

ISU Student Organic Farm

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Introduction

The ISU Student Organic Farm (SOF) is a student-operated club with a mission to create a functional organic farm that meets production, educational, and marketing goals. Specifically, farm objectives are: 1) to practice and research organic production methods, 2) to educate community members and encourage active community participation, and 3) to support a local food system with a diversity of market outlets, including charitable donation.

Farm Background

The SOF relocated its production site to the Horticulture Station in 2006. Farm relocation has allowed the SOF to take advantage of key infrastructure that exists at the research station. This final relocation has the potential to foster new synergies with faculty and researchers to benefit the SOF and organic and sustainable agricultural research.

Production

Production goals were focused on a select number of crops based on student interest and suitability for charitable donations. The farm focused on the production of seven crops with multiple varieties on a half-acre of land. Production totals for each crop included:

- 700 ears of sweet corn
- 300 lb of potatoes
- 70 lb of carrots
- 120 lb of beets
- 200 lb of tomatoes
- 50 lb of eggplant
- 100 lb of summer squash

All perennial crops, including peach trees, strawberries, asparagus, and rhubarb, were planted in the summer of 2005 and were still in the establishment phase. Raspberry canes were transplanted in the fall of 2006 from the former SOF location.

Research

Several club members developed and conducted a field research experiment funded by the ISU Professional Advancement Grant Program. This study tested the effect of a trap crop (*C. maxima*) on the distribution and abundance of cucurbit insect pests on two summer squash cultivars (*C. pepo*). Preliminary results indicate pest pressure above economic thresholds on both the trap and the two main crops. However, differences in cucumber beetle abundance were observed between the two summer squash cultivars early in the growing season. This project may impact planting dates, cultivar selection, and alternative pest management strategies for cucurbit production.

Education and Outreach

Community outreach activities included the establishment of a community garden, on-farm tours, and an informal partnership with a local youth shelter. The farm supported 10 community garden plots, where students independently managed production units (400 sq ft) for personal use. Farm tours were provided to the Boone County Master Gardeners Association and to students of SUSAG 509 Agroecosystem Analysis course.

Throughout the season, farm organizers actively engaged with a group of young adults, 10 to 17 years old, from Youth and Shelter Services (YSS) located in Ames. YSS youth volunteered biweekly, participating in 11 farm visits to the SOF and one educational session at the Rosedale shelter. During each farm visit, an average of 12 youth and 2 to 3 staffers worked

for approximately two hours. Youth were involved in multiple aspects of farm production, including planting vegetables, farm maintenance and light construction, staking plots, trellising tomatoes, weeding, digging potatoes, harvesting, and watering plants. Some farm harvest days were followed with food preparation activities in the YSS kitchen, i.e., making French fries from harvested potatoes.

Farm members also pursued connections with local area schools. Members attended a Gilbert Elementary PTA meeting with the goal of increasing awareness of the farm as an educational and recreational opportunity for interested classes and clubs.

The farm was represented at the 2006 National Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education

Conference in Okonomowoc, WI. A seminar presentation was given in collaboration with student-led farms within the North Central Region. This seminar served as a networking opportunity for farm leaders.

Farm Outlets

The primary outlets for farm produce were the Food at First free meal program, located at the First United Methodist Church in Ames, and Youth and Shelter Services. A Pick-Your-Own sweet corn weekend was also advertised to the university community at peak harvest time. In the future, potential outlets include specialty produce for Wheatsfield Grocery in Ames. Farm members are also exploring marketing opportunities to increase produce access for ISU faculty, staff, and students.