Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I’m Judy Simpson. Summer vacation isn’t over yet but for some students at the University of Vermont, summer vacation never started. They’ve been spending their summer at UVM’s student-run educational farm, called Common Ground. The students are not only getting their hands dirty, they’re also getting hands-on experience with things like crop production, soil conservation, and farm management. Across the Fence’s Rebecca Gollin tells us more:

The sign at this farm says ‘common ground’, but the farmers here are anything but common.

Sara Ziegler, common ground farm if there’s harvesting, we’ll do that stuff kind of first thing, or transplanting’s before it gets really sunny, and then if it is a nice day like today, probably some weeding, and just odds and ends of things we have to do.

Students run the show, and the tractors - at the common ground farm.

Ziegler - common ground is UVM's student run farm, it’s right here at the horticultural research center. It’s three acres all behind us, about, approximately, and it’s partly a UVM club for students, anybody can be in the club, and then during the summer, right now, there’s maybe five are six people that kind of take over the farm and run it throughout the season and all the vegetables are produced for a CSA.

Yolanda Chen, advisor, common ground farm it's their farm, and they feel like it's their farm Yolanda Chen is a professor in UVM’s plant and soil science department, and is the faculty advisor for Common Ground. In the organic farming classes that she teaches, the students come up with a plan for the farm. Implementing that plan is up to them.

Chen the classes are there to help basically guide them, but the students do all the work themselves. I only give them a couple of pointers, and so they take ideas and run with them

Students don’t have to be in Chen’s class to work on the farm, but for those who are, the farm also serves as a classroom

Sam Rothberg, common ground farm we usually go in the fields and look at pests and diseases and talk things that the actual farm needs to get done, like right now we’re talking @ getting a composting system put in...

Chen we don't want to prescribe just to spray pesticides every day and then you'll be set, instead we want them to learn more about biology, like what’s in the fields, what kind of insects, what kind of diseases and so they're learning basically ecological literacy at the same time that their farming.
They spend a lot of time looking at things so they can actually start diagnosing things when plants look too stressed or under attack.

Nats Ziegler - I'll usually get here at 7:00 take a look around, turn on the water if it's a day like today, I'd probably turn it on first thing and water, cause since the hoop house doesn't obviously get any rain, stuff dries out in there, and then I'll just take a look around, kind of write stuff down, take some notes on like what we should be doing, what things look bad, problems, stuff like that.

Sara Ziegler is an ecological agriculture major at UVM, and is the farm manager this year. Ziegler says that the experience she's getting on the farm complements her classroom learning. Ziegler you hear a lot of like the theoretical, you get the actual science, ecology, and there's also focus on like the production. But this is where you take all that, that you learned from books and you really just like, it's applied. Here you're actually like doing it and not just talking about it, and it's a completely different experience. It's great

Many students who are in the common ground club volunteer on the farm over the summer. Chen says the experience can offer students a taste for what agriculture is all about. Chen we're not necessarily training them to be farmers completely, we know it's just one season, and certainly there's a lot to learn outside of this campus

For Ziegler and Rothberg, who both plan to be involved in agriculture after they graduate, working at common ground is a chance for them to get their hands dirty. Rothberg it's a pretty great job to have. It's a lot of work and we do work a lot of hours a week, but I can't picture myself doing this amount of work anywhere else,

Ziegler - it's probably like the best experience you could have if you're interested in Ag. at UVM, Studying agriculture at UVM by growing food for the UVM community. In Burlington, I'm rg with atf.

Thanks Rebecca joining me now have are two key members of this summer's common ground farm Sarah Ziegler who you just saw in the video is entering her senior year at UVM she is an ecological agriculture major. And Cayla Tepper is also entering her senior year Kayla is in environmental studies major welcome to both of you. Sarah why did you want to spend your summer growing vegetables on a farm?

Sarah.: I wanted to learn a lot more about farming. I worked on river berry farm for the past two summers and got interested in agriculture more and I think the best way of learning anything is just doing it. I think it's a great experience to not have somebody telling you exactly what to do but to just go figure out yourself. That was my motivation.

Judy.: So what if you learn so far?

Sarah.: A lot. So many different things. We learned a lot about not only just crop production but a lot about time management. No one's telling us how to schedule we make it of ourselves. Time management labor management a lot of teamwork stuff. We've to work with all of our customers. Dining services at UVM and as a whole bunch of things we cannot really learn in the classroom.

Judy.: We saw in the video you planting and working in the field but there are a lot more that goes on and just that.

Sarah.: Definitely one are not in the field there is a lot of stuff to do preparing for our CSA pickups. We have to obviously when we're taking everything out of the field prepare for people to pick it up
Judy.: Kayla you majoring in environmental studies. Is there a connection between your major and your work at common ground?

Cayla.: Yes definitely. Growing food is one of the most direct experiences you can have with nature. You can go for a walk in the woods and ID plants take it all and aesthetically but when you're growing it and eating food it's like you're right there so and definitely learn a lot and it's definitely propelled by environmental studies.

Judy.: What has your experience on the farm been like this summer?

Cayla.: It's been great. I had only volunteered on farms here and there in the past and this is my first time been on a farm for the full season so I definitely learn a lot and its great idea to be outside every day and ride my bike to and from work.

Judy.: Talk about some of the challenges they face because we've had a really really wet spring and how did that impact your work?

