



PHOTO BY SHARI LEWIS/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Art meets agriculture in a crop of veggies inspired by campus collaborations and Henry David Thoreau.

Above: How does his garden grow? Pretty well, says artist Michael Mercil, standing in the Beanfield.

A patch of ground near the Wexner Center for the Arts marks the site of an artistic and agricultural experiment.

Michael Mercil—with the help of his wife, art students, and other faculty—planted more than a thousand bean seeds there last July, then tended them the way a mother hen watches over chicks she’s not sure will thrive.

But thrive the plants did, despite soil that proved a bit inhospitable and cucumber beetles that were more than a bit hostile.

The Beanfield is a 650-square-foot homage not only to Ohio State’s heritage as a land-grant university, but to Henry David Thoreau’s nineteenth-century classic of simple living and self-reliance, *Walden*.

“I started rereading Thoreau about two years ago,” said Mercil, an associate professor of art. “It was a book that was a great influence on me when I was a sophomore in high school.”

In *Walden*, Thoreau describes his experiment with growing two and a half acres of pole beans and how he used the experience to cultivate empathy with the community and with nature. Mercil’s small plot of beans is intended to continue that conversation about how a person’s art can both reflect the culture in which it was made and create culture around it.

The two-year Beanfield project is part of the Living Culture Initiative, which Mercil founded with his wife, art professor Ann Hamilton. The intent is to examine how the Department of Art can foster awareness of the university as both a repository of culture and a creator of it.

“It’s kind of an ethic that we’re trying to establish and follow for ourselves as teachers,” Mercil said. “It’s a way for the arts to become more visible on campus and to cultivate partnerships that make campus culture more real to people who live and work here.”

One example of such partnerships is the one that created the Beanfield. The Wexner Center was involved, along with a program in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences that was started last year to forge new ways of thinking about socially responsible food production, land use, and environment practices.

Mercil plans to use the crop harvested from the Beanfield to make soup. Dried beans will be given to students across campus as another facet of the Living Culture Initiative.

“We’re going to hand them out as ‘seeds of imagination’ or ‘food for thought,’” Mercil said. “What students do with them after that is entirely up to them.” ■