



2026 NEWSLETTER

EARTH ALMANAC



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SHARING COMMON GROUND, CULTIVATING CONNECTION

1603 N RIVERFRONT DR
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GROWING FOR THE FUTURE

BY LAURA MARSALA PETERSON, LEC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



When I look back at this year, the word that comes to mind is *transition*. I don't know about you, but the older I get, the harder life's transitions feel. The shifts of these past few years haven't been small — they've been seismic, reshaping ground beneath us we once thought was unshakable: our lives, our communities, our sense of what's steady.

But I've come to believe that in times like these, our responsibility isn't just to

hope for better — it's to actively transmute that hope into action. Nature has always known this: friction and upheaval aren't the end of growth. They're often the beginning of it.

What I find hopeful about times of change is that they often ask us to get creative — to reconfigure current systems and ways of doing things so we can come out better, stronger, and more sturdy for the future. This past winter, the Garden at Homestead experienced a fire in the shed that burned everything. After the smoke cleared, the community rallied to rebuild. With the hands of many, the garden shed was eventually rebuilt, tools were donated and resourced, and the garden not only grew back — it also expanded. Perhaps this is what this chaotic time calls all of us to — creativity and collaboration, the willingness to keep reimagining and redefining. These are the skills we need to stay resilient.

Living Earth Center is in the midst of our own seismic shift. We know our time at Good Counsel won't last forever, and we know a transition off the Hill is somewhere on the horizon. It can be hard to think about how to keep the ideas and values bestowed upon us by the School Sisters of Notre Dame when our deep sense of place shifts around us.

I keep returning to a simple truth: this legacy isn't something we leave behind someday — it's something we're building right now, in this very moment. This year, LEC took a meaningful step toward a new forever home, and the vision we're shaping is already rooted in what the School Sisters of Notre Dame and the stewards before us built on this land. Their legacy isn't behind us — it's alive in what we do next.

This summer we transplanted rhubarb that the School Sisters have stewarded for decades off the Hill and onto the Farm. I've found

myself thinking about that rhubarb often. A plant used to its home can feel a little shocked when its roots first meet new ground — but given care, the right conditions, and time, it doesn't just survive the move. It thrives, sometimes more fully than it could have where it started — and we're already seeing that with the rhubarb. We believe the same will be true for us.

Transition often feels hard and scary, but what changes fear into something else entirely is knowing we're not alone. When a community comes together with shared purpose, uncertainty stops feeling like something to survive and starts feeling like something to meet.

That's the spirit we want to carry into this next chapter. In the months ahead, we'll be asking you, our LEC community, to join us: to help turn hope into action, to plant the seeds (and trees) of what's next, and to prove, together, that we have the collective and creative power to build, grow, and tend good things. More details are coming soon. For now, know this — together, we are the ones creating the legacy that will grow for the future.

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- Meetings scheduled for the 3rd Monday of every other month
- Next Meeting: September 21
- Welcome to new member: Anne Ganey and returning member: Joyce Prahm
- Thank you to members whose terms have ended: Monse Perez Barrios and Briana Parr Baker. Briana was the last remaining continually serving member of the inaugural board, formed in 2017.



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HOMESTEAD COMMUNITY GARDEN CONTINUES TO GROW

LYNN ROZEN, GARDEN MENTOR

What makes the Homestead Garden unique is that it is the first community garden in Mankato where people do not have to travel to be in their garden. People walk right out of their apartment into the garden. Many gardeners do not have transportation, so being able to walk out the door and pick dinner is a game changer. People love that. It makes me smile when people say to me, "I love that I don't have to go to Walmart."

My hope is that the Homestead Garden becomes a model for building other community gardens at apartments and in affordable living spaces. It just makes so much sense. I started gardening myself on the Hill because I was living in an apartment and did not have space to garden.

Over the four years since the garden began, I have enjoyed watching the gardeners form friendships and a sense of community. There is a lot of mutual support and shared purpose through gardening together. As a garden mentor, I bring years of experience into the role of managing the Homestead garden. I like to support new gardeners, help them get started and gain confidence. It's very fulfilling to see someone who is new to gardening the first year become a mentor themselves after a few seasons.

I am so proud of how well the garden has worked for the Homestead community. I remember the first year someone said to me, "Well, that sounds like a good idea," the



The 2026 Homestead Community Gardens, featuring the new shed, which replaced the one destroyed by last winter's fire, surrounded by the green, growing gardens.

subtext being that it wasn't going to work in practice. I think the reason it has worked well is that we started small and built more gardens each year as the demand has grown. I try to stay attuned to what the gardeners want.

