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Sustainability isn't merely academic

Parking lots become orchards and lawns become desert gardens at Pitzer, which takes 'green' to a new level.

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“Sustainability” is the buzzword on college campuses across the country, where LEED-certified buildings are the new standard. Pitzer College in Claremont, however, takes sustainability to a new level. Tour Pitzer’s campus, and along with its LEED dormitories, you’ll see the “trayless” dining hall where students scrape leftovers into compost receptacles. The school runs a “green bike” program that refurbishes and redistributes abandoned bicycles each school year.

And Pitzer has a gorgeous, sustainable landscape.

Joe Clements, manager of Pitzer’s arboretum and grounds, came to the college in 2000 from the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, where he was in charge of the renowned desert garden. At Pitzer, Clements says, “we grow plants for our semi-arid climate. We look for plants from Mediterranean regions, native California plants and succulent plants.”

Clements’ work continues a tradition that dates to the 1970s, when professor John Rodman founded the college’s environmental studies program.

Rodman was a political science professor who, in that time of environmental awareness, rallied faculty, staff and students around the issue of environmental responsibility. They began a movement to preserve native plants and create gardens across the 31-acre campus. Today the John R. Rodman Arboretum comprises 16 themed gardens.

As Clements walks about the campus, he and the students greet one another by name. That might be unusual on other campuses, but at Pitzer, students are actively involved in campus landscape projects.

A few years ago, some students decided that an unused lawn by a lecture hall was a waste of resources. One night, they surreptitiously tore out grass and planted fruit trees.



“We live in a dry climate,” says Jane Philips, a senior who was one of the tree-planters. “We shouldn’t be watering grass we don’t use. We wanted the space to be used as an outdoor classroom instead of a wasted space.”

The students’ efforts caught the eye of the administration and of environmental studies professor Paul Faulstich, a cultural anthropologist who studies the relationship between environmental degradation and human behavior.

“The students were interested in bringing thoughtful environmental ideas and practices to our living and learning,” Faulstich says. “Pitzer is a place that wants to foster that kind of thinking and achieve that vision.”

With Faulstich’s support, the students embarked on an extensive effort to transform the football-field-size lawn into a series of gardens. One semester, independent study students created a concept and plant list. The next semester, Faulstich taught a class in which students, including Philips, developed the design. The students shepherded the plans, refined by a landscape architect, through the city of Claremont’s permit process.

Once the permits were in hand, 40 students worked with Clements and a local contractor, Casey Jones, to transform the lawn. They removed grass and helped grade the site.

As they dug, they unearthed countless rocks and boulders. Claremont sits in an alluvial fan, so the soil is filled with rounded rocks that Clements fondly refers to as “Claremont potatoes.” They make for frustrating and difficult digging but beautiful dry streambeds, which is exactly how the students used them. They also positioned boulders as benches for their outdoor classroom.

The new gardens represent six native habitats: riparian, chaparral, grasslands, oak woodland, coastal sage scrub and desert.

The desert garden is a nice transition to surrounding areas where Clements has planted enormous, sculptural succulents. He favors aloes, agaves, euphorbias and many rare plants with bright colors, complex shapes and textures. His gardens look like living art installations.

Some of Pitzer’s oldest gardens are near the Grove House, a student-run coffeehouse in a classic California bungalow moved to the campus about 20 years ago. On one side, a citrus grove pays homage to the bungalow’s prior existence.

Behind the bungalow, the Farm Project Garden and Orchard sits in what was, until 1994, a parking lot. Students, faculty and staff used jackhammers, pickaxes and shovels to transform the asphalt into an organic garden. To an outsider, it looks random and informal. But a student manager determines what needs to be done and doles out chores to student volunteers.

The centerpiece of the garden is a chicken house, where a small flock produces eggs.

Eggs and vegetables are available on the honor system, though people are asked to harvest in moderation.

The fresh food is most appreciated by students not on a college meal plan, says Dean Pospisil, who is on leave from his studies but still comes to campus to turn mountains of compost from garden trimmings and dining hall scraps.

Turning compost is hard work, and it smells funky, but “is a lot of fun,” Pospisil says. “With six people working a couple hours a week, we can easily process the food waste of thousands of people, something like 17 tons of food each year. In terms of carbon sequestration, it isn’t that impressive, but we think it is the right way to do things. Otherwise, that food waste would have gone to the dump and become methane that goes into the atmosphere.”

Encouraging this kind of sustainable thinking is exactly what Pitzer strives toward, according to President Laura Trombley.

“Pitzer has always been known for cutting-edge approach and engagement,” she says.

Sustainable living is also a commitment Trombley takes personally.

When she moved into the president’s house in 2002, Trombley says, “It was a 1911 Cape Cod with a faux English rose garden. I thought, ‘Why on earth do we have this?’ Four years ago, my husband tore out the gardens and put in desert plantings. Our water consumption dropped 60% the first year and there is no maintenance.”

Now that is sustainable.

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