Sarah.: It wasn't too bad for us we have really sandy soil so we didn't have any flooding issues but it did take as a longtime after the snow was around to get into the fields and some of our first plantings were struggling. We decided to go for it and try it but there was a late frost and we have some problems getting started but after we got out there nothing's been too bad except for the last week when it was really hot and dry our irrigation broke so things were hurting. So far not any huge problems. Us problems and a lot of weeds but nothing too huge.

Judy.: Talk a little bit about the pasts because that was also mentioned in the video as far as you just don't go out and spray.

Cayla.: No. We've seen a lot of squash and cucumber beetles and normally what we'll do is go down the row is grab them and pull them off the plants but they haven't been too bad. We did have some group maggot so we bought some beneficial nematodes spread them on the plants and they borrowed down to get rid of the magnets and it helped.

Judy.: So used some bugs to get rid of other bugs.

Cayla.: Yes and integrated pest management.

Judy.: Let’s talk a little bit about starting out where did you get your seeds from?
Sarah.: We bought most of our seeds from high mowing seeds and some of the stuff we couldn't get from there we went to Johnny's or Fedco but mostly high mowing.

Judy.: Can you tell me a little bit about high mowing and why you chose them?

Sarah.: We mostly chose them because they're right from Vermont and so a lot of their varieties are heirloom varieties that we're interested in and their suited to this area so we try to look for seed companies that were from at least the northeast like Johnny’s is from Maine I think and Fedco. At least there suited to this climate so trying to buy seeds from somewhere else is not the same as Vermont.

Judy.: Exactly. Maybe Cayla you can tell me about working with the CSA and explain to our viewers what a CSA is?

Cayla.: Sure CSA stands for community supported agriculture it's basically a way to have a more direct relationship with a farmer between farmer and consumer. We have a model where people pay us at the beginning of the season and that helps us with their startup costs buying seeds or whenever and throughout the summer and fall they come through every week pick up their vegetables and we send out an e-mail with a recipe or something. It's been fun we get to know the customers better than we would if you are just selling at a farmers market because we know they’re going to come each week.

Judy.: Basically what people get is a box of whenever it is and season.

Cayla.: Yes it's also a little bit of an educational thing because they will come through and be like do you have peppers right now? Now you have to wait a couple weeks because they're not in season. Probably not ready for another week or so at this point.

Judy.: See you really have to be dealing with the public?

Cayla.: Yeah and it's cool because most of our members are either faculty staff alumni or fellow students at UVM so it brings the community together a little bit.

Judy.: Are you surprised at how popular that movement is? It seems like everybody now wants to the local lee more than ever.

Sarah.: I'm not that surprised.

Cayla.: Especially in Burlington it's a receptive environment to that but I definitely can see a growing in popularity in other parts too.

Judy.: Is there something new for the farmer as far as having to be a public relations person too?
Sarah.: I think it's definitely a little bit more difficult. It's easy enough to take your stuff to the farmers market like one we deliver stuff to dining services we just drop it off. We really have to be able to deal with customers and like you're saying explain things so them when they're not accustomed to those kinds of things. Sosa little more difficult and it's a lot of effort on our part to set up the CSA. We basically take an entire day the harvest and set that up but I think its good we get to have that face to face value.

Judy.: And not only pick the vegetables and then wash them and make sure they look good. Tell me a little bit more about what happens but some of the other food you grow that does not go to the CSA.

Sarah.: We also like I said mentioned dining services we will deliver to them on campus. Mostly every week depending on what they want to use that we have ready and we're also working with campus kitchens project that is another UVM Group. And we're also working with campus kitchens project which is another UVM Group that will take are vegetables each week and they will make a meal to serve it at the food shelf. There's also an intern working outside of the Jeffords building at UVM who is in charge of applaud their own garden and she's growing all the food there for the campus kitchens project.

Judy.: Also your food stands on campus?

Sarah.: Yes. During the school year we will also set up of farmers market where we can have roundtables and sell our vegetables so. Anyone walking around campus who are students and faculty can buy are vegetable.

Judy.: That's a lot of work.

Sarah.: It probably will be.

Judy.: Some people might be wondering where the name common ground came from where did it come from?

Sarah.: It was originally a restaurant in Brattleboro is what I've been told.

Judy.: You guys are both going to be seniors can you reflect a little bit about your experiences working on this farm and where that's going to take you do you think?

Sarah .: At this Point I'm not really sure I'd definitely learn a lot that I could learn in URLs and definitely not in the classes at UVM. But I'm not really sure what I want to do when I graduate. I think the all the skills that I learned we'll be useful in anything even if it's not directly agriculture ran away.
Judy.: How about you Cayla?

Cayla.: I had only had an interest in farming and food for the past couple years without a real direct intense experience like this and I love it so I'm definitely going to keep pursuing it. I'm really interested in urban Food Systems so hopefully all taken to learn here and specially with the CSA model interacting with the consumer I'd like to take that further and maybe look at issues of food access in urban areas.

Judy.: You guys were in charge of running the farm itself so what was it like trying to coordinate other students handing assignments and figuring out who is going to do what?

Cayla.: We each have fallen into our own niche at the farm. Sarah really likes the tomatoes and I really like working in the greenhouse in starting seeds. It worked naturally. We have volunteers that come through every once in a while and a couple that come regularly once a twice a week. They help us with weeding and more of the stuff that doesn't require a lot of training so it's nice.

Judy.: Almost out of time maybe you can let people know how they can get more information about common ground?

Sarah.: If people want to know they can go on to our web site the UVM web site which is www.UVM.edu/~CGSREF. Or they can e-mail us at CGSREF at UVM.edu.

Judy.: I want to thank you both for joining me and good luck next year. That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we'll see you again next time on across the fence.

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