[Music]
0:01
Mohamed: Welcome to Garden Gate, a podcast where we talk to professionals who work directly and indirectly with plants in our natural world. We are students at
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American University in Washington, DC and interns at Smithsonian Gardens. We have created this project with the hopes of
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inspiring a new generation to make meaningful and sustainable change. I'm Muhammad Mustafa and this is the Garden
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Gate podcast. Today we have the privilege of speaking to Ashley
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Hocking. If you can just start off by saying your major and grade level.
Ashley: Sure. So I'm studying environmental science. I
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have a minor in studio art and I also study Spanish which is fun. I'm a third year so senior, coming senior year.
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Mohamed: So close, so close. It's going to be very exciting. So just first off tell the people what you do on
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campus and a little bit of the extracurricular activities that you're involved in, whether that's things that you just do for fun or internships or
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you know, if you're a president of any club.
Ashley: Well I guess I'll start there. I think my most treasured role on this
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campus has been co-leading the American University community garden.
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I work with a wonderful e-board with so many cool great people, so much credit to them. Totally can rant off
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their names at the end as well because they deserve all the credit in the world. So the community garden on
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campus, we just grow produce. We actually just secured our relationship with the Market, which is the food pantry at AU
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for food-insecure students, and now we'll be donating our produce every Saturday, fresh produce which is going to
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help them out since it's all donation base. Beyond leading the work days I do
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a lot of outreach for the garden. We've been trying to establish connections within the broader DC community, invite our neighbors in. We're
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right now kind of securing ties with a local restaurant in Adams Morgan. So a lot of cool things going on in the

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garden. And of course it's spring right now so things are popping up and everybody's starting to eat healthy again including myself, so it feels good
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to be part of that.
Mohamed: Yeah, that sounds amazing. I've been to one of the events. I'm trying to come to more. The community garden is a great place to
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to be so I'm really really happy that you're doing that and it's honestly one of the best things that we need
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especially given that it's springtime, and covering things as well as food security, so just want to say
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thank you for all the work that you do. Honestly.
Ashley: I feel like what I give the garden and the people in that
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community just give so much back. I think to when people first hear about the garden they're like, “I've
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never worked with plant,s I've never really done that,” which is really interesting too. That's a whole other conversation,
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the lack of connection we have with either where our food comes from or this idea of
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how do we take care of these things. And the garden is so much more than gardening. Like we really come together
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as a group, as I hope you saw.
Mohamed: Yeah, it’s a real community there.
Ashley: Yeah, it really is, and we just have all
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of our different skills and questions and traditions. They're all just celebrated in such a cool
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communal way. Every week we start off with a reflection or a reading and we try to
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tie it into academia a little bit. No one wants to be in school on a Saturday. But we try to talk about the
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bigger things like land justice and agricultural techniques and what is sustainability cause that's so
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important. It's so much more than just having a little plot of land, people, gardens. There are no plots,
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there's no ownership specifically in the beds. We all garden together, we all harvest together, and we have potlucks
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together so it’s - I just love that space. I can talk about it all day.
Mohamed: That’s something that you
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mentioned a little bit that academia fails to teach about and mention, so really: really
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great work that you're doing, and honestly I can't thank you enough for everything that you're
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doing. So just to tap in a little bit to the extracurriculars and what you do:
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given that you're the president of the community garden how did you get interested -
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Ashley: Co-president, co-president.
Mohamed: My bad, my bad. Given that you're the co-president of the community garden how did you get interested in this. What
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brought you to gardening? Was it something that you've always been passionate about since you were younger or was it just something you picked up in
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college? Tell me however you got into it.
Ashley: That's a good question. I think I kind of come back to two
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main stories. When I was little I
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was just so fascinated with how a seed could grow into a plant and then you get your own food, and I was like, I want my own food! My
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grandfather always had a big garden and so when I was like, I don't even know, ten maybe, he helped me build this
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Garden. I was so excited about it and then I just did didn't water it, I didn't weed it. It was summer in
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Pennsylvania so it's 96° which you know, believe it or not it gets hot there, and everything died, and he was
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so disappointed, and I was so upset that I disappointed my grandfather but he didn't like…. what he did was he
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encouraged me to try again. And then I was even more motivated. I think if he left it at being disappointed I would
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have been disappointed in myself, and then I would have had shameful ties to gardening. I would have said like my mom says, that she doesn't have a green thumb, and
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it's like, that's not true. Like you raised me. I was planting peas in the yard when I was four, like you do. And so he
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encouraged me and educated me, and then I was able to get a garden next year, and then I kind of got obsessed with this idea when I was eleven of
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having an educational orchard. I had this like big, prophetic, like, “Oh, what I want to do in my life, this
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vocation, is just have classes outdoors.” Cause I was really tired of being indoors in classes. So I was like ideally

