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Organic Farm to Sprout at Cal Poly Pomona Thanks to Student-Led Project

POMONA, Calif. — A student-run organic farm has begun to take root on roughly three acres of the Cal Poly Pomona campus. The student enterprise known as Pomona Organics had eager retailers lined up before its first seedlings began to sprout in February.

Lead by Agriculture students Patrick Dosier, 22, and Paul Nurre, 24, Pomona Organics is positioned to have a significant presence in the locally grown, sustainable farming produce market.

“I have a lot of faith and confidence that they will pull it off,” says Dan Hostetler, professor and chair of the Plant Sciences department at Cal Poly Pomona. “This is an excellent project.”

Pomona Organics, which is a Cal Poly Pomona Green Team student club initiative, is growing seasonal vegetables and fruit including a variety of tomatoes and melons, sweet corn and bell peppers. The student group, which has about 15 active members, plans to sell its organic bounty at farmers markets in Irvine, Baldwin Park, Claremont and Pomona. Cal Poly Pomona’s Farm Store at Kellogg Ranch and select restaurants on campus also plan to carry the produce this spring.

About a half of an acre of the farm is located on noncontiguous plots at the John T. Lyle Center for Regenerative Studies where specialty crops such as daikon radishes are grown.

The rest of the farm is located on about 2.4 acres of Spadra Ranch south of the main Cal Poly Pomona campus. The acreage was home to a grapefruit orchard that had long been left to gather weeds. The white marsh style grapefruits fell out of favor in the 1970, and as time passed, the declining sales could not keep pace with the cost to pick the fruit.

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Hostetler arranged for the unruly overgrown property to be cleared during this past winter break enabling the students to get the field ready for planting. A lone wild pepper tree was left on the plot lending a new name and identity to the once-ignored property.

To the untrained eye, cultivating Pepper Tree Ranch looks like a huge undertaking for a student group. However, Dosier and Nurre, who have accrued work experience on- and off-campus and have gained a level of insight about plant and soil sciences from their coursework, will be able to manage the land, Hostetler said.

“They are both ambitious, quality students,” he said. “Not every student can do what they are doing.”

The College of Agriculture has data going back several years that show inorganic pesticides and other chemicals were not used on the property, so it can qualify to become certified by the California Certified Organic Farmers association. The same goes for the smaller plots at the Lyle Center, Dosier said.

Dosier has carefully arranged for all organic products such as seeds, moss and soil, to be used in the planting process. He also has several organic failsafe measures in place to deal with pesky insects.

Pomona Organics is a student enterprise project, which means the group has entered into crop share lease with the Cal Poly Pomona Foundation. A percentage of their crop sales are used to repay the Foundation and the College of Agriculture for expenses accrued getting the project started.

The goal is to become a small self-supporting business so Pomona Organics continues long after Dosier and Nurre graduate.

“The students will make money, but nobody is getting rich,” Dosier said.

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ABOUT CAL POLY POMONA — Striking the perfect balance between urban excitement and rural charm, Cal Poly Pomona is nestled in 1,428 rolling acres in the heart of sunny Southern California. With 2,600 faculty and staff to serve 20,000 students, Cal Poly Pomona’s mission is to advance knowledge by linking theory and practice while preparing students for leadership and careers in a multicultural world. The university champions an approach that places learning at the center of every program, course, and activity on campus. Students are afforded opportunities to apply their knowledge through hands-on projects, collaborate with faculty members on research, and participate in valuable internships and service-learning programs. Seven colleges and one school offer 66 undergraduate and 21 graduate degrees, as well as eight credential programs.