welcome to the garden gate a podcast
0:03
where we talk to professionals across
0:05
many fields who work directly and
0:07
indirectly with plants and our natural
0:10
world we are students at american
0:12
university in washington d.c and interns
0:14
at smithsonian gardens we have created
0:16
this project with the hopes of inspiring
0:18
a new generation to make sustainable and
0:20
meaningful change in our world i'm kira
0:22
berba
0:23
and i am caroline mcdonald and this week
0:26
we're talking to sydney felder about
0:27
plants in college life sydney is a
0:29
student at american university who's
0:31
working to create change with the
0:32
school's community garden
0:34
hi sydney hi it's good to see you guys
0:37
good to see you too
0:39
i
0:40
think
0:40
that you are our youngest guest which is
0:43
super exciting that is exciting oh my
0:46
gosh
0:47
i think you'll be able to relate to
0:50
our listeners a lot and they'll be able
0:52
to relate to you
0:53
excellent
0:55
you're definitely the closest that we
0:57
have to
0:59
what we're doing since we go to the same
1:01
school and we have a lot of the same
1:03
goals in life so it would be interesting
1:05
to talk to you most definitely to start
1:08
do you want to tell
1:10
us a little bit about
1:13
you
1:14
and your journey to a
1:16
sure yeah so
1:18
i'm from portland oregon
1:20
and somehow i wound up in dc
1:24
it was a bit of a funny process but i'm
1:26
so happy to be here now um and while i
1:29
was in portland growing up i attended a
1:32
school through elementary and middle
1:34
school that was
1:36
environmentally based it was just a
1:37
public school but somehow i wound up at
1:40
a really environmentally focused
1:42
school and at that school they really
1:44
promoted
1:45
lots of ideas about sustainability
1:46
global stewardship and
1:49
basically service towards your community
1:51
in an ecologically focused way and this
1:55
definitely planted a seed in me of
1:58
wanting to carry those values forward
1:59
and throughout my life
2:01
i also come from a background of
2:04
farmers i'm a fourth generation prune
2:06
farmer
2:07
my mom's side of the family lives in
northern california and they've had the
prune farm for a very long time so as a
kid we would do family road trips down
and
it was so fun to be able to visit the
farm see all the operations play on the
tractors and all that stuff so this kind
of thing has been kind of brewing in me
for a while and
throughout quarantine i was reflecting
back on this and thinking about ways i
might be able to invest that energy
towards you know something
really good
and gardening came to the forefront of
my mind
and
living in dc for a few years i was aware
that throughout rock creek park there
were a few places where
people could rent out plots of land and
you know be able to cultivate that
so that was something that i really was
interested in exploring but after doing
a little bit of research
you have to pay for those plots and
there's a pretty long wait list which is
understandable
i also didn't feel like i was really
equipped to start a brand new garden on
my own
that my focus is environmental sustainability and global health so yeah that has definitely been an influence i'm very interested in agriculture policy and kind of observing those systems um through having that experience it's definitely formed a really uh unique viewpoint to observe those issues through definitely i'm really curious did you always like feel really drawn to exploring those topics in college or was your upbringing something you were later able to appreciate after coming to au and starting your studies so having that experience of being able to drive down from portland to california and you know spending a few days on the farm was really formative i wasn't really specifically drawn towards the field exactly as i grew up i got involved in the political sphere in high school and that was really something that i was super fascinated with which is one of the reasons i was drawn to dc and you know that was something that i was really exploring for a while until i wound up in the environmental sustainability global health gateway class and you know this kind of spark went off that okay obviously of course policy politics and agriculture sustainability and global health are so tightly tied together um almost inescapably so that was definitely kind of an aha moment and something that i'm i'm really excited to continue exploring thank you for sharing that's really how people grow up can so strongly influence what they're interested in um either like they stay interested in what they were surrounded by or they veer away from that um so it's really cool to hear your story absolutely i think like in my um middle school elementary school specifically i had that experience one of the things that we did which i am so grateful for looking back on but dreaded when i was in it is we would do weekly field studies um and so we would take our big old class and hop on a public bus and just go off to some some spot and it's great in oregon there's so many like parks and
natural spaces throughout and surrounding the city so it was very easy to access places um and we would do things like invasive species clean up we would test and study water and you know ph of water animals within the water and vertebrae in the water um and we would do a lot of you know sit and observation work and um as a kid i was like always wanting to jump and run around so i like hated sitting and um just kind of watching things but as i get older it's something that i really love to implement in um my even day-to-day and it's something that i've carried into um the gardening team that i'm leading right now um every time we meet together we allocate five to ten minutes for silent sit spot time where you can sit and you know check out what changed since the last time you were in the garden and you know engage your senses touch the plants around you and you know feel the soil under your hands um and i think it's a it's an incredible aspect of gardening and being connected to the land in general that's so nicely said thank you why was joining or becoming part of an environmentally focused career important to you um i think one of the things that really drew me towards it was of course my background my experience growing up but also it is you know something that i feel needs a lot of attention um needs a lot of care and it's it can be really difficult to continue to study um this topic without being drawn to take action and right now throughout this pandemic it's been very difficult to find ways in which we can take constructive action the experience in the garden has been extremely constructive and wonderful for forming this passion of mine and it's a small scale thing that i can use as a model to see you know other places where i can take this action that's great because i think that like the tricky thing when figuring out what you want to study or like what you
