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Organic farm becomes a reality at Oxford

By Kim Urquhart | Emory Report | Jan. 17, 2014



Award-winning organic farmer Daniel Parson has plans for big crop yields and even bigger learning experiences for Oxford students. Emory Photo/Video.

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The seed of an idea for an organic farm at Oxford College is beginning to take root. This spring, Oxford welcomes its first organic farmer who will help transform a grassy field on Emory Street into a thriving, colorful patchwork of crops and a living laboratory for students.

"For several years we had had a vision of developing an organic farm, but the enabling event was the gift of land," explains Dean Stephen Bowen. The 11-plus acres at 406 Emory St. was donated to the college in 2011 by Trulock Dickson '72Ox-'74C. It's the former home of Marshall and Fran Elizer, who joined Oxford in the 1940s.

The farm will be used "to model the use of sustainable farming techniques to support our local community and to provide education and training opportunities for our students on the issues of sustainability," Bowen explains.

"The final piece was to find the right person to lead the farm," says Bowen. "We wanted someone who was not only an accomplished organic farmer, but also an experienced farm educator."

A nationwide search turned up Daniel Parson, named to Mother Nature Network's 40 Farmers Under 40 list and recognized with the Georgia Organics Land Steward of the Year Award. Parson's 15 years of organic farming experience includes managing the Clemson University organic farm, Gaia Gardens in Decatur, Ga. and most recently his own venture, Parson Produce, near Clinton, S.C.

Since joining Oxford in early January, Parson has dug in. His initial focus will be to ready the land for farming: planting cover crops to enrich the soil; improving the drainage and installing irrigation; building a barn to store tools and equipment.

The first crops — sweet potatoes, squash, peppers — will be planted later this spring, to be grown over the summer and harvested in the fall. The farm will produce a diversity of vegetables, "choreographed by a rotation plan," Parson explains, as well as orchard fruit, cut flowers and shitake mushrooms grown on hardwood logs.

Longer-term plans call for the construction of hoop houses, which allow cold-hardy crops to grow all winter, to extend the growing season so it matches the flow of the school year.

Living laboratory for students

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"My focus right now is to get the farm up and running, to have something for the students to work with," Parson explains.

And students will be involved with the farm from the very beginning, he says. "We want to involve students as much as possible so they can learn to grow their own food, connect with the source of their food. There's going to be a lot of hands-on learning."

Lessons from the farm will be incorporated into the classroom curriculum. Faculty from across Oxford will be invited to use the farm as a resource in their teaching, Parson says. "Farmers today have to be growers, mechanics, business people, salesmen and marketers. So almost any field of study could reflect on the farm."

A grand opening is slated for fall 2014. "Fall is one of the great seasons in the Southeast. And every year is going to be a big fall, because right when the students arrive on campus is a great time to be planting a big fall crop," he says.

The farm is expected to reap many benefits for Oxford.

The Oxford organic farm is expected to break even financially in its first few years. Parson envisions selling produce through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program and at farmers markets.

But because "the organic farm movement is synonymous with the local farm movement," Parson says, "the first stop will be the Oxford community." Food grown on the farm will be served in the Oxford dining hall.

In addition to "having that good food on campus," Parson adds, farm work "is a great stress reliever for folks who might be overwhelmed with studies to come out and spend some good productive time, with a tangible result, on the farm."

Later this spring, Parson and his family will move into the former Elizer home. Parson's wife, Molly McGehee '07PhD, is currently a professor at Presbyterian College in South Carolina. She will join Oxford's Humanities Division in fall 2014.

Parson looks forward to educating and engaging with the community.

"I want students, faculty and staff to come out to the farm as much as they want. But they will learn very quickly that if they are out at the farm, they will be put to work," he adds with a laugh.

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