It's important to me to create a space of beauty. We plant a forty-foot row of zinnia on each end of the garden every year. We give out free bouquets every Fall. Homestead residents really appreciate the beauty of the flowers. Even people who don't garden come out every day to look at the flowers. The garden has become an outdoor oasis for people. One gardener said, "I just like to sit out here and watch things grow."

I was reading about creating environments where people thrive. It's the concept of "third spaces." Research shows that having spaces separate from home and work where people hang out together with a shared purpose is important our mental health. If the shared space is outdoors in natural beauty and involves doing things for others,

the effect on making humans happy is even greater. I'm biased, but I think a Community Garden is the ultimate third space. Growing food together, supporting each other through the ups and downs of gardening, and sharing food is magic. We have a dedicated garden where we grow food to share with other Homestead residents.

We had a big setback this year when a fire occurred this winter. Everything was destroyed: our shed and all the tools, our picnic table, our bench. It was shocking and sad for gardeners, but it really galvanized our group to make the garden even more lovely this year. Instead of a Phoenix rising, we got tomatoes and sunflowers rising.

One unforeseen benefit has been putting Homestead on the monarch migration path! The area went from a pollinator desert to a rich environment for pollinators. Last August, we could easily spot 30 monarchs at one time coming by to sip from our flowers.



Garden Mentor Lynn and Community Gardener Rockett pause for a selfie in the Homestead Community Gardens.

SAVE THE DATE

October 10th ~ Fall Farm Fest



Fall fun and games for everyone!

December 21 ~ Winter Solstice



Join us and welcome back the light!

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

BECKY BATES

I believe I started gardening up at Good Counsel in 2008, when I helped with one of the first partner plots, where the vegetables grown were donated either to the ECHO Food Shelf or to Theresa House. After that, I ended up with my own plot, where I am well known amongst friends for being more successful with kale and dill than any other crops.

My love of gardening came from helping my dad plan our vegetable garden during Montana winters, and then from my mom letting me “cook” my own dinner by going out to the garden with a big bowl and a knife to gather salad ingredients.

As the transition from the Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry to Living Earth Center began, I was able to join the inaugural board of the new non-profit. I served as the treasurer for about three years and then as the board chair for another few. It was exciting to be able to use my math

and policy skills to support the organization. Whatever your talents are, there is a place where organizations like LEC can benefit from your skills. It was eye opening to see how boards of community organizations work to support and advocate by bringing together people with diverse strengths. These days, I’m mostly just a gardener, and I love meeting other gardeners and learning from them.

As a monthly donor to Living Earth Center, I am confident that my financial gifts to the organization are being put to good use in our community. I know the budget focuses on doing as much as we can with a relatively small budget, with emphasis on both ecological and financial long-term health. I believe in the LEC mission of building common ground and seeking justice, and I know additional funds will expand what we are able to do.

I was asked in an interview once what I



would do if I wasn’t being a professor, a job I love. I said I would do work to make sure that all children were fed, that no child had to spend part of a learning day hungry or unsure of whether they would be fed that day.

To me, being part of Living Earth Center, whether as a community gardener, board member, donor, student of interesting classes, farm volunteer, or participant in solstice events, lets me be part of strengthening our local food network and increasing the chance that food security for all in our region is possible.

YOUR DONATIONS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

We know that current times are uncertain and economically challenging for many of you. While we are all feeling pressure, those most affected are our community members already struggling with food insecurity and hunger.

Community Growing Spaces play an important role in leveling the playing field. They insure anyone who wants to grow their own food has space to do so. They also ensure that fresh organic produce is available to the most vulnerable members of our community.

Through our Community Food Connection (CFC) Programs, LEC directly connects people to the land and to healthy organic produce. Your support of these programs is needed now more than ever.

Donations of all amounts make a big impact at a local level.

If you are interested in becoming a legacy sponsor by putting LEC in your estate plan, please contact our Executive Director Laura Marsala Peterson at lpeterson@livingearthcentermn.org.

