



2022

Growing Veterans

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Recommended Citation

Christian, Quinlan, "Growing Veterans" (2022). *College of the Environment Internship Reports*. 10.
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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Internship Title: Growing Veterans

Student Name: Quinlan Christian

Internship Dates: June 21st- August 11th

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STUDENT SIGNATURE

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Quinlan Christian', is written over the 'STUDENT SIGNATURE' label.

DATE: August 11th, 2022

Section 1: Introduction

My Internship for summer quarter was spent at Growing Veterans in Lynden. I feel a proper introduction of this non-profit is essential before diving into my time spent there. I chose Growing Veterans because I was hoping to find an internship that made me excited and eager to learn. Being a part of the college of the environment at western has been a wonderful experience, but I needed a way to truly connect with the community. I have been interested in light gardening at my house, but was always intimidated by even small scale agriculture. I did know that I enjoy being outdoors, working hard, and digging in the dirt. These were the backbone requirements for working on the farm.

Growing Veterans was founded in 2012 by Chris Brown, a United States Marine Corps Vet. He was trying to find a way to bring veterans out of isolation and into the community to help end suicide. Bringing people onto the farm he used 'dirt therapy' as a way to work through mental health challenges, and as a way to be social in a natural way. GV is not just for veterans, but encourages the larger community to be a part of the whole process at the farm. "Only through the mutual engagement and support between veterans AND civilians, will we see veterans having a complete and holistic transition home into our communities after military service." The 3 pillars GV stands for is growing food, each other, and the community.

The food grown at GV is donated to the local food banks to help people from all backgrounds have access to fresh, organic vegetables. Last year, they donated over 7,000 pounds of organic produce.

Section 2: Daily Tasks/ Responsibilities

Most of my days were spent working closely with Jered Bocek, the farm manager at the Lynden site. I learned more from working alongside him than I ever could have imagined, it might take months for me to process all of it. Most days I would begin by doing some simple, yet important tasks of watering, feeding the chickens, and monitoring the irrigation systems for leaks or holes. I would then dive into getting supplies ready for groups of volunteers, or get ready for a project with Jered. I knew farming was a wide variety of tasks, but it was constant projects, all different from the last.

If there were volunteers ready to help, I would often help appoint and lead them into some projects around the farm. One of the best projects with the more frequent volunteers included trimming and hanging the 4 rows of hops we have at the farm. It is a task that requires a lot of concentration to not cut the 'mother' root bind, or the hop plant would die.

Section 3: Projects and Community

Some of the large projects I was a part of included planting all the crops in our main field, hoop house restoration, beet and carrot field, building hop fields, and installing irrigation systems. The first week I was out at the farm it was already June and none of the crops had been planted into the ground. I quickly realized we were not the only farm struggling with the rainy spring we had. Thankfully the vegetables that were in their start containers had plenty of time to harden off and toughen up in the greenhouse before planting them into the ground.

My first day I began with Jered and a couple of local volunteers to start planting the kale in our main field “field alpha”. After the first day of planting kale, the rest of the week was spent with several volunteers planting cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower and cucumbers. Because the vegetables from this field are all donated, it limits the selection of vegetables grown for easy transportation, and easy preparation. After everything was planted, I helped measure, cut, and hook up the irrigation system above ground to automatically water every morning.

The second large project was transforming the second growing field so we could plant beets and carrots. We first had to get rid of weeds. This process is as hard and time consuming as it sounds. Thankfully, that week we had a group of about 12 that day from Agape to help us out. Agape is a program for youth that strives to connect with local agriculture businesses and help them out in solidarity for migrant farm workers. They were a wonderful group to have and they came back again in late July for our garlic harvest! Once we had most of the weeding under

control, I got to lead the way by fire torching the mounds to remove anything we might have missed.

The most grueling project of the summer was the hoop house. The hoop house is essentially a greenhouse, but is used to grow warm weather vegetables, like hot peppers. When we started, the hoop house was overgrown with weeds and wheat that was the cover crop over the winter. We had to dig deep to remove it all by hand because the door wasn't large enough to bring in any kind of tractor to help. Then came the mounds. We hand raked and wheelbarrowed in load after load of dirt so we could form the mounds. This took a couple of hard days, but the reward was worth it. We then planted serrano and jalapeno peppers for the hot sauce that GV makes called fire in the hole. I again got to be in charge of laying out the irrigation tubes and cutting and laying it down in the pepper fashion for automatic watering.

