

Choosing What To Grow On Terp Farm

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At the top of the list of frequently asked questions by people hoping to learn more about Terp Farm is about how decisions are made about what crops to grow. It's a question that is usually preceded by asking what the farm currently grows - which in the present season consists of baby-leaf salad mix, basil, napa cabbage, daikon and storage radishes, sweet potatoes, watermelon, roma tomatoes, hot peppers, pumpkins, and several varieties of winter squash. At first, crop selection for the farm was an exercise in trial and error. The farm was initially modeled after a small-scale direct-market vegetable farm - one that might market its products through a subscription-based distribution, or retail markets like a roadside stand. However, one thing that has always been clearly defined is that the singular marketing outlet for Terp Farm products is the Dining Services program at UMD's College Park campus, which has caused the production model to change a bit over the years.



Over nearly ten years of operation, Terp Farm has tried growing dozens of different types of crops and likely hundreds of cultivated varieties. Crop rotation plans in the past relied on frequent successive plantings in order to provide consistent availability of products over the course of the season. But with a footprint of less than five acres, there isn't enough space to scale up so many successive plantings to ensure that the yield at each harvest could be impactful in proportion to the tremendous volume required by the dining halls. One of the primary goals of the program is to show a connection between food and farming, and in order to do that the products of the farm must also be visible and recognizable in the dining halls. Producing limited quantities of a lot of different crops just wasn't having the impact that it needed to have and so different considerations had to be made when deciding what to grow.

The Dining Services culinary team and the farm management team have a close relationship that relies on close communication and feedback. Production cost is a big concern for both operations, with the culinary team having to take into account the handling and processing needs of the whole produce they receive just as the farm has to consider the labor cost of planting, crop maintenance, and harvesting. This is why something like garlic doesn't make the cut, because the reality is that peeling garlic cloves is too costly for the culinary team to undertake. Similar considerations were made when selecting winter squash varieties. In order to be selected, varieties must be able to be handled in one of two ways - either halved and roasted such as with acorn squash or delicata; or in the case of the butternut squash variety, to have a much larger proportion of easily processable neck flesh over the more difficult to process seed cavity.

In terms of on-farm production it makes the most sense to grow crops that are easily scaled up and are not too challenging to grow or have high labor requirements. There is only one full-time person dedicated to the production and most of the other labor is performed by seasonal student employees, so emphasis is placed on crops that can be managed largely with the use of tractors and generally culminate in a single or few harvests. The exception of course is the roma tomatoes which require a lot of maintenance and harvesting labor and are a big focus of the work of seasonal student workers. Large one-off harvests like that of sweet potatoes or winter squash are usually performed by larger volunteer groups that are excited to get involved at the start of the academic year, which is perfectly timed for fall harvests.