The Utah State University Salt Lake Center has opened a greenhouse on campus that will serve students in the horticulture program by providing a hands-on learning experience.

“We felt it was important to have an on-site greenhouse because it’s convenient,” said Paul Johnson, head of the Plants, Soils and Climate department. “Students can very easily go from the classroom to actually working with the plants right away.”

The 1,800-square-foot facility has been six years in the making. David Vernon, associate vice president of the Salt Lake Center, is excited to see the project come to fruition, allowing faculty the chance to design their courses with hands-on experience, which will help prepare students to enter the horticulture field.

“Our students are able to learn these skills in the courses they are taking and apply them,” Vernon said. “They can experiment with the things they are learning right away.”

In addition to providing a space for students to gain experience, the greenhouse is also shared with New Roots, an International Rescue Committee program that helps refugee farmers use the skills they already have to help them provide food for their families and communities, or to develop their farms into businesses.

USU Salt Lake horticulture students will work with New Roots employees and refugee farmers from Sudan, Burma, Bhutan, Chad, Somalia and Burundi to start the seedlings, which will then be taken and planted at the local farms.

“We are helping refugees grow plants,” said horticulture program coordinator Rachel Broadbent. “And they are plants that are familiar to them.”

Jacob Arrington, a junior in the horticulture program, has enjoyed this aspect of the greenhouse. He sees working with members of the community as something that the horticulture industry has always been about.

“I think that is so cool that we are doing that,” Arrington said about the New Roots collaboration. “It shows the students a real-world example of what we can do with a greenhouse. The horticulture industry has always had close ties to the community.”

With the completion of the greenhouse, the horticulture program in Salt Lake can continue to grow and serve students. Faculty are excited about what the facility can provide.

“We’ve had this Wasatch Front horticulture program for more than 20 years,” Johnson said. “It has grown from a very small group to now a large number of students. I think the greenhouse can be a centerpiece.”

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