



Summer 2023

Common Threads Farm Internship

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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Internship Title: Summer Learning- Common Threads Farm

Student Name: Yareli Barragan

June 26-August 21

Internship Dates: _____

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STUDENT SIGNATURE Yareli Barragan

DATE: August 18, 2023

**Building Sustainability within Communities:
A Common Threads Farm Summer Internship**

By
Yareli Barragan

Internship Log

Submitted to the College of the Environment, Western Washington
University

August 2023

My Learning Agreement and Mission Alignments

As part of my Cumulating Experience I wanted to focus on completing internships as a way to expand my academic learning and explore different career paths. I also wanted to gain experiences to make me a competitive employee and someone that can start a future career that I love. Participating in an internship felt like a great way to tackle both of these objectives.

There were four specific internship goals that I had. Firstly, I was hoping to learn more about nonprofits and how they might align with my interests. I was curious about the regulatory process's nonprofits explore and how effective these models are when addressing their own goals. Can nonprofits effectively address environmental concerns, specifically positive human, and agricultural health relationships? I was also curious in the effectiveness of community engagement in contributing to intergenerational interests and momentum. A year ago, I was set on entering the policy world and helping to enforce changes that way. However, within the past couple years living in Bellingham, I have come to love this community and want to work alongside it. I've been curious about what route I want to take and what kind of change I want to help with. I was hoping that this internship could answer some of these questions.

Another goal of mine was to gain experience in environmental education, especially between different age groups. As someone wanting to also help people, I need to be able to translate my education in a way that everyone can understand and be motivated by.

My third goal was to help people appreciate and recognize nature in their urban spaces. This is something university classes have taught me and I want others to embrace this more. It's easy to overlook the greenery right outside our doors simply because its surrounded by apartments or streets. But these urban spaces can and are little pockets of nature that are integral for environmental stability and human health.

Lastly, I wanted an internship that was outside and related to food. I'm in the process of building my Interdisciplinary Concentration in Food Systems at Fairhaven College and I wanted to expand on this through hands-on learning. Additionally, after spending most days working on laptops or in lecture rooms, I wanted an excuse to be outside more often.

The reason that I chose to intern as a School Summer Garden Assistant at Common Threads Farm is because it aligned with all these goals. Common Threads Farm is a nonprofit with seed to table programs within many Bellingham, Whatcom County, and Ferndale schools along with programs with other community partners. They connect kids to nourishing food within gardens, in the kitchen, and at the table.

In the following pages I'll explain how the various responsibilities I had this summer addressed these different goals.

School Garden Assistant Overview

Common Threads Farm facilitates over 20 school gardens in different Elementary and Middle schools as well as one garden that is paired up with low-income community housing. Over the summer, a team of AmeriCorps students are rotationally assigned to the Garden Crew. This number ranged from 2-10 service members any given day, depending on the number of summer programs running that day. Our Garden Crew team was responsible for maintaining each of these school gardens, harvesting the available produce, and ensuring that Fall crops were planted in time for the start of school once more.

The biggest take-away as part of the Garden Crew was a newfound confidence and curiosity in my garden knowledge and skills. Prior to this internship, gardening was something that I was nervous about. I was confused about planting schedules, sowing incorrectly, watering sufficiently, identifying pests and diseases and didn't even know where to start when it came to trellising and pruning plants and trees. This internship helped me learn about all of these skills. Yet, I learned about resources that I could depend on whenever I was confused about something garden related. Even more importantly though, I learned to be adventurous within the garden and to not be afraid to simply try out new methods. I

A particular plant that completely stumped me was tomatoes. It seemed that everyone had different methods to do just about every aspect of tomato care. Our Garden Manager let our team explore multiple pruning and trellising styles without worry. I was able to construct tomato trellises that teammates suggested, seen online, or create completely new ones with random supplies we had available. This hands-on approach to learning helped me gain more intuition when it came to understanding plants' needs. It's made gardening less intimidating and infinitely more fun.

