K’s Community Gardens
By Claire Eder

Kalamazoo College’s campus is bookended by two community gardens. Walk down Academy Street, starting from the top of the hill at the intersection with Monroe and finishing at the railroad tracks at the bottom, and you will pass both of them, although you wouldn’t know it. Both are tucked away, impossible to find unless you have precise directions. Both are attracting more and more attention as the campus ramps up its efforts at sustainability. And both are growing more dreams than their small plots can hold.

At the top of the hill, in the spacious backyard of an empty, college-owned house, is the plot that hosts the gardening class. As you walk up the driveway and around the tool shed, the noise of the campus fades and the neighboring houses and trees create a bubble of near silence. The garden itself is a flat, seventeen by twenty-eight foot plot partially covered by plastic sheets. Part of the rectangular patch of ground is still grassy, waiting to be cleared for planting. Besides the grass, there’s nothing green in sight at the moment.

To get this week’s session started, instructor Seema Jolly tells the class to check up on the progress of the seeds they planted last week. Students fold back the clear plastic sheets and peer down at the soil. At first glance, there’s not much to see, with the exception of one flourishing row of radish seedlings. Looking closer, the students spot a few tiny sprouts that will grow into beets, turnips, and lettuce. “A lot of gardening is just observation,” Jolly reminds the class. “When you just spend a little time and look at where you planted, you’ll start to see things sprout up.”

This garden is still in its infancy. It was created at the start of spring quarter to host a new gardening physical education course. The idea for a campus community garden came from Farms to K, but a lot of other players are involved, including the PE department, Facilities Management, Sodexo, and the Mary Jane Underwood Stryker Institute for Service-Learning. Amelia Katanski and Alison Geist, faculty members involved with Farms to K, pitched the gardening class idea to the PE department and contacted Jolly, a K alum with experience working and teaching in community gardens, to see if she wanted to teach.

Most of the students are seniors and will have graduated before these veggies are ready to come out of the ground, but Jolly says the class isn’t frustrated. “I’ve told [the students] that the PE gardening class is kind of a beginning step to creating a community effort on campus, and so I think framing it in that way makes it a little bit easier for the students to get on board with this, because it’s going to continue after they’re gone. They really are setting the foundation for a much bigger project than just their ten weeks here.”

How big of a project, exactly? And how to create a unified community effort on campus? As word about the new garden started to get around, there was a sudden surge of interest from faculty, staff, and students. Although this widespread enthusiasm looks promising for the garden’s future, there’s a downside: “Everybody’s got their own vision of what they think this garden to be, what it could turn into, and who it would be serving,” Jolly explains. Will the garden continue to be used for a class, or will it evolve into a community garden? Will the food go to the gardening students, to the school cafeteria, or to a food bank? Could the garden eventually generate revenue and become completely self-sustaining? Nothing has been decided.

If this wasn’t complicated enough already, there’s another garden just down the street, with its own tangled roots and its own dreams competing like plants for the sun. Tacked onto the side of the mammoth Markin Racquet Center, the long and narrow seventeen by forty-three foot...
plot seems smaller than it actually is. The sharp slope of the ground adds to the sensation of compression. While the gardening class’s infant garden is mostly dirt with a few razor-straight rows of seedlings, this garden is thriving, if a bit chaotic-looking. Kale plants line Markin’s brick wall with their raggedy-edged leaves and strawberries carpet the foreground. The plot is partially surrounded by a rickety-looking picket fence, and next to the entrance a hand-painted sign reads “D.I.R.T. Organic Garden.”

D.I.R.T., which stands for Digging In Renewable Turf, is the campus’s student gardening organization. D.I.R.T. has been around since 2004, and Ben Cooper and Tammy Pheuphong have been leaders since 2007. “We don’t really have a lot of formal meetings,” Pheuphong says, and indeed, a list of suggestions left for her by one of the former leaders includes the tip, “Have a party rather than a meeting whenever possible.”

The D.I.R.T. gardeners are laid back but hard working. Saturday mornings, Cooper and Pheuphong rally as many students as they can and head to the garden, rain or shine, to do tough physical labor. For the two seniors, it’s the combination of devotion and flexibility that has allowed them to hone their gardening skills and double D.I.R.T. membership during their three years as leaders: they are always experimenting with new methods and refining their techniques, whether it’s changing the organization’s promotional tactics or comparing different ways of preventing soil erosion. This spring they’re trying square foot planting: dividing a section of the plot into squares, each square being devoted to a specific plant, in order to see whether the plants will thrive so close to one another. Pheuphong explains that it takes about a year to figure out whether a project like this is going to work, which means that the garden is in a constant state of revision. Sometimes a project results in failure. “Gardening’s not instant gratification,” says Pheuphong.

With all the experimentation going on, it’s hard to measure the long-term impact of the D.I.R.T. garden. Although it is relatively established compared to the gardening class’s garden, it raises many of the same questions. The D.I.R.T. organization still hasn’t quite figured out what to do with the produce from the garden. Currently, the food is up for grabs: anyone on campus can share in the harvest. But a lot of the crops go to waste over the summer when the students are gone. Some ideas include donating the food to a food bank, or selling it at the local farmer’s market.

Plans for the garden’s future are also in a sketchy phase. Much of the decision-making will be left to Trace Redmond, a first-year student who will be taking over D.I.R.T. leadership after Cooper and Pheuphong graduate in June. In Redmond’s ideal vision, the garden would function more like a city community garden in which various groups would each have a plot. For starters, he wants to get the Living-Learning houses involved by giving each house its own plot, but that would mean expanding the garden or starting smaller gardens next to the houses themselves.

For now, though, there are only the two gardens, one at each end of the campus, bracketing something larger than life between their modest plots. There is a charge behind each, a community that wants to see its ideals of sustainability realized in the form of an abundance of fruits and vegetables. If this kind of cornucopia is the goal, then the campus’s gardens are coming up short. The gardening class’s garden hasn’t gotten much out of the ground yet, and the D.I.R.T. garden hasn’t decided what to do with the food it’s producing. So how do we assess their impact? Maybe it’s the human growth, not the vegetable. The networks that are created, the knowledge that is passed along, the passions that are born.

For example, Ben Cooper will participate in a summer internship at Sleeping Bear Dunes,
where he will learn about ecosystems and monitor the Piping Plover, an endangered species of bird. Trace Redmond wants to travel to Oregon to study the vascular system of redwood trees. As a K student, Seema Jolly got involved in D.I.R.T., which led her to an internship with Fair Food Matters, and from there to a position as a Garden Manager with a Utah non-profit called The Youth Garden Project. Now she’s back at K, showing students how to pull up weeds and thin radishes.

At the D.I.R.T. workday on Saturday, Ben Cooper hooks up the sprinkler while Trace Redmond hammers away at the leaning picket fence. For now, the other volunteers are trying to stay out of the sprinkler’s range, but they will soon break up the moist soil where the square foot plots have been marked with a grid of twine, ready for planting. Maybe the project will be a bust. But for the moment, the gardeners are soaking up the spring sunshine and pressing their fingers into the dirt to make trenches for the seeds. As Tina, a D.I.R.T. participant, puts it, “To have a project, to have a space where you feel like you’ve carved out a little area of something good and clean, I think it can just be really satisfying.”