Gibbs House Property Methods

During the past several semesters, my project has been specifically about the rainwater-harvesting cistern tower. At the beginning of the summer, the tower needed to be washed with vinegar and baking soda in order to prepare it for the catchment of water. Since that time, the tank has been operating efficiently without any problems. Aside from the initial cleaning, no further improvements for the cistern have been conducted. Therefore, the majority of my summer has consisted of working in the food forest, assisting the team, and operating the produce stand.

Josh Shultz, our Permaculture Program Coordinator, has been teaching me the ways of using a scythe in the food forest in order to conduct a method called “chop-and-drop.” This method has been useful in order to provide a substantial amount of nitrogen to the soil, which in turn provides nutrients to the trees that have been planted for the food forest. We cut down the clover and then place it in rings around the trees, therefore, as the clover decays it nourishes the soil directly around the root structure. In addition, the clover decreases the amount of unwanted weeds that only negatively affect the surrounding plants.

In addition to the chop-and-drop method, several other improvements were made to the food forest. I assisted Josh in providing manure and a carbon source to several plants in the food forest in order to accelerate their growth and provide enrichment to the soil. The hops, grapes, and the trees, which make up the living fence, all received wood chips on top of the manure. Whereas, the blueberry and cranberry bushes received pine needles because those plants benefit greatly from a more acidic carbon source.
Another method that was used in the food forest was the Three Sisters Garden. This is a method that incorporates corn, squash, and beans. The squash helps to cover the ground to eliminate the amount of weeds that could potentially arise. The corn grows tall to provide stalks that the beans can lean onto for support. Therefore, all three plants work together in order to grow with as little maintenance as possible aside from a single weeding process that was then mulched with straw to suppress weeds and the squash can then stretch over the straw. There are three plots in the food forest that were prepped into alternating rows for corn and mounds for squash. We planted the corn and squash first because the corn has to be a bit taller than the beans. Unfortunately, at this point in time the corn and squash are still growing and we will not be able to evaluate how each variety and placement fared the best until the end of the fall season.

Our team has realized that because we desire to be an organic, pesticide-free farm, we must also realize the importance of keeping unwanted creatures outside the fence. Our biggest challenge this summer, was controlling the groundhogs, Japanese beetles, and chipmunks. We have traps for the chipmunks and beetles that we used last year, so we made sure set them in the best locations and check on them periodically to keep them clean. Those traps have worked quite well during the summer. However, the groundhogs were a little more challenging.

We suffered a loss of broccoli, cauliflower, and others from the Brassica family because the groundhogs would come into the garden and chomp off the small stalks before they had the opportunity to grow any larger. These ground hogs also found their homes in our hugelklutur beds because of the voids between the wood and soil. Therefore, we invested in a low electric fence in which we baited with tinfoil and peanut butter. This way, the creatures would lick or sniff the fence, receive a shock, and decide that it was not worth the effort to come back. This was a perfect solution because we want to avoid harming the animals at all cost. However, we did have to set up traps for the groundhogs that were already living in the garden. Over all, our solutions have made a significant improvement in the amount of pests. It was also an important concern to address because this will be a reoccurring issue if we do not manage it properly.
The produce stand has been quite successful during these past few months. This is one outlet in which we have an avenue for the vegetables and other produce to be used to their best potential. In addition, it is important to have connections with the public because word-of-mouth is one of the best methods for people to learn about how the Gibbs House strives to educate others about organic methods. Each summer, we should be able to build a larger network in order to reach our community as a whole.