

This summer, I lived in the Florida Keys and worked at the Grimal Grove-- a rare tropical fruit oasis-- on Big Pine Key. A little background on the Grove: in the 1950's, an engineer and an avid fruit explorer named Adolf Grimal came down to the Florida Keys, with the goal of creating a tropical fruit grove comprised of various rare tropical fruit trees from around the world. The climate was right for most of these tropical species, however the hard limestone bedrock and poor quality soil that makes up the area posed a problem for him. With his engineering background, Grimal was able to construct beds for planting, as well as an irrigation system of multiple rain catchment basins by carving through the limestone bedrock. The trees thrived, and Grimal's Grove defied much of what Florida Keys gardeners thought was possible.

After his death, Grimal's property fell into disrepair. It became overgrown and served as a haven for drug addicts; it was an eyesore (and liability) for the community. In 2014, Patrick Garvey, the founder of the Growing Hope Foundation, which aims to promote community involvement, sustainability, and agricultural and environmental innovation, purchased the Grove. Garvey's hope was to restore the Grove to be used as an educational resource for the whole Florida Keys community. Since the purchase of the grove by Growing Hope, the cleanup and restoration has been an ongoing effort. Throughout the restoration process, Garvey has engaged many volunteers from the surrounding community, as well as volunteer groups from around the country. In addition, the grove has been open to the public every Saturday for tours for about a year now, and has hosted various educational events that have also acted as community builders and fundraisers.

***Tasks and Responsibilities:***

Throughout the summer, I took part in various maintenance and gardening projects in the Grove, worked on organizational tasks for upcoming events at the grove, and played a large part in setting up and managing a storefront (nursery/fruit stand) for the Grimal Grove.

I began my internship two weeks before the biggest event of the year at the grove, the Tropical Fruit Fiesta, which for the second year in a row ended up attracting over 1000 people from up and down the Florida Keys. The planning and preparation had begun before I arrived, so starting on my first day I jumped right in, working alongside volunteers to weed, spread mulch, pick fruit for the event, and ensure that the grove would be ready to host such a large amount of visitors. At the Tropical Fruit Fiesta, I was in charge of filling up the water stations around the Grove, as well as answering questions for visitors and volunteers.

After the Tropical Fruit Fiesta, most of my energy was focused on transforming an overgrown nursery space into a little market for Grimal Grove merchandise, fruit and produce from the Grove and other local growers, and rare tropical fruit trees. We began from the ground up, weeding, dealing with an intense fire-ant issue, laying down gravel, and reorganizing the space. The market opened about a week after we began the project. At that point, I became a store manager, and was in charge of setting up in the morning, helping customers, taking orders, writing out prices for the produce, keeping track of the money-in and money-out, closing the store, and delivering some orders down to Key West. During this time, I also worked in the Grove, about one day a week, harvesting fruit and preparing the vegetable garden for solarization. As I neared the end of the summer, I was responsible for preparing documents to simplify the work at the market for the volunteers who would soon take my place.

In the last couple of weeks of my internship, I helped with the planning of a fundraiser “Farm to Disco,” at a bar down in Key West. I designed a flyer used to publicize the event, met with the owner of the bar to discuss logistics, and ran the fruit stand that we set up at the event.

Additionally, all throughout the summer, I was involved with the Grove’s composting program. Each day, I picked up compost buckets from a Key West establishment and brought them to the Grove to be turned into nourishment for our plants. This program is also something I promoted to customers while working at the market.

***Experience Gained:***

My internship at the Grimal Grove provided me with many invaluable learning experiences. In addition to offering me an education on rare tropical fruit and fruit trees, this summer I had the opportunity to interact with people in a professional way, take part in the development of an important community resource and see it through to the finish, and grow my passion for environmental/food education.

As I understood more about the reality of the Florida Keys as a food desert, I found much more meaning in the work of the Growing Hope Foundation. The biggest lesson that I can take from this internship is about the importance of connections within the community in which one wishes to make meaningful change. Throughout the summer, my boss, Patrick Garvey, emphasized supporting other local producers, establishments, artisans and growers (when possible) as we worked on organizing the projects and events. This focus on inclusivity has allowed the Grimal Grove has to gain a strong following up and down the Keys.

***Future Goals:***

I hope that my experiences from my internship at the Grimal Grove will allow me to find success with other community projects focused on food and agriculture, especially within food

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deserts either back in the Florida Keys or elsewhere. One of my goals is to continue to pursue an education in organic and sustainable agriculture. Whether I end up farming or working with farmers to provide nourishing food to others, I want to participate in work that will allow me to help those around me to better connect with their food and the world around them.