ASU Farm connects students to sustainable food systems

The educational hub and lab was recently designated as a center and has big plans for growth

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
January 7, 2026

When Brennan Campbell took a Sustainability Virtues class in the 2025 spring semester, he never imagined it would lead him to a goat pen on a beautiful December morning, raking droppings into a pile.

But it turned out the professor for that class, Tyler DesRoches, is also the founding director of ASU Farm, an educational hub and laboratory for sustainable agriculture.

And when DesRoches told the students that ASU Farm partners with Maya's Farm, an organic urban garden in south-central Phoenix, and the students could volunteer to work there, Campbell was in.

So here he was, a smile on his face, cleaning the pen while approximately 12 other students and volunteers from ASU either helped him with the goats or picked weeds out of a nearby mint garden.

"I love it over here," said Campbell, who graduated in December with a Bachelor of Science in sustainability. "It's just such a great way to spend the morning. It's about being part of a community at ASU where I felt valued and being able to reconnect with nature simultaneously."

That experience, that feeling, is precisely what DesRoches and Becky Tsang, associate director of academic operations/advancement initiatives in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, envisioned when they came up with the idea for ASU Farm in 2024.

"A group of faculty had been talking about all kinds of social problems, like food insecurity among undergraduates, the loneliness epidemic, things like this," DesRoches said. "We were trying to think of a project that could help address some of these issues. A lot of people were interested in sustainable food systems. That's where ASU Farm came from."

In addition to its partnership with Maya's Farm — students and university staff volunteer to work there throughout the year — ASU Farm operates Sparky's Garden, a space near the Social

Sciences building that is now under renovation. ASU Farm also offers several courses in a collaboration with the Humanities Lab and The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, such as: Sustainability Virtues, Accessible Urban Farming and Urban Food Systems.

DesRoches said six core virtues are built into ASU Farm: adaptation, care, cooperation, environmental stewardship, environmental humility and a strong work ethic.

“One reason why we’ve been so successful in getting so much buy-in from faculty, staff and students is because we have this kind of strong social component associated with it, and it’s about fostering community and building character, while you’re actually producing food,” DesRoches said.

Rutendo Musiyiwa, a student farm leader at Maya’s Farm who is working toward a Master of Global Management at Thunderbird School of Global Management, said volunteer work days at Maya’s Farm attract anywhere from 25 to 40 people, and they come from all over the university.

“We want students to learn about teamwork,” Musiyiwa said. “We want students to learn about sustainability. We want students to learn about collaboration. We’re trying to develop values and character in the students.”

As Campbell continued to clean the goats’ pen, Sara El-Sayed oversaw several volunteers who were on their hands and knees, getting dirty as they weeded the mint garden.

El-Sayed, an assistant research professor in the Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems, talked about all the reasons the volunteers had given up their Saturday morning — from wanting to be outside and connecting to nature to being part of a community.

“Some people are just in the middle of exams and want to decompress,” she said. “There’s no one reason why they’re out here.”

ASU Farm is now poised to take the next step in its evolution. It recently received approval from the Arizona Board of Regents for a new name — ASU Farm, a Center for Environmental Stewardship and Character Building — and DesRoches said the center hopes to find a piece of university-owned land that can be used for cultivation.

DesRoches said the center, which will be located in the Global Futures Laboratory, is seeking a philanthropist who could help fund the center. Ultimately, he said, he’d like the piece of land to include small residences for students who are enrolled in programs that require immersive farming experience, and a farm-to-table restaurant staffed by ASU students.

“I see it as a space that could serve as a faculty or staff retreat,” DesRoches said.

Peter Schlosser, vice president and vice provost of Global Futures, said the work being done by the center is vital.

“It is important for us in Global Futures that we are envisioning futures in which we are living as a part of nature,” Schlosser said. “It is our responsibility to keep the overall system intact rather than taking ourselves so far out of balance that the life-supporting systems cannot support us anymore.

“This helps students understand that not everybody is as privileged as we are. Not everybody can actually go and buy the stuff. They actually have to plant it, they have to nurture it, they have to harvest it, they have to store it and have to make sure that they get through the annual cycles. And that is something that has an immediate impact on how we are thinking about the present and the future.”

ASU Farm also carries personal meaning for Schlosser. He grew up in Germany, the child of parents who lived off the land — growing everything from potatoes and radishes to asparagus and strawberries.

“There was no supermarket where you could just go and get everything. You had to really live with the food,” he said. “I think it is mindset-changing to have the experience of doing it. You have a different connection to the Earth that provides the food that sustains you.”

Schlosser said he hopes that in 10 years ASU Farm is a place where students come to understand and appreciate the food system.

“What does it mean for us?” he said. “How can you make it less intrusive on the environment so you can get what you want with the minimum pressure on soil, water use or fertilizer use?

“The more students within Global Futures that will have that experience, the better it will be, because we can shape the mindset that we need if we want to navigate the future.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



Recent sustainability graduate Brennan Campbell works in the goat pen at Maya’s Farm in south Phoenix during ASU Farm Volunteer Day on Dec. 13. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Sustainable business graduate student Rutendo Musiyiwa (right), from Zimbabwe, cleans a goat pen alongside other volunteers at Maya's Farm in south Phoenix during ASU Farm Volunteer Day on Dec. 13. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Assistant Research Professor Sara El-Sayed (left) works alongside her 4-year-old son, Shams, and Amanda Ohnmacht, an ASU graduate student in sustainable food systems, tending to a mint patch at Maya’s Farm in south Phoenix during ASU Farm Volunteer Day on Dec. 13. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News