want your career in is like okay well
what am i passionate about i feel like a
lot of people start there
but like i think the question people
have is how do i take this further like
how do i take action how do i make a
bigger difference yeah like moving
forward um
i think obviously having hobbies in
college is so important into figuring
out who you are what you're doing with
leading by learning is like creating
something that's more than that and can
help foster people's
interests and careers or even if it
doesn't become their career just like
something that they do on the side that
is more than just gardening which i
think is really amazing
absolutely i think that um
it's difficult i think in a university
setting to be really stuck on this idea
of
if i'm doing this thing um this is like
this hobby or the side project or
whatever this is something that i need
to take to the next level and like
really explode with but i think it's
really important to just you know branch
out as much as you can and try to you
know get involved with stuff that you
perfect fit um

there are so many different avenues to gardening one of which is you know we have an amazing student body that is so smart an important part of gardening is this research this understanding of seeds and the stories that are behind them and the uses that they've had throughout history and the important significant agrarian history and knowledge that the indigenous people whose land that we're occupying have had and you know have had for centuries before us and i think this is a principle of learning by leading using your personal skills and your personal strengths to uplift a group and uplift your communities is so essential definitely and i feel like it's just like a special knack that a lot of au students have is to take something that they love as a hobby and turn it into something more it's just so funny i feel like it it happens with everyone i know smart kids definitely and then like you start to get other people involved and then it becomes this huge like community taking collective action towards what they care about and i just love that at some point it's been really fantastic and significant to be bringing together these people my heart lights up every time i get a dm on our instagram page and it you know just makes me so fulfilled and joyful that this thing that i'm i'm doing and this thing that my community is doing is gaining attention and gaining traction um and bringing new folks in and showing them all the beds and you know describing what kind of plants we have in each bed and oh this is a weed but this weed is edible you know what do we define as truly being a weed and can we um shift our focus away from um this traditional like colonial style of gardening of where production is maximized and weeds are don't have a place um and yeah it's just been a fantastic exploration of that and it's so funny to be working in a group again after all this isolation this year of course we're very um safe we keep the groups very small we wear masks and we're outside in distance so it's a very safe process but um to be addressing a group after you know
only being on zoom for the past year is so surreal and it's just it's a fantastic experience to go out there and you know be able to have a conversation with one person then go over to have a conversation with another person and not have to go into a breakout room or anything um it's a real treat right like i feel like gardening is like the perfect cove activity too like you guys can all be doing your own thing but you're within the garden with each other chatting and stuff like that like it feels like you can be together um safely and especially in this year we're so connected to our technology and being indoors like what a beautiful thing to get outside and connect with real humans in real life and like hear their voice not through audio on technology and also be able to like touch the earth like so grounding so how would you say that your experience um with the community garden at american university with the group of students you're working with how has this experienced influenced where you see yourself going in the next couple years has it changed your trajectory at all yeah i mean um i think my trajectory has been changed every three months or so since uh i started uh at university um but this has definitely been a big shift towards something i see myself pursuing for quite a while i recently started working with a usda grant organization called farmers and ranchers stress assistance network which works to provide training for extensions from land-grant universities to help farmers with the stress that they're facing due to climate change coveted stress governmental stress suicide rates and and farming and ranching is at its highest with very low resources to assist that um so i'm thrilled to be involved with this project i think the work that they are doing is so significant and so important and it's tying together a few things that i'm very passionate about how does the
experience of having an internship
help you reach your career goals i just started it like a week and a half ago so i don't know if i'll be able to answer that question but i would love to and that's so exciting though it sounds like an amazing interview congratulations how did you hear about it yeah actually that's a great question um uh so i heard about this through my wonderful mentor dr jerry hush who was the person who really led me through my initiation to gardening dr hash and i worked really closely throughout the summer and early fall doing you know collective action researching the stuff we were really interested in researching planting together harvesting together and at one point we were we were workshopping at cookbook that's still in the process of being created we were making videos together a lot of fun work she had actually gained a new position in delaware so she moved there in i believe november and her and i have been in contact since um and i you know reached out to her recently to hear about the work she's doing and she's just so excited to you know bring me on board and continue this relationship that's amazing and especially because you met jerry through the community garden and that seems like such a small easy thing but it led to you getting an internship at the usda which is definitely a huge accomplishment yeah i met her through a note that i left on the garden fence so can you speak a little bit more to the importance that you might feel about having a mentor while going through college and trying to figure out what career you want to join so i worked with dr hush over the summer and considered her primarily as a close friend but on reflection of our relationship in the garden um i have found her to become a strong mentor for me she was able to provide me a lot of guidance about the importance of gardening beyond planting and beyond cultivating food we talk a lot about the stories that exist beyond plants right now i'm
