A new community garden on Catholic University’s campus fosters fellowship, service, and relaxation.

Ne by one, the lead gardeners introduce themselves and display their white paper bags of seed. "I'm Andrew. I've got onions." "I'm Torey. I've got kale." "I'm Angel. I've got mustard greens." "I'm Kevin. And I'm the mixed bed." With a Bible in one hand and holy water in the other, Rev. Jude DeAngelo, O.F.M. Conv., University chaplain and director of Campus Ministry, blesses the bags of seed and the soil where they will soon be spread. Invoking the Parable of the Sower, he leads a prayer for Catholic University's new community garden.

"Choose whichever vegetable you feel drawn to," says senior biology major Amanda Finnell of Hampton, N.H., president of CUA's Green Club, to a group of volunteers gathered behind Curley Hall. The seeds being planted on this chilly Saturday morning in March have been selected for their hardiness and quick growth. The produce will be harvested in about 45 days, right before Commencement. The seeds, being planted on this chilly Saturday morning in March have been selected for their hardiness and quick growth. The leaders have come prepared. They've brought new top soil and compost. They rake the existing soil, adding the seeds, says lead gardener Kevin Dolan, a senior history major from Rochester, N.Y. "You don't want to over water or wash away the seeds," says lead gardener Kevin Dolan, a senior history major from Rochester, N.Y. The aspiring farmer tells the volunteers, "You really just want to mist the soil." But all they have is a hose. It's time to water the tiny seeds that have been planted in neat rows in each of the beds.

Freshman Anna Klinker, from Richmond, Va., has joined her RA for the seed planting. "We have a garden at home. Spending time in a garden is very therapeutic. I miss it. So I was excited to help out." Andrew Templon, a senior history major from Pennington, N.J., likes being outdoors. "My dad and I hike a lot. I'm drawn to all things green," says Templon, who is vice president of the Green Club. "It's great to be out here getting my hands dirty. I love that the garden is drawing people from all over the University. But the most exciting part is that the produce will be donated to a food bank.

Community gardens can be found in urban, suburban, and rural settings, and they are growing in popularity. The benefits of community gardens have been well documented. According to the American Community Gardening Association, community gardens beautify neighborhoods, reduce crime rates, preserve green space, create income opportunities and economic development, provide opportunities for recreation and exercise, and stimulate social interaction and self-reliance. For food banks across the country, community gardens are becoming an important vehicle for providing equitable access to nutritious food.

The importance of community gardening has been recognized at the national level. The White House Kitchen Garden has become a tool for schools across the country to teach families about nutrition and sustainability. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has funded more than 1,900 community gardens across the United States through its People’s Garden initiative. During her junior year, Finnell attended a national conference in Washington, D.C., with other Green Club members. The conference was sponsored by Power Shift, a group dedicated to youth involvement in climate issues. She heard Al Gore speak and she attended a session on the benefits of community gardening.

"I got the bug and knew that's what I wanted to pursue in my senior year as president. When it comes to environmental..."
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The deer fencing has been pulled off the garden beds and rolled into loose balls and now it blows across Curley lawn like tumbleweeds. “Look at the size of that radish,” says an excited student who has come out on a Saturday morning in May to harvest the garden. She is pointing at a bright red radish popping up through the soil. “That wasn’t there a few days ago.”

“The mustard greens have doubled in size since last week.”

“Do mustard greens taste like mustard?” several students pull a few of the green and purple leaves. “It actually tastes like mustard. It’s spicy.”

“I want to get a picture of each bed before we start to harvest,” says Finnell. “Be careful with my babies. Oh gosh, I’m having a moment.”

It turns out the large radish was a tease. As the harvest on that bed begins, it appears the students have a crop of “micro” radishes. “We probably should have allowed more space between the seeds when we planted them or we should have thinned them out so they had room to grow,” says Dulan.

“It’s okay,” says Finnell. “This is a learning year.”

Heads turn toward Templon, whose bed has yielded no onions. He accepts the good-natured ribbing. “It’s a learning year,” he reiterates.

“We love your invisible onions, Andrew.”

The leafy greens, on the other hand, are abundant. Pulling them bunch by bunch from the soil and packaging them for donation is tedious, but on this sunny Saturday of the harvest on that bed begins, it appears the students have a crop of “micro” radishes. “We probably should have allowed more space between the seeds when we planted them or we should have thinned them out so they had room to grow,” says Dulan.

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The Office of Campus Activities also helps sponsor the garden, providing organizational and publicity support. “The entire CUA community has been involved — faculty, staff, students, and alumni,” said Finnell. “This is all about our mission. We are in service to the community by feeding the hungry and we are working as stewards of God’s creation.”

— Amanda Finnell