It’s like one of those ongoing jokes that you can drop into without explanation, except we’re serious about it. As we drive around in Nathan’s clunky, faithful truck, we’ll pass sunny patches of grass and simply say, “There.” After just a few months growing food in Tallahassee, I’m beginning to see possible gardens everywhere.

I had grown two things, a cup of grass seed in kindergarten and a kohlrabi in third grade, before I moved to Florida to join Nathan Ballentine with his business of helping people grow their own food and share it.

Within 12 hours of getting off the bus, I’d sown rows of turnips, beets, carrots and rutabagas; within 24 hours I was helping kids at Nathan’s church plant a garden of vegetables to give away at the food pantry. Within a week I had learned how to build the raised-bed gardens that serve as the moneymaking center for Nathan’s Tallahassee Food Gardens. After two weeks, I had found the first two churches whose community gardens I would be helping to start or expand; learned how to install micro-irrigation; and helped lead two workshops, one for the food pantry and another for teens with developmental disabilities. I was learning.

Nathan graduated from Warren Wilson in 2008 with an integrative studies degree in community organizing and returned to Tallahassee with the thought of re-rooting himself. When I ask him how he started his business, he launches into vaguely connected stories with the take-away of, “Well, I really don’t know.” He jump-started Tallahassee Food Gardens by standing by the roadside in overalls with a pitchfork, à la *American Gothic*, holding signs reading, “Grow your own food and share it,” “Honk if you like food gardens” and “We can grow food.” The signs are in his closet waiting for his next roadside show.
As Warren Wilson graduates, Nathan and I are well-schooled in blurring the lines between academics, work and service; now, the lines have all but disappeared.

In two years, Nathan has built both a successful business and a good name for himself in Tallahassee. His studies in community organizing have helped him work with different communities to start gardens. His two years working on the Landscaping Crew taking care of the EcoDorm permaculture garden have given him the practical know-how to plan and maintain a variety of foodschemes.

I arrived in the fall, hoping to learn about growing food and working with people while maintaining a healthy idealism and making a bit of money. As Warren Wilson graduates, Nathan and I are well-schooled in blurring the lines between academics, work and service; now, the lines have all but disappeared. Raised-bed garden placement (work) necessitates researching plants and their growing seasons, and thus can be a scholarly endeavor. Listening to elders tell stories about growing up on farms teaches me enormous amounts, but it’s happening in Miss Mitchell’s Senior Center healthy living classes, so does that make it service? And if we create a garden at a church for a reduced rate, spend an evening helping the youth group plant food, then return for problem solving, is that work, or is it service, or is it just another learning experience for us? Categories have blurred to the point where they’re irrelevant.

People ask, “What do you do?” One answer is this: We install and plant raised-bed food gardens and take home checks (and, a few bewildering times, hundred dollar bills). We use the money to subsidize the free work we do in the community.

Really, though, the work we do is a litany of food-related activities: We develop and lead workshops to teach people how to grow their own food; we collect and publish community garden stories to instruct and inspire; we walk around with pastors who want their congregations to start growing food in their church’s parking lot; we organize our community to host a visit from Will Allen, urban farmer extraordinaire from Growing Power in Milwaukee; we meet with city planners who want to create community gardens; we dream about starting a lettuce growing and delivery business; we eat a lot of home-grown food and laugh with our neighbors as we figure out what on earth to do with daikon radishes. Every day, we set out with the goal of finding ways to support the dream of Tallahassee being able to feed itself.

When we drive home at the end of a full day, we see empty lots full of weeds, trash and grass. More and more, though, as we drive through Tallahassee, we see things starting to grow: collard greens, turnips, broccoli, lettuce. We see gardens taking root, and we see our part in it.

Lindsay and Nathan were both integrative studies majors who received the Pfaff Cup and Sullivan Award, respectively.