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March 18, 2013

New Course Provides Greens to UNH Diners; Their Waste Becomes Compost



Emily McKeen '14, a student in the Food Production Field Experience course, harvests greens grown by the class for the UNH Dairy Bar restaurant. Credit: Beth Potier, UNH Media Relations.

DURHAM, N.H. – Order a salad at the University of New Hampshire’s popular Dairy Bar restaurant, and you join a closed loop of sustainability: The greens were grown on campus, less than a mile away, by students in UNH’s sustainable agriculture and food systems major. And that salad got its start in compost created from food waste from the Dairy Bar and other university dining facilities.

The course, Food Production Field Experience, borrows from the structure of community supported agriculture for its 20 undergraduate students to get their hands dirty – literally -- by planning, growing, marketing, and delivering food crops as well as managing the operation’s finances. For the full farm-to-fork

experience, students supplement in-class time with work hours tending their “curriculum” in two new greenhouse-like high tunnels located on the university’s agricultural land.

“We’re learning a lot about transplants, seedlings, greenhouse management, irrigation, and soil,” said Emily McKeen '14, a sustainable agriculture and food systems major from Plymouth, Mass., as she harvested leaf lettuce and mustard greens recently. “The hands-on experience definitely helps me remember it all.”

With academic topics like soil science, integrated pest management, and plant pathology amplified by hands-on work in the high tunnels, the course prepares students to launch and manage their own small-scale horticultural enterprise. “We wanted to follow as closely as possible the year for a horticulture producer here in this area,” says instructor Andrew Ogden, noting that the spring-semester course, with its focus on planning and planting, is part one of two; students are encouraged to return for the fall semester so they experience the harvest season as well.

Key to the success of the class was the recent construction of two high tunnels, season-extending temporary greenhouse-like structures covered in two layers of clear plastic, adjacent to UNH’s Fairchild Dairy Teaching and Research Center. “The high tunnels allow us to grow vegetables here in New Hampshire while students are actually here,” says Ogden. He notes with pride that the use of high tunnels for season extension was pioneered at UNH by retired professor Otho Wells.

Several times each week, those vegetables – for now a mix of leafy greens, spinach, and kale plus other cold-tolerant crops like radishes and carrots – are delivered to the course’s primary customer,

the UNH Dairy Bar. The restaurant, operated by UNH's Dining Services in a historic train station (Amtrak's Downeaster train still makes five stops a day), focuses on fresh, local, sustainable dining, making it an ideal outlet for the fruits and vegetables of the students' labors.

"We're getting the freshest product possible," says Jon Plodzick, director of Dining Services, "and we're teaching a whole generation how to harvest and grow greens year-round right here in New Hampshire, which is really exciting."

Closing the loop, food scraps from the Dairy Bar and all UNH dining facilities go to the university's composting operation several miles away on UNH's Kingman Farm. Once the waste becomes rich, nutritive compost, it returns to the high tunnels to help grow the next crop of greens or, as the weather warms and days lengthen, summer crops like tomatoes, squash, cucumbers and peppers.

To Ogden, who works closely with horticultural production coordinator Jake Uretsky '12G, UNH provides the ideal environment for this full circle of sustainability education, food, and practices. "We have this unique combination of an administration that's very much in favor of all this, a dining service that's making buying local, sustainably-raised produce a priority, and this farmland right here on campus," says Ogden.

The new course and the new facilities are the result of a collaborative effort between UNH's College of Life Sciences and Agriculture, the New Hampshire Agriculture Experiment Station, UNH Dining Services, and the Tuttle Foundation.

Watch a video about the collaboration between the Food Production Field Experience course and UNH Dining: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=SjJDzPLAawgcCompost

Read more on the blog of the College of Life Science and Agriculture:

<http://wildchat.tumblr.com/post/36813606345/prolific-produce>

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

Photographs available to download:

<http://www.unh.edu/news/releases/2013/mar/hightunnelstudent.jpg>

Caption: Emily McKeen '14, a student in the Food Production Field Experience course, harvests greens grown by the class for the UNH Dairy Bar restaurant.

Credit: Beth Potier, UNH Media Relations

<http://www.unh.edu/news/releases/2013/mar/hightunnels.jpg>

Caption: Two new high tunnels growing greens for the UNH Dairy Bar are classrooms for the Food Production Field Experience class.

Credit: Beth Potier, UNH Media Relations

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