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daydreaming in class of being in an orchard. And so for my eleventh birthday my mom got me a
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peach tree from Walmart. And it was this meager stick in a pot. I was like okay. But I was so excited and I planted
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it, and two years later I got my first peaches. It was faster than most peach trees do that, and I was just
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like wow. I think that was like the cornerstone of everything. It was just transformed through the care of
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my family. Then we started kind of doing community guarding togetherjust in our neighborhood and for the
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food bank. I actually thought I was going to go to college and be an artist, which is really interesting,
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but I kind of just had this epiphany that I wanted to be outdoors-
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I was always very nature focused and very involved in environmental things growing up, but I thought art was the career path.
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But really I was like no, I want to be outside, and I want to help the earth. I went to college and I
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really picked AU because I wanted a smaller school with professor connections, honestly, because I've just
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always benefited from a smaller classroom. And sometimes I'm still surprised that I picked AU, because we
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don't really have the same tools for field work in environmental science. I was a little discouraged at first
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but because of how like, esteemed our professors are and how cool they are and how their like, different ideas they were
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always so open to talking about different things that could supplement the lectures, and I
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learned that way. My freshman year was right in the middle of the pandemic. I had emergency housing and I came to a
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campus with nobody on it, all online classes my freshman year, which was so devastating, and of course I was like
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craving the outdoors and human connection and these things. Being away from home I didn't have my garden - I
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didn't have my peach tree - and I found out there was a garden on campus and I just lit up and I tried to get involved. When I did there was like four of us in the club, and the awesome Sydney Spencer who was running it who I just… such a
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role model. I talked to her and the garden just kept growing
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and growing. I brought in friends and they brought in friends and next thing you know we have 10 people, 20 people, 30
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people, and it was so cool. The pandemic, we were still in that, but I think things started to loosen up
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and people also were like oh my God, we can be outdoors with people. We were gardening with masks on. I really remember just being
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like “This is such a weird time in my life.” And that's kind of how
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I found the community garden. About my sophomore year she asked me if I wanted to be co-president and
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started giving me weekend responsibilities like leading the meetings when she couldn't make it, and then that grew into my junior year being
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the co-president full-time. It's really really cool.
Mohamed: That's awesome, that's awesome. I think you emphasized a
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really important part that we often lack as humans: the importance of human interaction and you
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interacting with nature. You mentioned being in American University and being in Washington DC: I feel like oftentimes
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there's an undervalue for green spaces. I think we have such a beautiful campus but I think
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people within urban areas undervalue green spaces and I just want to ask you a little bit about that.
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Being a student at AU, have you ever had conversations with students about that? Have they been
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positive? Have they been negative? How have you been met with other people who aren't familiar
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with gardening? Have they just said you know “this is a waste of space,” and then you tell them to come here
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and you know see the community and see what you're all about and then they realize the importance of having
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something like that?
Ashley: Well first of all, campus is so beautiful, and I think right now it being 80° and like the quad
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is swarmed with people. Everybody's on a bench. You can just see that first of all campus is beautiful, and so much
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love for the facilities management team. They're so wonderful and they really help us out with our garden too that's great.

