Increasingly, at each of our four A4 Program Student Farms, teachers are becoming more involved in the student groups and connecting field activities to classroom academics. Key principles discussed during lectures are demonstrated and reinforced in the field work. When unexpected problems develop, the students and teachers work together to find the answers. This helps students to develop problem solving skills.

Will involvement on student farms help to develop graduates that meet the expectations of employers following graduation? Internationally, there is ample evidence that practical ‘hands-on’ experiences—in coordination with strong academic programs—helps develop critical thinking skills and boosts the knowledge base of students. In a survey of students graduating from the A4 target faculties in 2010, the majority of respondents reported that they believed that their job readiness was enhanced through experiences on student farms.

—Ned Kalb, Chief of Party

The purpose of the A4 Newsletter is to connect staff members working within the A4 project, keeping them informed of on-going work across our Agriculture Faculties.

If you have comments, newsworthy topics or feature stories for future A4 Newsletters, please contact Ben Alkire — a4list@gmail.com or alkire@purdue.edu

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- —Why are Student farms important in learning?
- —June calendar of coming events
- —Farm Day June 24
- —Land Laboratory at Nangarhar University
- —Student internships at Balk University
- —Farm Activities at Herat University
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- —Kabul Student Farm
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Student Farms — Why are they Important to Student Learning?

What’s The Value of a Student Farm?

Traditionally, the skills and methodologies needed to grow vegetable, agronomic and fruit crops were passed down from one generation of farmers and gardeners to the next. Children were taught how to sow seeds, transplant seedlings, and harvest the ripened crops. They learned the value of applying manure, eliminating weeds and watering plants when moisture in the soil was short. Much like fishermen who dreamed of the big catch, as they grew, these young people had visions of bucket-sized tomatoes and crop yields that filled storage facilities to overflowing.

Fifty years ago, the majority of students entering agriculture faculties either grew up on a farm or were closely connected through a relative or neighbor. Today, that connection has changed, incoming students have less familiarity with actual growing of crops, animal husbandry and the of handling foodstuffs. This year, of the students who entered the 1st year class in Afghanistan’s faculties of agriculture, just over 50 percent are sons and daughters of an active farmers. Today’s students do not have the practical experience that for generations was present for freshmen students in agriculture. For the teachers of these students, the task of connecting production agriculture with classroom teaching is much more challenging.

Student farms, with more than 1,000 student participants in 2010, provide help for new students, filling in the gap with opportunities to learn farming and gardening skills through guided demonstrations and applied research plots. They get first-hand experience with comparisons of tillage techniques, differences in varieties, the use of different types of irrigation, disease and insect control and fertilization. They are introduced to principles of experimental design and scientific investigation. Students participating in group activities gain the experience of working in teams. And, they have the opportunity to forecast whether or not by the results of their own work if it would add profitability for farmers adopting their growing techniques.

Increasingly, at each of our four A4 Program Student Farms, teachers are becoming more involved in the student groups and connecting field activities to classroom academics. Key principles discussed during lectures are demonstrated and reinforced in the field work. When unexpected problems develop, the students and teachers work together to find the answers. This helps students to develop problem solving skills.

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—Ned Kalb, Chief of Party

A4 Mission Statement - Capacity building in Afghan Agriculture education to develop university academic programs that will educate Afghans to meet the national manpower needs of the Afghan agricultural sector.
Thursday, June 24—Farm Day at Kabul University

Kabul University Agriculture Faculty and A4 Program will be hosting the 3rd annual Farm Day on Campus, June 24. Registration will begin at 8:15, with the welcome address starting at 9am.

We are expecting hundreds of visitors turning out—students, staff and faculty, university officials, guests from outside institutions including dignitaries from Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Higher Education.

Walking tours will highlight student activities in Horticulture, Agronomy and Animal Science. Students and staff will be available to answer questions and discuss the plantings and displays set for the event.

Tour highlights will include the market garden, greenhouse, orchard, vineyard, perennial crops, field and forage crops, composting area, chicken house and livestock facility.

Please spread the word about this premier event, hosted by the Agriculture Faculty. Farm Day festivities cordially welcomes all interested visitors!

Guided farm tours will be featured
Three wheat research projects were implemented by professors at Nangarhar University’s Faculty of Agriculture, each aimed to bridge the ‘academic to practice’ learning gap of students.

The first project was entitled “Seeding rate and variety trial.” The objective was to train students about conducting variety trials and using research results for dissemination and publication. Students were involved in planning the experiment, designing the trials and managing the experiment, including data collection and analysis.