LEC’s Community Food Connection Program Includes:

- **Youth Gardening Initiative** - Includes summer gardening classes with youth from MY Place, Loyola, and ISD77 ages pre-K to teens. In 2024, our Seed to Sauce Program connected over 1,000 area youth with a hands-on gardening experience.
- **Produce Donation** - Last year, over 2900 lbs of fresh organic produce was donated to community partners like ECHO Food Shelf, St. Peter Food Shelf, and FOCP Summer Food Program.
- **Emerging Growers** - Program has grown from 3 to 17 participants. We are working with Growers to create pathways to enter the local food economy.
- **Community Garden Partnerships** - Our flagship partnership with MNSU School of Allied Health and Nursing running the dementia-friendly Eng-AGE-ment Garden is in its 7th year!
- **Community Garden Scholarships** - Annually, LEC provides an average of 12 scholarships, ensuring that anyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, has access to land to grow food for themselves and their families.

If you would like to become a monthly sustaining donor, either scan the QR code to the right or return the pledge card below and check the “make this a monthly donation” box.



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Our sincerest thank you to each and every one of you.

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Tyler Buhn
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Ellie Camp
Camp Ignite Students
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SEED TO SAUCE

THE THIRD YEAR IN PICTURES



In its third year, LEC's Seed to Sauce youth education program continues to grow. Already this year we have had over 1,000 area youth participants, ages pre K through middle school.

Students learn to start seeds, tend a garden, about beneficial insects, and how to be good stewards of the land. As the season turns from growing to harvesting, as seen below, students are beginning to enjoy partaking of the fruits of their labors.



2025: A LOOK BACK



In March, LEC staff attended the Schools Sisters of Notre Dame Leadership Luncheon in St. Paul. They shared the day with both School Sisters and past Board Members.



In August, Garden Manager Mal and longtime gardeners/volunteers Bruno and Jim gave the Big Red Barn a lil' glow up - repainting all the wooden doors so they look shiny and new!

Here are a few of our 2025 highlights:

- Over 3900 lbs of fresh organic produce, grown by LEC Staff, Volunteers, and Emerging Growers was donated to our community partners
- Our Community Garden was full with 110 gardeners and their families, growing healthy food and quality relationships. 23 garden scholarships were awarded, ensuring everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, had access to land to grow food.
- Eleven Emerging Growers participated in our Local Foods Purchase Assistance Grant Program. They were reimbursed a total of \$13,250 for produce they grew and donated. Much of the donated produce was culturally significant - greens like saga and managu, common in East Africa, but not readily available in Southern Minnesota.
- In its 2nd year, 1507 youth attended 110 workshops as part of our Seed to Sauce Program. Partners included ISD 77, MY Place, Loyola, YMCA Summer Camps, Camp Ignite, and the Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota.
- 715 volunteer hours were logged at the Blue Earth County Community Farm by over 100 individual volunteers. Volunteers play an integral part in the success of our Produce Donation Program.



In May, the U of M Extension Office donated a pack shed to the Community Farm. Extension staff and LDS youth group volunteers helped Farm Manager Sky assemble the shed in a single day! We now have an amazing place to wash and prep the food grown at the Farm before it is donated to our partners throughout the community.



This past winter, monthly Volunteer Days were held to help prep seeds for spring planting and other indoor winter work. It was a wonderful opportunity to keep LEC connections going year round!

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

RONETTE JEANNE COLE

We sat down with longtime Community Farm volunteer Ronette Jeanne Cole to chat about what she enjoys about helping out at the Farm and what keeps her coming back.

LEC: Could you please give a little introduction of yourself?

RJC: My name is Ronette Jeanne Cole, I'm a resident of Mankato, and this year will be my 4th season volunteering at the Blue Earth County Community Farm.

LEC: How did you first learn about volunteering opportunities at the farm?

RJC: One day I was out riding my bike down the Red Jacket Trail and noticed a group of people working at the Farm. Someone I knew was there, so I stopped and asked what was going on. When I learned

what they were doing, I knew this is where I needed to be!

LEC: What keeps you coming back?

RJC: Knowing my time there is working for the greater good and for a greater future.

LEC: What are some of your favorite jobs you do when volunteering at the farm?

RJC: Honestly, I love doing all the things! I also love having the opportunity to learn how to create a sustainable garden to grow fresh produce for the community, It is the best feel!

LEC: Anything else you want to share?

RJC: Yes, I think it is important that all involved - the volunteers, donors, LEC staff,



and community members that visit events at the Farm - be mentioned in this spotlight as well. As it is said, "teamwork makes the dream work!"