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But it also shows like you were saying there's a connection to nature that is so innate within us. I learned
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about the term recently it's like biophilia. There's a hypothesis that is like, humans need nature. Like we know this.
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Like it's so important. There's even like nature deficit disorders. Just having a lack of connection to
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nature first of all is psychologically not great, but also disconnects you from taking care of it too. And I think in
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urban spaces it's really a shame, because of all sorts of systemic oppression and also just how urban spaces are designed especially in
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America with urban sprawl. There's so much, first of all, habitat fragmentation
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that degrades the environment but there's also like - sometimes it is intentionally planned - we see a lot of times where
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there is no green space built into this. I learned about this last year, that
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it's not as simple as planting a tree in your yard. First of all especially in cities [there are] private and public trees - I don't even get all that - but the thing was like
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it's going to raise property taxes and that can you know, evict people from their homes. It can make it too expensive to live there.
Mohamed: Exactly.
Ashley: Can you imagine
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planting a tree can take you out of your home? And so bringing green into an urban space is so contentious
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Sometimes.
Mohamed. 100% um
Ashley: And I think it doesn't have to do with people not valuing nature. I think it's people either not
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growing up with connection to it, so not seeing that, or just again urban spaces not
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having green built into it, and that being a more systemic pressure of all
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sorts of things like redlining and everything else. [sigh] So I don't know. I think it's really
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cool to have a campus that's so beautiful because it starts the conversation. And we have had a lot of these conversations, especially in a
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community garden where people learn: plants and people, you can't take that relationship away.
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But yeah, I don't know. Green spaces are so important for all sorts of health, and just going back to that really. I
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just think that's critical for people learning how to take care of their environment too.
Mohamed: 100%. And I
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think you bring up a really really great point: how green spaces are so important for our mental health. We saw that during covid: a lot of people
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going out, a lot of people walking, really emphasizing the importance of being outdoors, what impacts it has
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on our mental health as well. And I feel like because we grow up in urban areas it's not taught about or it's not told
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About. We're given more traditional roles of jobs you know like, become a doctor or become a lawyer or
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you know become this and that and we don't value it so we're not talking about it. It's not being pushed
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Onto- well not pushed onto students, but it's not being brought up to students, and there needs to be conversations about it and you're
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bringing up an interesting point. And you know we're so privileged to be at the college level luckily, and a lot of people in middle school and high school, especially that grow up in these urban areas like DC,
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New York, and other cities, don't have this privilege of being able to work in a community garden and being able to go out and see the
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importance of it. And like you mentioned, once people start being in those positions like they all approach
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you from a different perspective completely.
Ashley: It's so interesting to see the lens of where people come at environmentally, like you were saying
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without access, and I have to remember too when I'm talking about things that maybe people don't have this
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relationship with the land. So when I'm fawning over nature some people are like “what are you talking about?”
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I really noticed that with just as simple a thing as recycling on campus. It's so simple but
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some people never did that and it's just not simple to them. I had to reframe and
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check myself and look at my privileged view, be like “I learned this and they didn't and that doesn't mean they're morally
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incorrect or anything like that," and that's a big issue. We place a lot of moral value on things that are bigger
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systemic issues. And I think it's all about community engagement and making sure a community has access to their
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land to manage and really involving people in that. That can go into a much broader conversation of like how
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the state privatizes land. National parks have taken people off the
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land to preserve this idea of untouched nature, when it really was displacing people. I also see that
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with gardening and other things: sometimes there is a resistance, or
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sometimes nature doesn't feel safe like it does for some people who have the privilege to for it to be safe. The woods
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are not always a safe place. It can be scary. Generational trauma passes down. People being displaced from their land.
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People being enslaved on land. These things can you know just presently
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make people afraid or unwilling to re-experience. I think having a
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connection with the land sometimes - sometimes that's not always empowering. But I think if we have
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conversations where taking care of nature is empowering for anybody I think it can really change how we value nature
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and how we implement or just really have nature as a really core part of our lives, cuz yeah. I just feel like
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I've just seen so many people transformed with having even like two hours on a Saturday.
Mohamed: Just so simple.
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Ashley: Hands in the dirt. They're so much happier!
Mohamed: Exactly! Just going back to that point,
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it's so important, and I thank you for bringing this perspective. A lot of people aren't aware of this, and a
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lot of people have not been given this opportunity, like we were talking about earlier. What I want to ask you there
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Is, as co-president of the community garden and as you plan out
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these events and other things how do you advertise these opportunities? Do you just tell your friends, or do you tell classmates, and is it