Research started December 12 with ten students from the Agronomy Department, guided by Professor Mohsin Shah Falah.

In a randomized block design, five seed rates and two varieties were combined to make ten treatments which were replicated three times.

‘Lalmitz’ and ‘Mazar99’ varieties were planted at rates of 18, 22, 25, 28, 32 kg/jerib. There were no significant differences observed in yield, however yields of ‘Lalmitz’ at the 28kg/jerib treatment were highest. For ‘Mazar99’ the rate of 32kg/j showed the highest overall yield. Higher seed rate did not yield higher rate of return.

A second research project, titled “Use of fertilizers” had the objective to optimize urea fertilizer application in conjunction with diammonium phosphate and animal manure. The project was conducted by ten agronomy students guided by Professor Abdul Hadi Asim. Nine treatments were used, replicated thrice. Fertilizers applied were: urea, animal manure and diammonium phosphate. The 30kg urea/jerib, four-ton/jerib animal manure and 25kg DAP treatment was found to be economically best.

A third student research project was implemented by Assistant Professor Aismatullah Durani, entitled “Wheat variety trials.” The objective was to find high yielding, disease resistant varieties for environmental conditions of Surkhrood District, Nangarhar. Ten varieties were investigated with grow-outs replicated three times in a RBD design. A total of ten students participated in this project.

A fourth research project was implemented by Assistant Professor Aismatullah Durani, entitled “Tomato and cucumber greenhouse.” The project was conducted by ten students from the Horticulture Department.

Greenhouse Cucumber Production

This project was started in early January 2010 by ten students of the Horticulture Department. It ended May 1st. This capacity building project was carried out to train the students on how to:

- install and build a greenhouse
- install a greenhouse drip irrigation system
- raise seedlings in trays in winter
- establish a cucumber trellising system
- conduct good agricultural practices and harvesting methods
- identify and control pests
- manage and control the greenhouse environment

There were 312 seedlings cultivated in a 120m² (5m x 24m) high tunnel. At its optimum, output exceeded 100 cucumbers per day for over three months! The total gross income of this greenhouse was 16,483 AFN ($375).
JDA has had interns involved in its projects throughout the A4 Program but it has really grown this year under the guidance of Venera Makhambetova and with our new A4 colleagues Haroon and Noor. We started the 2010 program with a series of interviews which included more than 70 interns - a process which in itself is important for students who will be applying for jobs in the next few years. With these students in mind, the A4 team met with potential employers around Mazar and introduced the program to potential project partners.

Following a series of meetings and introductions more than half of the interviewed students have been placed in internships this semester, including: FAO’s dairy processing plant and Wheat Lab, People in Need, ASAP, PHDP and IDEA-NEW as well as here with us at JDA.

In JDA we involve our interns in many projects including the A4 work at BUFA. Three interns play key roles as we support faculty teaching in plant and soils labs, three are involved on BUFA farm projects, and another four are working in a student-led project researching rabbit production. And there are more. From time to time we bring our interns together for particular experience, training, or workshops.

JDA promotes the usage of small two-wheeled tractors in Northern Afghanistan, so we took the opportunity to bring eleven interns together for a field seminar demonstration (see article below) where a number of students were able to receive training on the equipment itself.

JDA feels that the internship program is a key part of our work giving students exposure to real working environments, to and understand what might be demanded of them after graduation, develop professional networks, learn new skills and motivate them as they return to the classroom.

**Wheat Harvester Training**

A4 Program and Joint Development Associates Senior Agriculturalist, Venera Makhambetova has teamed up at Agriculture Faculty at Balkh University with Eng. Osman and Sami in wheat harvesting training of student interns at the JDA Farm. The small tractor usage, proper handling and safety training program was conducted at the end of May, followed by practical equipment testing in the field.

[Operating the tractor-harvester.]

[Students and staff of the wheat harvesting field training program.]
Student Farm Activities in Herat University

The Land Laboratory at Herat University’s Faculty of Agriculture is covers 2,800 m² and is shared by the A4 Project with the departments of Agronomy, Animal Science, Horticulture, and Plant Protection. The area is utilized by professors conducting basic experiments and by 3rd and 4th-year students where they learn techniques how to grow and manage specific crops. This is also the site for the proposed animal structure for the Animal and Veterinary Science departments.

The area was considered too small to be effective in providing practical experience for students, so an additional outside area was requested by A4 through Agriculture Dean Abdul Rahim Omid to the Chancellor’s Office. This area consists of about 2 hectares, but due to limited irrigation water, only 4,300 m² was used this season.

