

Just beyond the sounds of pickleball courts and soccer games sits a small farm, a micro farm, run entirely by UT students. Every Sunday morning, a handful of volunteers participate in workdays to plant seeds, water crops, rake mulch and even rescue frogs.

The UT Microfarm first started in 2012 on a small one fifth-acre plot across I-35 from the university's campus. Six years after its first seeds were planted, the farm joined forces with the UT Concho Community Garden and moved to a one-acre plot behind the university's intramural fields on Guadalupe Street 51<sup>st</sup> Street.

According to project team leader Hillary Xu and team leader in training Andrew Eastland, the farm has a variety of purposes; to educate, offer community enrichment and provide produce for the UT Outpost.

"[The Microfarm] shows them what urban farming can be, shows them what sustainable practices look like, gives them hands on experience with gardening," Eastland said. "It gives us a place to spread the news about how to live sustainably, how to understand where your produce is coming from."

Each Sunday, the Microfarm hosts workdays for student volunteers to get their hands dirty and learn about sustainability. The farm's field managers, adorned with red bandanas around their necks, teach volunteers how to use tools, pull weeds and pick peppers off vines and sustainable practices like composting. Every vegetable harvested on workdays is donated to the UT Outpost to provide students with free organic produce. During breaks, the field managers teach a "word of the day" to educate volunteers on specific sustainability topics, like greenwashing. Volunteers don't leave empty handed, though, as they are able to take home whatever is harvested that day

The farm is managed by UT's Office of Sustainability's Center for Environmental Engagement. Xu and Eastland said the office empowers the students to make important decisions about the farm.

"The stuff you see at the work day is the result of a lot of planning and execution that we're just kind of left to our own devices for," Eastland said.

Although workdays seem straightforward, planning them is no easy task. Xu said the team has to consider climate patterns, irrigation, soil health and scheduling. For example, the farm's cover crop project has been in progress for a year. The plants have to be planted between October and November because it is the best climate for seed growth.

"This fall, we've had a particularly dry fall, so we did it at a dry and hot fall," Xu said. "So we've had to delay putting in our cover crop, because last year we put in our cover crop on October 20. This year we put in our cover crop on November 4."

Eastland and Xu both got their start with the farm as volunteers during their respective freshman years. Xu, a double major in biology and environmental science said she continued to come back to the farm because of the community she found there.

"I really believe in the mission of the farm and the impact it can have on students, despite it not being a very large space," Xu said.

Eastland, however, did not return after their first workday. As a genetics major researching the DNA of grass, Eastland felt they lacked a good background for hands-on field work. Xu convinced them to come back to the farm. After a particularly difficult summer break, Eastland said working at the farm offered an escape.

"Having the farm to just go over to twice a week and do this kind of menial task for a while helped me feel much better about my life at the end of that summer," Eastland said. "There's something about just literally touching grass that can clear your head."

Volunteers Iris Bradbury and Zoe Zayco said working on the farm was a fun way to interact with the environment and learn more about sustainability.

"I get really confused with recycling and composting, because it can be really confusing," Zayco said about the workday's word of the day, composting. "So, it was nice to get some clarification."

Bradbury said working on the farm holds a lot of educational value because it helps students appreciate the work their peers are doing, especially the community they foster.

"I like how they bring so many different organizations together," Bradbury said. "You get to meet people from other orgs, and you're all here, just to go farm."