Since I had an intimate relationship with multiple gardening methods from helping to maintain so many school gardens, I was able to translate and explore these methods with students and the community thereby getting them more interested, engaged, and confident in being part of their school garden. Communicating with students or community members daily helped me work on my environmental education skills because I was constantly translating what I had learned to different people. I also learned a valuable lesson about environmental education. The more real-world and hands-on experience you have with a subject, the higher likelihood that you can get the community to care about this same subject.

It was also incredible being able to weave in knowledge I had gained within classes such as the concept of invasive species or urban nature. During the Environmental Speakers Series, we learned about how detrimental invasive species could be for local ecosystems. I was able to relate this information with common garden weeds such as Bindweed or Horsetail.



Additional Responsibilities

One of my main responsibilities in the beginning of the summer was to help facilitate a summer program that came out of a new partnership between Common Threads Farm and Vamos Outdoors. For three weeks, a team member and I helped lead garden lessons for different age groups at the Birchwood Elementary School Garden. The first week was spent with pre-kindergarten. The second week we taught 6-8th graders. During our third and last week, we were in the garden with 5-6th graders.

While I didn't originally know that I would help lead a summer program, I was ecstatic for this assignment. Vamos Outdoors is a nonprofit that I have been interested in ever since moving to Bellingham. I admire their mission to connect Latine, Migrant, Bilingual, and Newcomer youth in the community to outdoor activities. This was a great opportunity to get connected, involved, and to learn more about how one of their summer programs functions. Moreover, I have wanted to get involved within the Birchwood neighborhood for a while especially since it is a food desert. This partnership was a great way to incorporate both interests.

However, I was extremely nervous to be teaching young students. In my past internships and work experience, I have had limited interactions with children, and it was something that didn't feel the most comfortable. I didn't know how to communicate environmental knowledge to younger people while getting them excited, engaged, and safe. I also didn't know how to lead over a dozen students while actively working on conflict resolution and problem-solving skills with youth.

The three weeks spent working with Vamos Outdoors youth was incredibly difficult. I had to learn how to control my voice in a way that everyone would hear me throughout the garden, respect my instructions, while encouraging curiosity and interest. Then I learned how to scale garden knowledge down and up according to the different age groups. Youth



have such variability in what motivates them and what consequences steer them towards better behavior. Learning how to engage different age groups was the hardest yet most rewarding aspect. For example, the 6-8th graders were in their pre-teen ages and were therefore less receptive to some of the activities that they perceived as childish. They weren't as interested in garden stewardship either. But they loved talking to their friends and having class competitions. My teammate and I worked on incorporating more game-like competition within most of our activities and rewarded good behavior with students choosing their own teams. By the end of our week with this age group, the students enjoyed most of the activities and felt more comfortable communicating their preferences in a respectful manner.

This experience cemented an understanding of how powerful youth-based environmental education was. Students entered the garden with awe, wonder, and a bit of skepticism. Many students didn't recognize the plants within the space or didn't know how to care for them. By the end of the week, they felt welcome in the garden because they could confidently identify their green friends, they knew how to care for them, how to harvest delicious treats, and they knew how to help the garden continue to thrive.

I also realized how important gardens were for community building and identity affirmations. One student shared how his family used to grow numerous flowers back in their home-country. He had been sad to leave because he had been unable to watch some of the seeds he had sown back home grow up. When we sowed flower seeds in pots and let the kids take them home, this particular student was so eager to watch new green friends grow up and it connected him to his home country.

When my teammate and I would steward the garden after hours, we saw many families enter the garden. I saw how powerful programs like this were during this time. For example, there was a grandpa and father who came to harvest grapes with his two children. The father had attended Birchwood Elementary as a child when there had been no garden.



