee, and staff and faculty members agreed that this garden was a great opportunity to engage in transformative hands-on experiences, community building, and demonstrate Mesa’s values. Thanks to the advice, support, and generous donations TerraMesa has received, the on-campus garden continues being a success in providing students and volunteers with a wide array of valuable knowledge and information.

Hands-on Learning

The photographs below show some of the activities conducted in the organic garden, which include:
- Soil preparation, such as use of mulch and compost for insulation and fertilization for edible greens,
- Identifying, treating, and preventing pest issues efficiently,
- Practicing proper pruning techniques to maximize growth and yield while preventing damage to plants, and
- Learning about individual plant life cycles in order to recognize best time of year for planting and signs of optimal time for harvesting.

Benefits

Research studies suggest that involvement in community gardens often have a positive influence on science achievement, nutrition knowledge, and physical activity. A garden is essentially a miniature ecosystem, where students can observe life cycles of plants and the animals they attract, as well as their behaviors. Gardens help participants broaden their knowledge on what foods are edible, which can lead to healthier eating habits. Additionally, maintaining a garden is a continuous process that requires regular physical activity to remain healthy, not unlike other workout routines.

Expansion

TerraMesa and other student clubs and academic disciplines on campus have plans to make use of the surrounding garden plots in the near future. The Student Veterans Organization wishes to establish a rock garden for the purpose of having a place for meditation. The Anthropology Club has plans to grow a variety of plants grown by different cultures around the world. The culinary arts department has made suggestions of growing specific herbs and vegetables intended for use in their classes.

“Gardening changes the status of food for all involved. When one gardens, food can no longer be viewed as a mere commodity for consumption; we are brought into the ritual of communal goodness that is found at the intersection of people and plants. Food that we grow with our own hands becomes a portal for personal transformation.”


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