The last big project I got to work on was planting two more rows of hops in the hop field. GV currently has 4 different 'c' varieties that are sold locally to brew organic beer. This was the first time I got to see what planting hops was like. There is no seed, but a cutting that is planted horizontally into the ground. We spent August 5th measuring where the plants would be, digging holes, and laying agriculture fabric. I even got to use the drilling machine to carve out spaces for the metal hop poles to be inserted into the ground.







There were many frequent volunteers that I got to work with each week that I got to know very well. Also as well as several large community volunteer groups that helped us immensely with some of the less fabulous (but necessary) jobs of weeding. We had Agape service project come 2 afternoons, with about 15 kids and several adults. We also had the local T-Mobile call center come and weed with about 20 people, and Larson Gross Financial brought out about 25 people! I was able to run small groups on the farm with several different projects so Jered could be elsewhere when needed. As one of the last big activities for my time with GV, I got to go to the Seahawks Training Camp in Renton on August 10th with Jered and our Executive Director, Sean Dalgarn. We went as a part of 'Task Force 12' which is the Seahawks hand picked non-profit veteran organizations from the state of Washington. We sold Seahawks yearbooks and all proceeds went to the groups in Task Force 12!

Section 4: Learning Objectives

My learning objectives from my learning agreement fall into two general categories- agriculture and veteran based connections. When talking about agriculture it's important to understand the difference between organic and non organic. At GV, everything is certified organic. The biggest requirements for this certification is based on not using fertilizers or pesticides, and extensive record keeping. For example, I learned from a very large whiteboard in our barn about what had been planted in what location the previous year so we have a reference to not plant the same crop in the same place. This helps to ensure soil health by not continually

depleting the soil of nutrients needed to grow crops. During the growing season, Jered has to keep very detailed records of when seeds were started indoors under grow lights, the dates they were put in the greenhouse, and the dates they were planted. I was unaware of how detailed every move of the crops needed to be in order to be certified organic.

From a sustainability standpoint, GV has it down to a science. The biggest issue farmers face is soil health. You cannot plant the same crops over and over again in the same place without removing all of the soil nutrients that would usually be replaced with fertilizers in conventional farming. This is solved with rotating the crops as well as using a cover crop during the off season that is specific for replacing nutrients. At GV they use a rye and vetch mix. Using cover crops also helps with soil integrity or soil structure that can be damaged by continuous crop harvest. Because of the weather this spring, I have not gotten a chance yet to harvest anything from the main field as they had a late start. I did get to harvest garlic that is also used for the hot sauce which is one of two value added items at the farm. GV gets most of their tools and supplies by donations and materials are used more than once on the farm to limit waste. We do use agriculture fabric which is extremely helpful in managing weeds and increasing soil temperature, and retaining water. This agricultural fabric is used for several years until it is absolutely needed to replace it.

I got a chance to really connect with veterans in our community and get to be part of a larger support network at GV. One thing that I was told helped veterans suffering from PTSD and in need of connection was dirt therapy. Dirt therapy at the farm is essentially the connection and feeling of well being you get when working with plants, moving your body, and talking with the people at the farm. I know 2 veterans specifically that told me their day and their mood was completely shifted in a positive direction after spending just a couple hours helping out at the farm. It was a truly humbling experience to be a part of such an uplifting atmosphere that was inclusive of veterans and non veterans alike. By showing up in a light hearted fashion with a smile can go a long way in helping to create a welcoming environment for veterans. I had several mornings that were spent talking through personal struggles with volunteers that created a friendship and a support network.

Section 5: Reflection and Conclusion

I can simply say this was the best experience I have ever had. Not only did I learn an incredible amount from the staff at Growing Veterans, but I had a great time. I feel like I made wonderful connections and even some friendships that will last. I have a newfound passion and confidence to be an organic farmer, or to work with another non-profit organization. It is a true statement that the best way to learn is by doing. I would recommend their internship, or even their volunteer opportunities to anyone!