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possible for other people to come in? I know we talked a little bit about how it's Saturdays in the morning
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for two hours. Is it advertised as it should be across campus? Do you get support from the university?
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Ashley: First of all the garden is always welcome to everybody. It's unlocked, 24/7 access. We really encourage
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people to go in there and harvest. We literally have this issue where like produce is dying in the garden because
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people aren't picking it. That's first of all on us to advertise it better, but also for
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students to truly believe us when we say come into the garden. I think a little bit of history of the garden recently
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that made the garden much more public at campus was about a year ago, maybe a year and a
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half ago. We were told that the center of athletic performance, which was like a big donated facility, was
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going to be placed in on top of the garden and also be replacing most likely the tennis courts and basketball
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courts, which is really interesting because these are two recreational spaces that people are at every
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day, all the time, so important. It's interesting to see when recreation or
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cultural or traditional things don't have monetary value and therefore can be
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totally neglected. In the beginning it was very difficult to figure out the timeline of this project.
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Facilities Management - who, again, just so much gratitude for them - they didn't even know what was going on really, and
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unfortunately, and we did have someone who was sort of spearheading the design of this project tell us “you should be happy
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that your garden’s getting replaced for the center of athletic performance and a center of wellness.” We were like, “but
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we're not.” I mean you think that building a building on top of this space is making
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us happy? It was the weirdest thing I've ever experienced because we were told you should be happy there's a bull- you know what are they called when
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they plow over the thing? What are those called?
Mohamed: Bulldozers?

Ashley: Yes, thank you! We were told to be happy and grateful for those
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and applaud them. I was like no, I will not be happy about that. I had to sit there. It was also a very tough
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meeting because the people representing the garden at the time were five girls, and no
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disrespect to this individual who's talking to us, but he kept calling us “girls,” and he at one point
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- in all honesty like I'll never forget this - the president, Sydney Spencer, who was trying to negotiate,
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said “if you're building this on top of garden can you at least find some sort of negotiation to build us a new one, take some of that
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money, whatever,” and she said “I would love if you could write these down in your notes,” and she talked and talked and said
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a few things, pointed, very succinct and with it and professional. He didn't
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write down anything. She said, “sir, why didn't you write down anything?” and he said, “It was just so
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beautiful I had to memorize it.” The condescending nature that can happen
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when there are people who value nature and other things and people who have a profit motive to either exploit nature
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or to degrade nature or to put things in places where they don't think that enough community solidarity will rise up.
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I mean we see this with this big topic: is it minority move-in that goes into these neighborhoods because it's
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it's cheaper, or is it really that these big companies know exactly where to put the landfills, exactly where to put toxic
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chemicals and all sorts of coal dumps and everything else, because they know sometimes in these communities they
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don't have the solidarity, they don't have the same language, they don't have the ability to not be working their
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multiple jobs, to come together as community and say, no you cannot do this to us, to our children, to degrade our
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Neighborhood. Bringing it all back in: I don't even remember what the question was.
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Remind me what the question was. I just totally went tangent.
Mohamed: No, I think I think you said a lot of important stuff that
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we should highlight as well. It’s this constant theme that we've been talking about since the beginning of the podcast: a lot of people
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are not taught or are not given the value or see the value of nature, a community garden.
Ashley: Or they have
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they have to shut it down themselves for their jobs, which is really messed up. It’s scary when the
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economy has a rhetoric that environmental protection isn't valuable.
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And also it doesn't even make sense because in the long term continuing of environment is going to have those paybacks. Right now, as
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an update, the garden is going to be moved. That conversation led to other conversations that led to that
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person who was spearheading the project also saying “you're right, if I am responsible for removing
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this garden we will try to help you make a new one.” So we have been in contact with some of the bigger
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heads of it all, moving that space in the fall most likely, to Nebraska Hall. Which is really
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interesting because Nebraska Hall was built on the last community garden. So it's
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definitely been a targeted spot, but now because of - well we just raised hell, to be honest. We went to
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student newspapers, and that maybe goes into the question about advertising: we went to everyone we knew, who then they
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went to everyone they knew, and we tried to show people why the space mattered. We didn't have a monetary
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value on the produce that we were growing and harvesting, but now we're paying attention. Now we're weighing what
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we are growing and now we're getting data. We
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have to be at the same level as the system sometimes, which really sucks, but it also shows us too how
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much we do. So yes, solidarity was built, we were able to move the garden next fall and make it even better,
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A more accessible space because that's something we definitely want to bring to the garden: wheelchair-accessible, and other advertising
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Things. We do have an awesome Instagram called “I Beg Your Garden.” It's very active.
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Mohamed: If you don't follow it, follow it right now.
Ashley: Yes. it's great. We love to share on there, and a bunch of different people run it, so it's all sorts of