In 2009, student farm activities were restricted to simple growing techniques on selected crops because of area limitations. This year, several simple replicated trials were introduced involving effects of different cultural management practices on crop growth and development. This will enable the students to learn not only how to grow specific crops but also how to compare effects of different treatments on crop growth and development.

Several replicated experiments are being conducted by 4th-year students including: adaptation and yield potential of five processing tomato varieties, evaluation of different fertilizer rates and mulching on okra, evaluation of yield potential of wheat varieties, and evaluation of yield potential of soybean varieties. Strawberry and lettuce will be grown after the midterm examinations.

In the outside area, experiments being conducted are: evaluation, adaptation and yield potential of seven soybean lines, effect of spacing on growth and yield of two cotton varieties, effect of spacing on growth and yield of five corn varieties, pruning effects on tomatoes, and effect of compost and chemical fertilizer on growth and development of eggplant. A total of 125 4th-year students are participating in these activities.

Junior students were also encouraged to participate in farm activities by offering simple growing techniques for squash, eggplant, tomato, radish, and pumpkin, alfalfa and clover. About 93 3rd-year students are now involved. A thousand square meters is also being prepared for cultivation of medicinal plants common to the region, a project that will involve forty agronomy and horticulture students.

More student activities would have been planned if additional summertime irrigation water was available. In this outside area, the water source is a natural spring that may dry up during the summer season.

With the announcement of the start of farm activities, several students approached A4 staff suggesting crops and experiments they were interested to work on. As an example, a group of seven 3rd-year students (Ramin Sobhani, Farid Ahmad Timory, Mohammad Zahoor Sediqi, Aziz Ahmad Khakzar, Aref Aslami, Farzad Youz-bashi and Ahmad Faisal Natawan) volunteered to participate in other farm activities aside from ones assigned by A4 or their professors. They are now involved in five extra activities: growing okra and squash, growing *Atriplex* for erosion control, composting, effect of spacing on growth and yield of two cotton varieties, and effect of spacing on growth and yield of five corn varieties. This shows the eagerness and enthusiasm of agriculture students to learn the practical aspects in agriculture, a clear indication that more and more of these activities should be integrated in the course curriculum when A4 Project is no longer around.

It is also interesting to note that a number of professors are involved in providing guidance to the students. When A4 requested professors to suggest useful and informative topics that for students to work on, they immediately submitted possible topics. Actively participating professors are Roohollah Sarwarzade, Mohammad Qasem Jami and Ramin Nazarian of Agronomy and Ahmad Shah Mohammadi and Ahmad Farid Rahmany of Horticulture. Plant Protection, Animal and Veterinary Sciences professors are also very active in providing practical experience to students using the animals facilities in the Land Laboratory.
In May 2010, a workshop in Biological Laboratory Techniques was conducted by Ms Sofia Wilcox, A4 UDC in Kabul University, for the professors of Herat University Faculty of Agriculture. This is A4’s response to the request of the professors to be given practical techniques that will be useful when teaching biological subjects to agriculture students. Prof. Abdul Rahim Omid, Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture, participated in lecture and laboratory sessions joined by 11 other professors from Agronomy, Horticulture, Plant Protection, Animal Science and Veterinary Science.

Lectures were given on topics such as good laboratory practices, pH, buffers, pKa, enzymes and how they work, and colorimetric assays. After the lecture, professors participated in practical laboratory activities such as proper liquid measurement, titration, spectrophotometric determination of reaction rates and enzyme analysis. The A4 staff provided assistance to the workshop and also attended the lectures and practical to gain extra knowledge on the subject.

Specific topics were tailored for professors of veterinary and animal science departments. The professors and 35 students from the two departments had the opportunity of learning practical techniques in proper blood sampling from cow, sheep, goat and chicken. In the laboratory, the students were shown proper blood slide preparation, blood analysis and detection of blood parasites.

Ms Wilcox was impressed with the enthusiasm and interest shown by the professors and students who had to bear very hot conditions - not only in the field but also in the laboratory.

From the workshop final evaluations, the professors asked for more training of this type and other related topics to gain additional experience in teaching practical techniques to the students.

A4 Herat is discussing with Ms Wilcox on the possibility of having another workshop in the near future.

- Efren Altoveros, UDC Herat
In February 2010, Ben Alkire, Horticulturist from Purdue University joined the A4 staff and began concentrated efforts toward development of Kabul University’s Agriculture Faculty Student Farm.

