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Maharishi greenhouses teach organic farming

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By Brandy Welvaert

When Eric Carter dives into his studies at Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa, he's not necessarily buried in books. In fact, the 27-year-old student is just as likely to be found in a greenhouse, tying organic eggplants to a trellis or washing a day's harvest of vine-ripened tomatoes.

As part of his coursework in the sustainable living program at the university — the first of its kind in the nation — Carter spent six weeks over the summer working at the Maharishi University Organic Farm. The university founded the farm in 2003 after the decision was made to serve only organic foods on campus, says Steve McLaskey, director. It was the first university in the U.S. to serve all organic foods, as well, and Yale University followed suit a year later. "We called them up and said, 'Hey! We did it first!'" McLaskey jokes.

The 10-acre farm and its three greenhouses — two on campus and one off — provide the biology professor a place to teach his students about sustainable organic agriculture outside the traditional classroom. On the farm, teaching and learning happen naturally, as when McLaskey and Carter converse about the symbiotic relationship between bacteria and beans while harvesting them in the greenhouse. "Just getting the hands-on experience is good, and the hands-on experience as well as the intellectual experience is great," Carter says. "This is my first dive into organics, and I'm working on it all."

The internship provides students the opportunity to participate in farm work, from the planting of seeds to marketing. More importantly, it gives them the opportunity to see the fruits of that labor, both with the plants and with the people. "I think it's just great to be able to work from the level of the production and then to be a student and see (the food) served in the dining hall and just see how people's diets are affected," Carter says. "Their vitality and liveliness are actually a really cool part of it."

At the peak of a particularly good season, the farm's small staff of 10 workers can harvest enough food to supply the dining halls with about 80 percent of what they need for the organic, all-vegetarian meals provided to students, McLaskey says. In winter the greenhouses remain in production, though things slow down dramatically after the cold crops — chard, kale, broccoli, bok choy, Chinese cabbage, spinach and lettuces — are through. The farm also provides fruits and vegetables to the on-campus grocery store, which inventories the produce each evening and faxes a list to McLaskey, who then uses the information to coordinate the next morning's harvest.

From time to time, the farm sells excess to outside businesses. "Last summer we sold some of our cherry tomatoes to Whole Foods in Chicago, and they told us to pick them less ripe. They were not holding up on their shelves too long. So we had to pick them a little sooner," says McLaskey. "It just emphasized to me how mixed-up our food service is that we go to a high-class grocery store and we can't get a ripe tomato."

Usually the workers do harvest foods when they're most ripe — and most flavorful. "I have a theory, and my theory is that the fruit has the most nutrition when it has the most flavor. I think that those two things go together. I know it's true for apples and tomatoes, but I think it's also true with other things," McLaskey says. In the big picture, he believes that the unmatched taste of organic, properly ripened fruits and vegetables will lead people back to healthier food ways. "It's going to happen because people are going to want it because it tastes good," he says. (He credits this idea to one of his favorite authors, the agronomist and organics proponent Eliot Coleman.)

"That's my experience here," he says. "When people taste our cherry tomatoes ripe from the vine, they say, 'Wow! You just can't get something like that at the store.'"

Formerly the professor was on the school's biology department staff and taught classes on biology and sustainable agriculture. As a hobby, he had a large garden on campus, and he sold some of the produce to his peers. As one of only two faculty members with interest or skill in growing things, he was a natural to head up the farm. "These days I'm not spending much time in my office," he says. "I fill my days pretty full." He spends five or six hours each day, five or six days a week, in the fields and greenhouses, oversees student interns and otherwise manages the farm.

Though the work is hard and the days are long, McLaskey says he wouldn't have it any other way. "It's the best job I've ever had. I usually get to the end of the day and wish there were more hours."

Visitors are welcome at the Maharishi University of Management and its farm. Tours of the school, which include the greenhouses, are offered monthly. To find out more, visit www.mum.edu and click on "[Visitors Weekends](#)."

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Submitted
Biology professor Steve McLaskey plants snap beans inside a greenhouse at Maharishi University of Management. Behind him are yard-long beans growing on a trellis. (Photo courtesy of Maharishi University Organic Farm)



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