NEWS-TIMES

Counter-culture meets Permaculture on B Street

Greg Shipp brought a unique resume to the sustainable garden project in Forest Grove

BY ANDREW MINER

The Forest Grove News-Times, Apr 4, 2007, Updated Apr 4, 2007

Pacific University art professor Terry O'Day brought Greg Shipp (above) on board at the B Street Permaculture Garden to teach organic gardening and sustainable housing design.

CHASE ALLGOOD / NEWS-TIMES

What could a guy who once headed a prison garden club in Kansas have in common with a liberal arts professor in Forest Grove?

Pausing next to a patch of potatoes at the B Street Permaculture Garden, Greg Shipp ticks off his similarities with Pacific University art professor Terry O'Day.

"When I first met her, I saw that she and I have the same kind of energy: hard working, just keep on going," he said. "Then I found out we had the same birthday. Then I found out we were born in Chicago, then I called my mom ..."

Shipp pauses as he begins to laugh. "We were born in the same hospital!"

Though not born in the same year (he's 11 years older), the pair of Aries are deeply rooted in their commitment to teach and model the elements of sustainability to anyone willing to pick up a hoe and learn.

Members of the B Street Club, a small group of dedicated Pacific students, come out one or two mornings each week to work on the land, located along B Street just south of the Gales Creek bridge.

The three-acre garden began to take shape three summers ago through Pacific University as an outdoor permaculture laboratory for students.

"It is right in town and involves the community," O'Day explained. "The types of people that are drawn to it are really broad. And it's a complex coordination of community partners," said O'Day.

Financial support came in from education groups, the county wastewater agency and a variety of private donors for the project's start-up. Now, the plot of land, nestled along Gales Creek, is beginning to be self-sufficient.

Shipp came to Oregon a couple years ago when he found out his ex-girlfriend was living in Forest Grove.

Although the romance was not rekindled — "I remembered why we broke up in the first place," he said chuckling — Shipp was able to pursue another of his life's loves: growing things.

Chicken tractors and artichokes

Eventually his path crossed O'Day's and she showed him her intentions to clean up the B Street farm and make it a prosperous garden.

O'Day brought him on board to teach organic gardening practices, sustainable housing design, and some other tricks-of-the-trade he's picked up during his 30 years of working with the soil.

Last year he took over day-to-day farm operations and moved into the property's small house as an AmeriCorps volunteer.

The former logger tended a stand of new trees along Gales Creek and helped with other tree-plantings in the area. He worked with the Pacific students who came to the garden, led Sunday morning tours of the

operation and taught gardening techniques to families from Adelante Mujeres, a Forest Grove based non-profit that provides parenting classes and career training for local Latina women and their families.

Shipp showed the gardeners the benefits of using regional crops better suited for the shorter Pacific Northwest season than Mexican corn, a crop that takes eight months to harvest.

He also introduced them to the “chicken tractor,” a one-wheeled wire coop without a floor, fitting half a dozen chickens that are rolled along a plot every other day so the birds can eat weeds, seeds and bugs while fertilizing the area below them.

In time, the land, which just five years ago had been overgrazed and invaded by thistle and blackberries began to support, vegetables, fruits and cedar trees with the help of compost, organic fertilizer and botanical wisdom.

Artichokes, for example, usually don’t produce the first year. So Shipp placed the plants in a greenhouse under a heating lamp, and then took them outside for a number of weeks before taking them back in. As a result, they think an entire season has passed.

“So you can get artichokes in the first year by tricking them a little bit,” he said.

He grew 1,900 cantaloupe last summer on less than one-eighth of an acre, and made $3,000 selling them at the Forest Grove Farmers Market.

Shipp said he learned earth-friendly farming techniques during the 1970s while studying under Alan Chadwick, a famous proponent of organic gardening, at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

“There were more non-students than students who followed him; he was so far ahead of his time,” Shipp said.

Eventually Shipp, Chadwick and others moved onto a 6,000-acre ranch in Northern California to form a commune. Subsequently, Shipp moved to Montana and, while working as a contract logger, was busted when his green thumb ended up on the wrong end of some marijuana plants.

He served four years at a federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. While there, he said, he taught a masters gardening class and ran the prison garden.

Since then, he says he’s stuck to legitimate crops and largely stayed out of trouble, though his record finally caught up to him in Forest Grove and cost him his AmeriCorps post and his free rent on B Street.

Out on his own

When AmeriCorps officials realized Shipp had been convicted of a drug crime, he was asked to sign a stack of paperwork and consent forms that revoked his privileges to teach high school students.

“For AmeriCorps, I went from a great asset to a great liability,” he said.

In the end, Shipp decided that it wasn’t worth the hassle, so he gave up his status (and small stipend) as an AmeriCorps volunteer and, last month, moved off the B Street farm.

He still has a contract with Pacific University to maintain the trees he planted along Gales Creek and, two weeks ago, he attended a tree-growing seminar in Clackamas County.

He hopes to start a business related to habitat restoration.

“It’s good for the community and it’s good for the environment,” said Shipp, who has once again landed free lodging, this time at the home of a friend who is trading him a bedroom for landscaping duties.

He said he has no hard feelings and, in fact, continues to volunteer at B Street every Sunday.

“I can’t just walk away from it,” he said.

Pacific officials say they are glad Shipp is staying connected to the parcel of land he helped reclaim.

“He threw his heart and soul into that project,” said John Hayes, dean of the College of Arts & Sciences. “We are extremely grateful for what Greg did for the garden and what he did for the students.”

Back on B Street, Shipp points out two bee hives and an eddy in Gales Creek that makes a good swimming hole in summer. Being on the property, he says, sometimes makes him feel like he has returned to that deeply embedded commune life of his past, living in a natural habitat.

“It was a back-to-the-land movement,” Shipp said, looking at old photos of himself in a whiskery beard during his days on the northern California ranch.

“It’s kind of weird because all these years later, people are saying, ‘Hey, that was a pretty good idea.’”

Copyright 2009 Pamplin Media Group, 6605 S.E. Lake Road, Portland, OR 97222 • 503-226-6397