

Internship with the Lick Run Farm and Community Market

Lick Run Farm and Community Market is an urban farm that is focused on revitalizing the Washington Park neighborhood of Roanoke, Virginia, a neighborhood that has been deemed a food desert by the USDA. The farm provides fresh, organic produce to the surrounding community while simultaneously providing a gathering and learning space for community members. The farm, which is run according to permaculture principles, sells its produce to members of the community at an on-site market and local farmers markets, as well as to restaurants focused on sourcing their produce locally.

As an intern at this young and growing farm, I worked side by side with the farm manager and my mentor, Michael Grantz (C'13), participating in every aspect of the farm's operation. These daily farm tasks include garden bed preparation, weeding, mulching, planting, harvesting, composting, preparing value-added goods (canning, drying fresh produce, etc), chicken care, organizing and delivering restaurant orders, and running the farmers market and on-site market stands.

By asking many questions and receiving insightful answers, I acquired many farm-specific skills during my time at Lick Run, all of which I plan to use in the future for both professional and personal sustainable farming endeavors. I learned how to maintain a farm using all-natural, organic methods of pest control, soil maintenance, and weed suppression. For example, I learned how to brew compost tea, a natural soil additive that improves the soil's fertility without compromising its health or negatively impacting the quality of local streams and rivers. I also learned what types of organic

matter are helpful in maintaining bacterially-dominated soils, which for annual plants are preferable to fungally-dominated soils because they leave more nutrients available for uptake by the crops. Additionally, I learned about operating the business side of farming, as I gained marketing and customer relations skills. For instance, because Lick Run follows completely organic practices but is not certified organic, I learned to establish relationships with the customers that enable trust between the farm and our buyers.

Something that I learned about myself during this internship is that I love using my body to accomplish meaningful tasks. There is something so gratifying about the tactile experience of working with the earth and then seeing that I've physically done work that has improved, albeit so slightly, a system's ability to sustain life. Working on a farm is physically exhausting, but every evening when I thought back on all I had accomplished (and that there was physical proof of it printed into the landscape of the farm), it was a wonderful feeling of success.

One high point that sticks out in my mind was going to my first farmers' market for Lick Run after a full, hard, sweaty five days of physical labor out in the garden. After hauling mulch, weeding unending rows of vegetables by hand, and transplanting seedlings (among many other tasks), I was finally able to hand over these vegetables to people who would be lovingly turning them into tasty dishes; the hard work was worth knowing that I was giving these people healthy, delicious, well-cared for food. I love making others happy, and it is great to see that I was not only caring for the earth, but for the people as well.

Another high for me was one day, when Michael and I were out weeding in the garden, a little 7-year-old girl named Jocelyn got home from school and immediately ran across the street to the farm to see what Michael and I were up to. She asked so enthusiastically if she could help, and also begged to eat a tomato off of the vine. For me, this is what it's all about. While honorable, the impact of maintaining one organic urban farm is environmentally minimal. But when you can share a love for the earth with others, that impact expands exponentially, and (I believe) those people's lives are enriched. To see this little girl thrilled to be helping out at an organic farm gave me so much hope and joy.

My time at Lick Run Farm and Community Market has affirmed my passion for the field of sustainable agriculture, as I have loved learning about how the earth functions and ways in which humans can work with it to bring forth a mutually beneficial outcome. However, I have also realized throughout my internship that I don't believe that I want to be a commercial organic farmer. I consistently found myself to be much more interested in learning about the complex relationships that occur within the farm's ecosystem than in the marketing or selling of the farm's produce (although this was a gratifying experience); the unending desire to answer questions about the farm's ecological interactions has confirmed for me that I hope to, and likely will, pursue a career in agro-ecological research. I absolutely love farming, and hope to pursue this passion as I continue to explore and learn the workings of a productive, ecologically-sound farm.