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different things all the time. We also do a lot of sponsored events with our environmental clubs and with the
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opening of AU CECE, the center for equity, community, and environment - I think that's the right order, CC something like
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That. Acronyms always get mixed up, right? -We had them in the garden and that was pretty much it was so cool. It's like a group of fifteen really cool
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professors whose kind of mission of starting AU CECE was to bring together this larger environmental focus on campus and
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really hone it in because environmental science is interdisciplinary. We have the anthropologists, the econ people,
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even the math people. Dr. Saddiqui - we both had that professor - he was a doctor of applied
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statistics and he was doing things that were just for the environment. It was so cool to learn from him how
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everything is environmental. That institution opening up also led to us partnering up and seeing
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our need to be in close contact with the Office of Sustainability, zero waste club,
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beekeeping society, everybody else that I'm forgetting. We're doing a lot of events with them. Upcoming we
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have a thing called a Bee Ball at the garden. It's like a big fun night of art and music and an open mic
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and all the different clubs and it's going to be a really good time. It’s the end of April. Find more details on Instagram!
Mohamed: That's awesome.
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Like I said earlier, if you're not following already you definitely need to follow that Instagram. But yeah, I just want to just reemphasize but obviously
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don't want to put any words in your mouth - the importance of once again nature being
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interdisciplinary. I think the most important thing is as children we’re taught if you major in one thing you can only do a job in one thing,
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and you can't change your career path or you’re stuck in this, so I that's why I feel like a lot of people often get limited to their ideas and
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what they want to participate in. As you just said, a doctor in applied statistics was over here doing
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something related to the environment. He is a great professor. For anyone listening out

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there I just want to make sure that that importance is emphasized to you: no matter what you major in you could
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always get a job in something involving gardening or something completely unrelated to your major. Even if
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you're majoring in math, even if you're majoring in like SIS, you can still apply your knowledge from that major to a
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field of gardening.

So like we've been talking about
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a lot, I just wanted to ask you is how do you communicate to people the importance of gardening and horticulture,
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whether it be policy makers at AU - I know we talked a little bit about that - or whether it be friends and family who have no idea what gardening is or
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don't have any experience doing it at all.
Ashley: I guess the main thing is everybody needs food, right? And gardening
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isn't only that. I think that's been a really fun thing I've been learning too, working with Smithsonian Gardens and being
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more in a public horticultural sense. Smithsonian Gardens does
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all the gardens around the National Mall, and their big thing is bringing in people first of all, creating little moments of respite and shade in
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the really really sunny days especially in the summer. They create these
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beautiful spaces. Working with so many talented co-workers I've been so grateful to meet. It's not just
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food gardens at all: it’s really cool plants. Some are native, some are not native, and they have a cool cultural history making these
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beautiful spaces. I think for me when I think about communicating the importance of nature, it's just like
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when you talk about climate change, which can be a word that turns people away: you have to connect it to
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people's morality in a sense, or ethics or value-based approaches. It’s really the only way.
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You can spit data and science, but if you don't connect it to what people are interested in you're not going
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to have much success. I forget who said this, but it was pretty pretty much along the premise of everything that's an economic problem now was an
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environmental problem first. We're thinking about gas prices - what does that relate to? Energy. We're
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thinking about health of the future and pollution and all these things.
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I can think of so many examples. Everything really was an environmental problem first. Talking about things and making
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people feel connected in that way. One big thing I always go back to is living in Pennsylvania - it's a
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really interesting space where there's coal mines and then Amish farms and then like really weird suburbs. You see
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people who are farmers and it's their livelihood, but then they kind of vote for anti-green things, and it's
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really interesting because it's like oh this is your land. One of the things I really come back to for people is that like taking care of
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your land, taking care of you know America, taking care of everywhere, is patriotic. You
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want good land.
Mohamed: Going back to the person's motive.
Ashley: Exactly. You really have to connect to that. That's how I usually relate it. I see what people are
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interested in and what their values are and then I try to say well, this is how the environment is related
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to that.
Mohamed: That's great. Like we've been talking about, the environment is literally related to
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everything.
Ashley: We are the environment! You cannot take people out of nature. And that is the biggest issue,
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people trying to find these pristine untouched spaces: there will never be such a thing. We
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literally have used the environment. Every single place pretty much always has been had some sort of human influence for thousands of years.
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Why would we even try to take ourselves out of nature to protect these spaces? No. We need to learn how to interact with them, sustainably.
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Mohamed: Just pursuing that question a little bit more - asking yourself given that
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you work for the Smithsonian Gardens and you have an interest in this and ENVS, do you see yourself continuing in the field of
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horticulture? Tell me a little bit why or why not, if there's any issues related to that or

