

Lessons Learned and Mouths Fed



The South Plains Food Bank accommodates a quaint five-and-a-half-acre farm, where three-and-a-half-acres grow fresh nutritious vegetables. The farm consists of raised crop beds, high tunnels to allow for earlier and later crop growth, and land used for crop rows.

Ashley Basinger is the horticulturist for the South Plains Food Bank, and has a large impact on the farm. Growing up as a fifth-generation cotton farmer, Basinger became interested in horticulture and pursued her passion through an education at Texas Tech University. Basinger has received a Bachelor of Science in Horticulture, a Master of Science in Horticulture, with an emphasis in wine grapes viticulture and a doctorate in agronomy.

All of those degrees are not just diplomas hanging on the wall, as Basinger uses the education daily, while working on the farm.

"I deal with all the technical information to improve the plant and soil health," Basinger said.

She formulates plans for when to spray and plant the crops, determines what cover crops to use during the off seasons, and speculates an irrigation schedule. Basinger is also responsible for the selection of plant varieties planted each year and the task of handling insect problems.

Constituting it as certified sustainable, the farm uses very little chemical on their crops. Thirty-one types of vegetables thrive on the small farm, ranging from beets and peppers to tomatoes and zucchini. To spice things up, there are also six types of herbs grown, such as parsley and cilantro.

Since Basinger began working for the South Plains Food Bank in 2010, she has made numerous beneficial changes to the farm. Basinger focuses on the sustainability of the soil. She has provided a plan for local compost and

the use of cover crops during the off seasons to maintain healthy soils.

The expenses of maintaining a sustainable farm are significantly higher as compared to non sustainable farms, which is a substantial barrier for the non-profit to overcome. Running a sustainable farm not only challenges Basinger, but it allows her to teach others how to have a green thumb.

"The farm is a really good educational resource," Basinger said. "The number one thing we try to teach volunteers is the basics of farming."

The bulk of the volunteer staff at the South Plains Food Bank is not comprised of master gardeners, but instead at-risk teenagers. The Growing Recruits for Urban Businesses (GRUB) is a program that takes at-risk teens and allows them to work at the farm. Teens learn valuable skills, such as how to grow food.

Basinger commits herself to the youth involvement on the farm and enjoys watching the students learn valuable skills.

"The farm really came to be to provide fresh vegetables for the food bank," Basinger said, "but it has evolved to really be more involved with youth, particularly youth that could become involved in that hunger cycle. It became more of a prevention farm."

The GRUB students are not the only ones that benefit from the food bank farm. Many Texas Tech sororities and fraternities volunteer their time at the farm for community service.

Amanda Baack, junior in animal science, has volunteered with her sorority.

"I really like to volunteer at the food bank because I get to see the planting process and see the outcome the next time I'm out at the farm," Baack said. "It's rewarding to see your hard work pay off to help people in the community."

The work that GRUB students and Texas Tech students provide helps to address the growing number of hungry people in the local community. As the executive director of the South Plains Food Bank, David Weaver sees a direct correlation with the economy and the number of food boxes distributed.

"The number of food box recipients is definitely due to the economy," Weaver said. "Reality is, food is more expensive than it was."

According to calculations done by Feeding America, the food bank distributed 7,148,458 pounds of food during 2011.

Weaver and Basinger both know the impact the farm makes in the Lubbock community.

Basingers' enthusiasm and knowledge in agriculture provides her with exceptional visions for the food bank farm, but she really wants to see the farm used for educational purposes for the Lubbock community.

"I want to increase the education," Basinger said with a smile. "I want to have full day workshops to teach people how to grow food in their own backyard."



Growing things is just part of what Basinger enjoys; making a difference in the lives of others is her greatest joy.



Attention to soil quality has made a difference in yields.

"My ultimate goal is that it will be an epicenter for farm education," Basinger said, calling this goal her "utopia."

Basinger is rewarded daily with her job.

"With the farm and the kids, you get to see the fruits of your labor," Basinger said. "There's an immediate satisfaction seeing the work you've done."

She feels that the food bank is an exceptional non-profit organization due to its community involvement.

"The food bank involves the elderly, youth, young kids, and addresses the issues of hunger," Basinger said. "I think everybody cares about the hungry."

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