



Student Gardeners

Don't let Natalie Ronning's long, wavy auburn hair, bright blue eyes or pink fingernail polish fool you. All girly-girlness aside, she's not afraid to get her hands dirty. Spiders, earthworms, rodents – they don't faze her either.

Ronning, a senior from Rapid City majoring in biology and Spanish, serves as the leader for the student-managed Augie Garden, a rectangular cornucopia of green, red, orange and yellow vegetables just behind Augustana's "Green" theme house. Yet as Ronning points out, the Augie Garden is doing far more than just growing produce.

"This garden is really about fulfilling a need," she said. "In the early stages, we started thinking about the needs of the Sioux Falls community. Then we realized we could fulfill that need and get people to connect with nature while producing something local."

Producing, indeed. In its second season, the Augie Garden was a robust place this summer, alive with dill, tomatoes, potatoes, summer squash, spinach, lettuce, strawberries, zucchini, peas, carrots, cucumbers and more. Six students tended to the garden and harvested the produce, which was donated weekly to The Banquet, a non-profit agency

that serves meals and provides food to people in need in Sioux Falls.

The Augie Garden is funded through a grant administered by the Service-Learning Program, an initiative designed to integrate community service and civic engagement with academic study. Augustana faculty members work hand-in-hand with representatives from community agencies to develop service-learning projects that will meet community-identified needs.

"What's so incredible about the Augie Garden is that it was almost entirely student-led. The students came up with the original idea to have a garden, and they took the initiative to talk to the facilities group and find volunteers. It wasn't until much later that they learned about the potential for faculty support," said Reynold Nesiba, associate professor of economics and director of Service-Learning at Augustana. "The Augie Garden really allows us to think about environmental issues and our responsibility to the community."

In July, officials at The Banquet already estimated that the Augie Garden had fed more than 75 people in Sioux Falls.

"Things like cucumbers and summer squash – those are terribly expensive at the grocery store. Our guests don't have the luxury to purchase those things. When they see them here at The Banquet, they're so grateful. It really does mean a lot to them – that someone would donate food items like these," said Tamera Jerke-Liesinger, executive director of The Banquet.

The environmental and social responsibility aspects of the Augie Garden are also studied by students in Civitas, Augustana's honors

program.

"In the Reading Augustana course, we look at the Augie garden as a model of responsible citizenship," said Jeffrey Miller, chair of the Department of English and Journalism and director of Civitas. "You have students practicing the Jeffersonian virtue of working with the land, things we read about in a number of essays in the course. Then, you get to watch their care for that land transform into care for the Sioux Falls community in the produce they donate to the Banquet and the work students in the course do with the Banquet as well."

Jamie Horter, '10, played a key role in starting the garden last year. She hopes the garden project will continue to grow – both in size and by volunteers.

"The garden is really part of a larger vision, which is to someday produce food for our students who eat in the Commons, in addition to helping those in our community," she said.

To help accomplish that goal, the YMCA and Leif Erikson Day Camp recently donated six acres of land near I-229 and Cliff Avenue for the purposes of a larger garden. Horter said the students will likely continue working on the Augie Garden in its current location for at least another season to hone their skills and uncover best practices, such as companion planting.

To Horter, watching the success of the garden has been fulfilling.

"We started with dialogue – a discussion with people about gardening. What we found was a sense of community through Augie."