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any problems.
Ashley: My internship with Smithsonian Gardens has been super
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interesting so far. I'm so grateful because they kind of just made this experience for me and they let
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me take it wherever I wanted and I was really grateful for that trust they had in me, and that came from working in
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the community garden and developing ties there. They are letting me work
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and help out in their victory garden. Victory Gardens were made in World War I but really are known for World War II
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Era. It's a big demonstration garden by the
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National American History Museum. I also do research about cultural
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narratives that are kind of not talked about in World War II, especially relating to Victory Gardens. Again,
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this relationship between plant and people is so important. I have to tell you about this article that I read in my research with the
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Smithsonian. Gabriel [R. Valle] was talking about pandemic
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gardens. If we do not talk about the conversation of why a lot of gardening pops up in times of social,
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economic, political distress, we're missing a really big piece. He was talking about how marginalized,
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displaced, oppressed people have used gardening as not only a supplement but also sometimes as their entire
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source of food and even a source of community gathering, knowledge sharing, preserving history
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through seeds and recipes. If we
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just garden at times when the system fails us we are forgetting the people who have been gardening because the system's always been failing them,
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and if gardening has been a survival and a resilience tactic for so
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many communities, it's not just hippie gardening, you know? And that ties
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into like the agrarian myth and everything else. So what's really important to me is when I'm when working
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in horticulture is I don't personally want to just cultivate plants that are beautiful. I really have
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always been interested in more- I guess the word for it is ethnobotanical plants. It's how plants are used by cultures
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and then their different uses like medicinally, edibly, for textiles and things. Gardening has again
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been this source of resilience and community building, and in horticulture I'd like to see more of that. I think I
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would love to go into this field. I love it. I love being able to be outside and take care of plants and teach people
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about plants, and people teach me about plants, and people learn about each other too! It's just all so
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Interrelated. But the issue I think that this field is having is there's a decrease in workers…
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Mohamed: What do you think that is like? Do you think it's because of these preconceived notions that people have? You
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mentioned a little bit about like, people might think gardening is related to being hippie, or gardening is too
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dirty and too hands on.
Ashley: I almost wonder if it's the opposite. I almost wonder if sometimes horticulture really appeals
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to a rich white audience. A lot of these displays and things can
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really sometimes only be bringing in those people and that's not fair. And there's a lack of diversity in the field
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of horticulture. I've been trying to you know really think about that. I've been I've been working there. What
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we're missing out on by not having lots of different people connected to the Earth and then wanting to cultivate plants and make beautiful
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spaces and sharing their knowledge if they're willing. I think
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if I were to go into this field I would want to continue to do the research of
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Unearthing cultural narratives, where is my place, but really learning from people who experienced that, and
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and taking that and hopefully sharing that knowledge. Again the relationship between plants and people
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is undeniable, and so anytime we just make a display and call it pretty I think it's doing an injustice to how
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much plants mean to us, and how much history plants have.