Inside the Farm’s unheated greenhouse in February, cabbage family members (broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbages and cauliflower) were seeded into planting beds, followed in March with summer annual crops such as eggplant, pepper and tomato. The plan was to have thousands of seedlings ‘ready-at-hand’ for transplanting at the beginning of the spring school semester. Due to delays from 2009’s fall semester, 2010 classes began several weeks later than anticipated, thus delivery of a complete assortment of optimum-sized seedling transplants for the students became challenging. Transplanting to outdoor plots commenced the second week of April and continued through mid-May. Despite over-grown cabbage family seedlings and undersized eggplant, tomato and pepper transplants, crops in all plots responded with rapid growth. Remarkably, whether too big or too small, there has been minimal seedling attrition (and re-planting) of transplants across the farm.

Early success has been greatly due to careful pre-plant soil preparation. Cow manure - two large truckloads - were delivered for soil incorporation in addition to significant heaps of Student Farm compost processed from the previous year. Students were obligated to incorporate soil amendments and fertilizers by shovel and rake, all carried to site by wheelbarrow. In addition, plots were fertilized with diammonium phosphate. Student Farm soil registers pH 8.6 and is comprised of 25% calcium carbonate by weight; thus it has been highly beneficial to add organic material to somewhat ‘acidify’ the soil, improve micronutrient and phosphorus availability and improve tith.

Weed control has also been a priority. Early on, several plots and side areas were sprayed with glyphosate (Round Up) herbicide as an effort to manage difficult perennial weeds, mainly quackgrass and bindweed. Today’s vigilance in weed control will pay dividends in future seasons by reducing the overall soil weed seedbank. Weed control early is a discipline point that is constantly repeated (sometimes painfully) to students and farm staff, for this is one of the most important concepts to be instilled. Reduced yields due to inadequate weed control and weed pressure represent the most important yield potential detriment for crops countrywide. Furthermore, plans are being cast for setting aside a selected land area to be placed under continuous no-tillage crop rotation, just to demonstrate an alternative to current tillage methods. Plowing, harrowing, pulling and hoeing are the methods now in ubiquitous use. No-till seems to be little-known in Afghanistan. A hand-held, propane-powered flame weeder has also been purchased to serve as an additional example of a possible means of weed control.

Black plastic, cardboard and compost mulches have been lain in various tomato and pepper plots. Tomatoes growing through black plastic mulch are visibly larger, more mature and have out-paced growth of all other mulched treatments. Yield data from these plots will make an interesting comparison to un-mulched plots by mid-season.

With the long days of June, come explosive growths of weeds and the appearance of insect pests, soil and foliar diseases. Students have been reminded that their plots require constant routine maintenance and monitoring. The A4 Program has enrolled student teams and faculty of the Plant Protection Department to scout and monitor the horticultural and agronomic areas of the farm, and to create weekly reports.

Harvesting demands will begin in July, and student teams will be required to weigh and track amounts of produce coming from their plots. A new portable 20kg Ohaus scale has been purchased for this. Students have been asked to extrapolate yields from their plots to per jerib or hectare units. From these estimates, they are to suggest a monetary value and compare this to their input costs of materials and labor. Only with these numbers recorded, can gross and net profitability of their ‘farming’ endeavors be discussed.

At season’s end, students will be presenting their findings to peer groups and the A4 staff. In advance of their presentations, seminars will be given to help guide students in making effective public presentations, including key components of a good-quality PowerPoint assisted talk.

- Ben Alkire
Student Farm, Spring 2010—University of Kabul

New and Unusual Crops

Introductions at Kabul University Student Farm

- Artichoke
- Asparagus
- Arugula or Rocket
- Scarlet runner pole beans (*Phaseolus coccinnus*)
- Brussels Sprouts
- Pointy-head’ hybrid cabbage (fall crop)
- Kohlrabi
- Rocoto Pepper, *Capsicum pubescens*
- Radicchio, red (fall crop)
- Heirloom tomatoes, striped and fresh market types
- Hybrid processing tomatoes (four varieties)
- Swiss Chard, red, yellow and green
- Spelt (grain)
- Rye (grain)

Snapshot: Student Farm at Kabul:

- Established 2007
- Total area: 3 hectares or 15 jeribs
- 2 hectares (10 jeribs) agronomy area
- 1 hectare (5 jerib) horticulture & animal science
- Student involvement: 450
- Student teams & projects: 85
- Average number of student per team: 5

Plantings in early May

Plantings in early June

Students and A4 staff member Laila Amin (right) harvesting our early-crop kohlrabi.

Kohlrabi vegetable

Artichokes thrive exceptionally at the Student Farm
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