I will continue to volunteer and be involved with LEC and the Community Farm for as long as I am able.

Yaaaaay! :)

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER NIGHTS AT THE FARM

SKYANNE WALKER, LEC FARM MANAGER

The Community Volunteer Days at the Community Farm began because I was struggling with the best way to get more volunteers to the farm. Cora and I were brainstorming for ideas and we started thinking about what people like to do during the summer, and grilling came up.

We tried it out, and the first one was a success, so we have continued to build on them. Now we have them once a month during the summer. Each time it feels like more people show up, and that feels good because it shows that we're on the right track for raising awareness about what we do at the farm.

The fun thing is that at each event we get a blend of new and returning volunteers. We have regular volunteers that keep coming, even if it is super hot, and then they get to be paired up with new volunteers. It really helps to have people who know the space work with those that haven't been out there before. They can show them how we do things, and it is a nice opportunity for people who maybe normally wouldn't spend time with each other to connect through gardening.

The volunteers return for many reasons. Some because they know that moving their body outside is good for their mental health, some because they care about feeding their community, and yet others because they enjoy the atmosphere and want to meet new people in the community. Whatever their individual reasons are for coming back, it helps that they also get dinner at these community volunteer



Community Volunteer Days happen every last Thursday of the month each summer from 5 - 7 pm. Volunteers come and help with general farm tasks with dinner provided by LEC.

Pictured above: SkyAnne and volunteers prepping potatoes for planting during the May 2026 event.

events. When we all sit down to eat together, we get to know each other better, and that feels good.

It also gives me peace of mind knowing that if the weeds are getting bad or I have a larger project that needs to get done like washing the seed starting supplies for next year or turning the compost pile, I can count on a larger group to work together to turn a huge project into something that can be finished quickly. We like to say that many hands make light work, and there is definitely truth to that. Turning the compost pile by myself feels daunting at best, but with a group of 4 or 5 people, it becomes doable within a volunteer shift.

Community volunteer nights are the perfect opportunity for anyone interested in coming

to the farm and learning what we do. They can work alongside other volunteers and play a part in growing food that will feed those area residents that need it most. They will also hopefully have some fun and become a part of Living Earth Center's community as well.

HELP FEED YOUR COMMUNITY

VOLUNTEER AT THE COMMUNITY FARM!

We'd love to see you out at the BEC Community Farm! Volunteer opportunities are available for both groups and individuals.

Scan QR code to the right or email our Farm Manager at communityfarm@livingearthcentermn.org for more information on how you can get involved!



LOCAL ARTIST SPOTLIGHT



Living in southern Minnesota, Dana Sikkila is first known as a visual artist. Her practice combines printmaking, painting, sculpture, and site-specific installations with an impressive sense of scale and playfulness that pushes new ideas of contemporary art.

Her work has been viewed and discussed all over the state in places such as the Mayo Clinic, Minnesota Museum of American Art, Macy's Department Store, Hennepin Theatre Trust, University of Minnesota St. Paul, Minnesota Children's Museum, and the Minneapolis St. Paul Airport. She has developed numerous grassroots cultural projects and exhibitions throughout the state, having her work displayed everywhere from traditional gallery spaces to highway billboards.



REAL FOOD FOR REAL PEOPLE

Refreshing Cucumber Salad *from SkyAnne Walker, LEC Farm Manager*

Sky found this recipe at allrecipes.com when looking for something to bring to one of the Community Farm Volunteer Day events. It is the perfect way to use up an overabundance of cucumbers and is as refreshing as the name implies.

It was a big hit with the volunteers after a hot July evening working at the Farm. Her only change to the recipe as originally written was to substitute white onion for red and to add some fresh dill.

We had a discussion about what else could be added to this recipe. Suggestions included hard boiled eggs and broccoli, although really any over abundance of veggies that you may have lying around would make a delicious addition to this already tasty summer salad.



Refreshing Cucumber Salad

- 2 small cucumbers, thinly sliced
- 1/2 small red onion, thinly sliced
- 1 large tomato, halved and sliced
- 3 T mayonnaise
- 1 T white vinegar
- 1/4 t salt
- 1/2t ground black pepper

In a medium bowl, toss together cucumbers, onion, and tomato. Gently stir in mayo, vinegar, salt and pepper until coated. Cover and refrigerate at least 1 hour before serving.

submitted to allrecipes.com by ShawnaRae