So, his children showed him the garden and identified the plants for him. One child wanted their grandpa to try a Nasturtium yet when the grandpa saw only one flower on the plant, he said "Don't take the last flower." This was incredible to hear because it pertains to the Honorary Harvest guidelines, all students hear about the garden. These children had shared this knowledge to their family and their family had learned from them.

This experience showed me how integral community programming is for intergenerational knowledge building, helping people identify nourishing food sources, and building safe bonding spaces for a community. I also expanded my people skills and now I've learned that I would love to work with youth in the future to some capacity.

Constructing New Gardens

Common Threads Farm is in the process of helping a couple of schools construct new school gardens. One of these is Parkview Elementary School. This school has had cooking lessons facilitated by Common Threads Farm Food Educators in the past but has not had a garden. And the district has recently helped the community in constructing a garden in front of the school. Something that students were particularly ecstatic about.

As part of the summer garden crew, we helped students, parents, and teachers in constructing this garden. The first day we helped weed, construct the beds, and then organize them into their new positions. It was exciting seeing the vision of this community. We learned about where certain perennials might be and what annuals would be grown in the beds. The second day a huge number of volunteers showed up and we helped to shovel and wheelbarrow compost into the raised beds. Seeing this space slowly transform from a barren rocky landscape into a space with numerous raised beds ready for sowing was so exciting. I heard students talking about what they wanted to sow in a couple of weeks when school started up in the Fall again.

Something I'm excited to see is how this garden transforms and looks like in a couple of years. This school community was extremely excited to have this space and I am looking forward to seeing how this energy and vision strengthen this place.

This experience in particular reaffirmed how important community engagement is when it comes to environmental stewardship. I saw parents teaching their kids how to remove weeds, explaining what birds and beneficials they wanted to attract, and the food that they could grow. And I heard stories of how kids were excited to steward this place so that future students could partake in this.



Looking into the Future

Working with Common Threads Farm this summer has been incredibly influential. While I'm still unsure what specific route I want to take after I finish university, this internship has given me clarity into what level of community engagement, depth of impact, work culture, and other factors that I will be looking into when job searching after graduation.

Firstly, working in community gardens, educating youth, and interacting with community partners has been one of my favorite things to do as an intern. Connecting with people who live here and to help them expand their garden knowledge, providing them with nourishing meals, and connecting them to an additional food source has been incredibly rewarding. Even more so when considering that most of these garden spaces were in the middle of the city amidst concrete buildings and pavement. It reaffirmed how we can build more nature into our spaces. I want to have a career where I can have regular interactions with my community and see the 1-on-1 impact that my work can have. Previously, I was hoping to work in some political capacity to make larger, over-arching impacts. While I still think that this is a great way to make more extensive community impacts, I crave the relationship building that can happen when you're interacting with people and nature on a daily basis.

Secondly, while I don't know what sector I want to work in, I've come to admire nonprofits even more. Many of the partners that I got to work with at Common Thread Farm were also other nonprofits and it was energizing seeing so many people placing their soul into bettering a concern close to their hearts. Working within nonprofits would be a way to bring attention to aspects of our culture that are not well-supported by the free markets or by the federal government. While I am not opposed to working within a business or in the federal sector, in fact, I'm even more excited to dip my toes into these sectors so that I can make a better comparison, I have realized that nonprofit work is something I am also interested in.

Lastly, this was one of my first times working in a work environment that was so open and collaborative. For example, a teammate and I had almost full flexibility when it came to altering our lesson plans or incorporating cooking lessons- something that was not originally weaved into the summer program we ran. While on garden teams, I was also able to gain experience with specific garden skills that interested me. I felt part of a team where my voice was always heard and supported. This is something vital I hope I'll continue seeing within future employers.

My summer spent at Common Threads Farm was invaluable and I am so happy that I chose to intern here. The biggest take-away though, was realizing that I am hoping to expand on the skills and experiences that I have started learning here. I have chosen to sign on to a full year-long term at Common Threads Farm. I still have a couple years left of university and I know that continuing to work here will get me closer to a career that I enjoy.