Mohamed: Like
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you were mentioning earlier, it's crazy to think about some plants that we could eat, some plants that we could-
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there's multiple purposes for plants. They're not just some flowers that you put in a vase or something to put in your front yard to
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make your house look pretty. They serve purposes. I often feel that because we're so disconnected or
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uneducated about it we don't know and we just undervalue it.
Ashley: In another sense too I've also learned that it's
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okay to just value something for its beauty or its ecosystem services that aren't benefiting me, because the more I
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was just like “man I don't like these plants because I can't eat them,” the more I realize it's like why am I- I mean it's
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very natural as a human to think “what can I use,” but I was like why do I need to have some sort of human use
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for this and is that selfish? I've been really sitting with these questions a lot in my internship and I was like, wow, I didn't realize this
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internship would make me question everything. I'm glad it did because it's like I really had to ask
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myself why did I want to use plants so badly. That leads
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to over harvesting sometimes. It can lead to that and you can accidentally
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devastate a population of things: you're pulling them out of the ground replanting them elsewhere. We have to be careful about the plants that we want to
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use and how we respect plants just like how we respect nature. Does it have to have a monetary value?
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Does it? And no, in my opinion you can't really put money on when nature is used for cultural and spiritual,
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recreational things.
Mohamed: I feel like a big part of that issue is because of the lack of education in it. I feel
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like we have preconceived notions or we have incentives like being selfish for plants, and because there's a lack of
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education in it, in public education, also in the college level too, if you didn't seek out this opportunity
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or the community garden people aren't going to be aware about these narratives. We have to unlearn a lot of that and
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a little bit of unlearning starts with education. It's a difficult process a lot of people. A lot of people feel
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uncomfortable by it but it's an important process because we really need to see sometimes the value in things and
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not just how can this benefit me.
Ashley: Right. And like truthfully I'd rather have people plant trees
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out of selfishness than not at all because I think what you learn from
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planting and taking care of things, you will unlearn the selfishness. You'll see again how
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humans create nature and can take care of nature and how nature takes care of us. I mean, honestly.
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Mohamed: Thank you for that. Just to briefly wrap this up, I just wanted to ask you a little
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bit about what has your most rewarding experience been not just in your internship but in your overall
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experience with working with gardens and working in the field of horticulture. This could be in any time
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within your lifespan; you've told me that you've worked in it for a really long time. Just the most memorable moment
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that kind of just keeps you going.
Ashley: So hard!
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Okay, can I give two?
Mohamed: Please do. If you have three give them.
Ashley: I would say a really rewarding
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moment lately was honestly researching with Smithsonian Gardens. I dug up things I never even knew I'd learn about and that
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seems to be a common trend in my education. It's like oh, I got the whitewashed, watered down version of this,
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and here's the truth. One of the things I learned was during World War II right after the attack on Pearl Harbor they enacted Executive
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Order 9066, which was to create military exclusion zones on the west coast which would move all the Japanese-American
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residents living there into internment camps, but incarceration camps really.
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People early in my elementary school especially coming from white suburbs were like,

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“this was a necessary evil.” First of all, crazy talk. Second of all, learning more about it, no, first they
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only moved people from the west coast. We have to remember that Japanese immigrants at this time were pretty much responsible for, I don't remember the
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statistics, but so much of the economic development and were doing the agricultural labor in the west coast,
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and it made white farmers so afraid. There was already anti-Asian sentiment before this with just all the
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different laws that were passed that didn't let Japanese people own land if they were not a resident, because
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there were laws before that that didn't let them become citizens, so there was just like
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this long history. Anyways these internment camps were on agricultural farms. They were on productive land.
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They put people, skilled laborers, into place, displaced them, pretty much enslaved
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them, and made them grow food for the war effort. Where have we seen this before? History repeats itself. I had no idea
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that that was happening during World War II. Really
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interesting: I learned about this Japanese philosophy of gaman, which was enduring the intolerable
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with patience and dignity, which there's a lot to say about that. But even though they were growing
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food that was providing for the camp because the camps were made to be self-sustaining because they
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didn't want to provide food for people that they thought were an alien race which is, you know, horrible -
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and of course they were shipping the food out to the troops and to other camps - the Japanese people were
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amending their land to be better
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for them because when they were living in in these incarceration camps, I mean, they were awful conditions. So they
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were bringing trees in from the riverbanks and planting them. Every single barrack had an entryway garden.
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They took cultural traditions that some had learned in Japan, some that learned from their time on the west coast, and they made beautiful

