

CHICO STATE



PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY LARS GUSTAFSON

Chico State University agriculture students Betzabet "Betsy" Valdez and Samuel Shank weed in a greenhouse at the University Farm used by the Organic Vegetable Project.

Hands-on for health

Organic Vegetable Project satisfying CSUC students

By Lars Gustafson
Special to the E-R

CHICO » As the sun bakes through the top of the greenhouse roof, Chico State University agriculture students Betzabet "Betsy" Valdez and Samuel Shank sift their hands through dirt, evicting pesky weeds over small talk on a breezy Northern California afternoon.

The two are volunteers with the Chico State Organic Vegetable Project at the University Farm. The garden sits off Heglan Lane on the southern outskirts of town, roughly 15 minutes away from the heart of campus. While the University Farm encompasses a massive 800 acres total, the Organic Vegetable Project takes up just three acres, and produces everything from juicy tomatoes, to hearty lettuces, to spicy peppers as the seasons change throughout the year.

"It was initiated in 2006 by a really great group of students who wondered why we weren't growing vegetables for the campus," said Lee Altier, the professor who directs the project. "In particular, they promoted the idea of an organic vegetable project."

After two years of development and planning at the University Farm under Altier's guidance, the garden had its first harvest in 2008. It has steadily grown ever since, tripling the project from one acre to three acres.

The project receives a large majority of its funding from the California Agricultural Research Institute of California and U.S. Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Block grants. It also pays day-to-day operational costs with profits from the crops they sell at its



Julianna Trujillo, marketing assistant at the Chico State University Organic Vegetable Project, staffs the project's market on campus one Wednesday this spring.



A variety of lettuces on sale at the Chico State University Organic Vegetable Project market.

weekly market on campus and through monthly subscription boxes available to students and Chico residents.

The project is organized into three main branches: experimental/variety trials, production and marketing.

Experimentation

While the Organic Vegetable Project teaches valuable real-world skills to Chico State agriculture students through organic farm management, its research projects provide valuable information and data to Northern California farmers.

"We got a research grant that is ongoing that funds trials with different varieties of things that we are interested in further development," Altier said. "For example, summer lettuce. We get really high temperatures in the summer here. Lettuce has mostly evolved as a cool season vegetable. But, there are varieties that can grow during summer," Altier said.

The experimental/variety trial branch of the garden provides valuable information in regards to what crops can be successful growing in the en-

vironmental conditions in the surrounding areas in Northern California. The project provides data on what crops grow best on a seasonal basis for local farmers and ranchers in the Chico area.

"Our data is for everybody. When we post it, ranchers and farmers are able to go and see if the crop we grew was good or unsuccessful," Valdez said.

Local farmers, ranchers and community members and children can attend one of the project's field days. These events showcase the 15 types of the three crops being experimentally grown in the variety trials patch. They plan on distributing the data collected through pamphlets available at the field days and on their website, <http://csucag.wix.com/chicostateovp>.

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Farm

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Next, California stepped into a lingering drought.

Yet at each step of the process, the farm served the main purpose for which it was intended, to give valuable work experience to people affiliated with the Jesus Center, jesuscenter.org.

Many people have gotten their hands dirty with internships at the farm.

This week, Michelle Wilson helped subscribers as they arrived to pick up their box of fresh food. She said working at the farm brings her peace, and she'll include the work experience on her resume. She lives at the Sabbath House, for women and children, and recently finished an internship working for the Bloomin' Hope flower cart, which is another work experience program run by the Jesus Center.

At the farm, she is learning about plants and hopes to have a garden of her own in the future.

Food sales create jobs

The new subscription program is called Harvesting Hope. Money raised will directly fund the internships, including the



PHOTOS BY DAN REIDEL — ENTERPRISE-RECORD

The Jesus Center Farm starts a subscription CSA that supplies boxes of produce Saturday in Chico.

work done by Wilson, Mathys explained. Currently there are five people learning to work the land.

Mathys also has been on a learning curve. Over the past few years he has worked hard to improve the growing conditions at the farm. He has been sitting in on classes taught by Lee Altier, a professor of sustainable vegetable crop production at Chico State University.

The Jesus Center's new director Laura Cootsona

worked with Sierra Nevada Brewery for continued help to improve the soil. The brewery also donated giant malt bags used as planting containers. Many, many others have also contributed, including Lundberg Family Farms and Rystrom Farms, to name just a few.

Mathys also attended a seminar in Pacific Grove, and worked with Chico State professor Mark Stemen to learn about running the subscription food program. The system is

known as a CSA, community supported agriculture. Several other farmers offer CSAs locally.

Growing and growing

The farm looks lush right now, with many rows of vegetables in their prime and other strips of bare land ready for transition to a new crop.

After the recent improvements and improvement in weather conditions, Mathys has put more land into production than ever before.



Farm Manager Jim Mathys repacks a box as the Jesus Center Farm starts a subscription CSA that supplies boxes of produce Saturday in Chico.

The farm looks lush right now, with many rows of vegetables in their prime and other strips of bare land ready for transition to a new crop.

In the past there have been experiments that just didn't work out. However, Mathys has kept pushing ahead with support from the Jesus Center and the community, and with new people who need job experience.

Wilson is an intern, but people from the community often call the Jesus Center and ask if they can volunteer.

Saturday a mother and daughter were creating a big pile of weeds just outside the mature rows of veg-

etables.

Hitiata Monnier said she was visiting her mother Tevavai Hermann for a few days. Monnier lives in Tahiti and her mother said she wanted to show her daughter how community members help others.

Monnier said it was nice to fit that experience into her travels.

For information about subscribing to the Jesus Center Farm, email the program at csa@jesuscenter.org.