the office and i'm sitting right next to a loofah um it's a sponge that's grown on it behind and it's so crazy to see that in person. Dr. Hush is an extremely intelligent person um she's done incredible work and incredible research and just to bounce ideas off of her and to talk through the classes that i was taking and being able to call to her if i am you know doubting my leadership abilities for this garden and to get that advice and get that guidance is so valuable and i'm just so thankful to have that relationship with her for sure. That's amazing mentors that i have found in my life are so important to just like not only help me figure out what i want to do but just give me like that encouragement to keep going when things get hard and i feel like everything's failing and nothing has worked like maybe i shouldn't be doing this anymore but it's just wonderful to have them there and reassure me that they went through that too and that it's going to be okay and to keep going absolutely and it's great i we jerry and i have really honest conversations about both of our lives and we really work to help support each other and it's it's been wonderful to have that mutual um respect and you know relationship with uh with a mentor that way definitely so we've talked a lot about where you are now and where you're going in the future but is there anything like looking back to when you were in high school deciding where to go to college didn't really know what you wanted to do yet is there anything that you would tell yourself or give yourself advice i can't really think of anything to be honest i think that like so many coincidences happen to me like it's very funny but i guess i would say that the value of work is very real putting your energy and your focus towards something you're really drawn to even if it's not necessarily the same
perceived caliber as peers you know i was never a math person and so when i do find something that really caused my attention i definitely doubt if is this worth putting energy towards this is not traditionally something that people explore in the academic field so am i like doing less if i invest myself in this and you know to reassure my younger self i would say no that that work you're doing is impactful and important and it leads to opportunities it leads to doors opening where you wouldn't really expect them to that kind of help everything align that's great and i love that you said you really wouldn't change anything just because you're so happy with where you are and not a lot of people can say that and i know that we're young but like it's really just nice to hear yeah i definitely do think that there are so many lessons in those moments of perceived failure or you know perceived misalignment with the final goal i don't you know i don't really adhere to an idea of a final point in my career where it's like when i get here this is going to be perfect everything's going to work out i definitely have a more gentle approach to myself because i think that having that mindset makes me be really hard on myself and put a lot of pressure on myself to do you know accomplish a goal that i don't even have fully actualized in my own mind so taking things as they come has been something that's been really important for me and i think that to go back and change any of that would be a disservice to my current self because you know even through the bad moments there was something that i learned and of course i understand that that's a very privileged thing to say in many cases but that has been my truth that i have experienced in my life and i think that's just going to be so encouraging for people younger than us to hear that just because it seems like things aren't going well like it's going to propel you to where you want to be
eventually yeah it's really funny i mean
my younger brother right now is in
his first year of university in
california and
you know he's having that classic
freshman experience where you know it's
it's really hard to find your footing
especially during covid i mean i
sympathize for him so much but
during my freshman year particularly
there were moments where i felt very
lost and very you know
i was one among many that
um and especially at a school like au
where there's so many smart kids you
know i just felt a little bit like out
of my out of my own but
i think that that experience of being
uncomfortable and and having that year
of
learning it was so impactful for my
journey
if you could give
university students or high school
students even
advice on how they can make sustainable
change in their communities and
environment
do you have any advice for them one key
aspect of sustainability that i've found
in my experience is the idea of
longevity to
continue the work that others have
created and
find your way to elevate that in the way
that works best for you
the american university community garden
has
these fantastic roots and
i've spent a lot of time talking to
people and hearing about their history
within american universities gardens
specifically
and one of the continual
barriers that has come up in our
conversations is that it's really
difficult to make that jump once the
majority of the folks involved or
seniors or leaving the university for
whatever reason to
continue that energy and that passion
behind the project to the next quote
unquote generation
of students coming in so my advice for
sustainable action is to
find your place in projects that are
pre-existing find ways that you can
strengthen them and lengthen them and
that continuation of past work will
create the most foundational change
because you already have that base that
you're working from you don't have to
start brand new
and you can really uplift important projects that are already occurring
that's really well said
thanks
thank you sydney it was so great to talk to you today you too this was a wonderful opportunity thank you guys so much for having me on today i'll definitely be stopping by the community garden soon to check out all your work we'll look forward to seeing you there thank you thank you the garden gate was created by kira berba and caroline mcdonald as part of the smithsonian gardens this team includes emily warsha as the education specialist jena yu as the marketing specialist nicolette kelly as the recording assistant and megan hastie as the audio engineer the music is by royalty-free music on soundcloud special thanks to cynthia brown and paula healy learn more by visiting gardens.si.edu thanks for listening