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Spaces. Right now at Amache, which is a camp in Granada, Colorado - there
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was a really well done documentary on it - after about eighty years a rose is blooming
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that was planted there. It's this really big deal because we see how nature is resilient but people are
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Resilient, and again this example of marginalized displaced oppressed people doing things, using nature
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as a resilience tactic. That was a really eye-opening story that I learned. I really couldn't believe
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it when I found it out. So that's been a big moment. It's hard
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to say: it's rewarding because sometimes I think even at this college a lot of people feel like ignorance is
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bliss because when we sit with things that are really uncomfortable and a history that's really
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painful it's really hard to know what to do with it. I think really my most
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rewarding experience on this campus has been when we had this beautiful potluck of everything from the
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garden. All the regular members came in and made a dish with an ingredient from the garden and I was like, oh my God.
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This is really cool. This is so cool. We grew this together, we planted it as seeds,
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we grew it and then we cooked it and we ate it and we celebrated and that was just awesome to me.
Mohamed: I just
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want to take a little bit of an aspect of what you were talking about when we were talking about the interment
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camps a little bit and talking about this sort of barrier between knowledge
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where sometimes it could be a language barrier, sometimes it could be informal versus formal education, or sometimes it
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can be born out of spite for one another. I feel like that happens in the field of gardening and horticulture and as
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well as agriculture sometimes - people don't like to share techniques with other countries or sometimes other states. You have to think
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about the collective, the whole collective. We're all here on one place and we're all trying to protect that one
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Place, and I think you brought up a perfect aspect of sort of what was rewarding to you: you were able to come
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together in one space and create something with something that you guys all grew together, and
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honestly that sounds amazing. I hope I'll be at the next pot luck. I'll be looking out. If you follow the Instagram you'll
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also be looking out as well.

Just really quickly, I wanted to ask you what was the most challenging aspect of
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gardening or the field of horticulture given just your whole experience with it - doesn't have to be particular to the
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community garden or Smithsonian internship. It could be when you were younger and you faced a road bump that made you
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want to quit.
Ashley: It really is hard when you when you are trying to start seeds and they just die. I'm going
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through that right now. It's actually much more stressful as an adult who's helping run a community garden
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because I'm like, oh my gosh, yes we're planting things directly in the garden, but also I'm very much responsible for making sure we have
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things that are being transplanted into the garden. I'm like, this is a lot of responsibility, and I'm really hoping I do have a green thumb. And then you kind
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of have to really fight the narratives. Anything you do growing up when you don't succeed at the
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first time you have to fight narratives that really have nothing to do with you, because you don't want to let that hold you back. So I think that
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besides again the greater thing of learning historical truths that are
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really hard to sit with in a very much first world problem - maybe it's not first world - but just having
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something die after you've cultivated it for so long is really difficult. And you just have to try again. And you just cannot let that be the downfall because
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so many other things are growing. I mean really, stick a seed in the earth and it will probably grow.
Mohamed: It goes back to
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interdisciplinary things: you're learning life skills, you're learning so much more.
Ashley: Oh, there's life skills to be learned.
Mohamed: I guess just the last

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question I'll ask you to wrap it up is: for people who want to get involved in the field of horticulture or
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gardening just sort of a sentence - it could be one word or three words - what would you tell them and how would
39:51
you encourage them to become engaged in it?
Ashley: Try it out. Just try it out. It is
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so worth it. I don't know what could be more rewarding than having an outdoor job taking care of things that you know
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bring beauty and happiness to other people. And then your own connection to nature too. It is a
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beautiful, awesome field and there's so many cool people who have all these fun plant facts, and you just become
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more in awe of nature every day. You just learn something new and you're like wow, this is how this works? And then you realize you're part of
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that and you're cool too and it's like wow. I've always felt very empowered with horticulture.
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Mohamed: All right, well, I just wanted to say thank you so much, Ashley, for taking the time to interview with us. It's been a
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pleasure having you and I hope everyone really listens to this and takes what Ashley is listening and given her
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firsthand experience with her field of horticulture and the work that she does with the community garden as well
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and then also just take a little bit of the interdisciplinary aspect of it as well. Most importantly if you
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don't take anything else from this podcast at all it would just be take the last part of it: try it out.
Ashley: Go
40:56
Outside. Touch grass. [laughter]
Mohamed: Thank you so much, Ashley.
41:01
Ashley: Thank you. I'm really grateful. Thank you so much.
Narrator: The Garden Gate was created as a
41:07
part of the Learning by Leading initiative with Smithsonian Gardens. This team includes Mohammad Mustafa as
41:13
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41:20

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