

"It takes a village to raise a carrot"

Gaining Ground and the Lexington Interfaith Garden



Story & Photos by
By Mary Kantor

A simple pavilion is at the center of the farm, a modest structure furnished with a few picnic tables, a hammock, an old upholstered chair, and a vintage ice-box. Colored-glass bottles and vases overflowing with wild flowers are scattered about the space. Wooden wind chimes, prayer flags, and metal bells dangle from the building. Hanging from the inside rafters are giant paper mâché tomatoes. Nets strung from the ceiling are full of dried gourds. A tiny bird has taken up residence in one of the gourds, and is darting in and out to feed the hungry brood inside. Beneath this miniature meal setting, a larger-scale work of providing food takes place.

Volunteers at the picnic tables sort the just-picked produce of the day, cleaning and preparing it to be given to those who are in need of food. Hunger relief and volunteerism are the key elements of Gaining Ground, an organization with the subtitle "Growing Food, Growing Community." Gaining Ground, located at the Henry David Thoreau birthplace farm in Concord, Massachusetts, "grows organic produce for hunger relief with help from volunteers of all ages and abilities, who work and learn in our gardens." The mission statement of Gaining Ground goes on to say: "In short, we grow food and give it away to people who need it. For free."

Founded by Concord resident Jamie Bemis, Gaining Ground began in 1994 as a small garden on private land. The non-profit organization now has its main farm on one of the oldest continually farmed plots of land in America. The seventeen acres of land, leased from the Town of Concord's Natural Resources Commission, has been farmed for more than 350 years. "Land with a history – as well as a future" the organization's literature states. Of the seventeen acres, five are

cleared. Four of these are used for growing, and with rotation of these, two and a half acres are actively planted at any one time. To meet rising demand for their produce, they are also working towards returning two and a half more acres of overgrown meadow to agricultural use.

The Village

Seventy percent of the work in the gardens are performed by volunteers who do a variety of chores, including picking, pruning, mulching, transplanting, preparing fruit and vegetables for distribution, fence building,



At left: Garlic awaits patient hands. Above: Pat Rabby of The Religious Society of Friends and Barbara Munkres of Pilgrim Church clean the garlic bulbs. Below: Mark Sandeen & Connie Gregg work row by row.



weeding, weeding, and more weeding. Under the leadership and able hands of Gaining Ground farmer Verena Wieloch and her staff, the skills and needs of people are matched with the work that needs to be done on a specific day. In 2008 more than 2000 volunteers of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds contributed over 6300 volunteer hours. And almost everyone who volunteers at Gaining

is done by doing and it's done outside. "How fun is that?" the organization's materials ask. "We see real opportunities in experiential learning on the farm. Some of us call this the joy and wonder of the garden... We rely on the spontaneity of experience. For example, if it's buggy outside, volunteers learn about bugs. If it hasn't rained in weeks, they learn about irrigation. If a flock of turkeys wanders

shoots rotten tomatoes alarming distances." "My dad was a gardener and grew a lot of what we ate," says farmer Wieloch about her early influences. "I think I had a little bit of it plunked in my mind and that's what's important about the kids who come out here. Even if they think, 'I don't like this,' just a little taste of it literally plants that mental seed. They're going to remember and say, 'That was really fun.'"

The Carrot

Gaining Ground crops are transported no more than twenty minutes from the farm; this food is distributed no more than twenty-four hours after it is harvested. As noted in their mission, this local, and sustainable approach to farming is kept on a small scale, "enabling a closer connection with the land," with growth "in a careful, considered fashion." Regarding this thoughtful tending of the land, Wieloch recalls her grandmother: "She used to say that farms are like teeth. If you don't take care of them, you'll miss 'em when they're gone."

Each growing season approximately 20,000 pounds of organic produce is raised. The recipients are individuals and families, with over forty households served this growing season. This food is also served and distributed at about a dozen meal programs, food pantries, and shelters in the area, including The Open Table (Concord), Food for Free (Cambridge), Ayer Council for Aging, Sylvia's Haven (Devens), Sudbury Food

true. But it is. And by donating this produce, we help do more than keep people fed. We help inspire hope."

Lexington Interfaith Garden

According to the Gaining Ground organization: "We're excited about the potential our model holds in communities beyond Concord. We don't want to become a huge organization or open Gaining Ground 'franchises.' We simply want to inspire people to do something similar in their own communities." And the Gaining Ground model inspired a summer field trip from Lexington by members of the Lexington InterFaith Environmental Action Team (LIFE Action Team). According to the local leader, Mark Sandeen: "We've been asking ourselves the question: How can we live our faith in a way that's best for the Earth as well as our community? The more we looked into the issues of environmental stewardship, the more we realized what a big impact our food choices have on the environment and on our neighbors, whether they be local, regional or global neighbors." LIFE Action Team has people participating from a wide range of faith communities in Lexington and the surrounding area. Many of the members volunteered at Gaining Ground over the summer to learn how to run an organic farm/garden. "One of our first steps toward establishing our own interfaith garden is to learn from others in the area who have been successful... Our main objective is to see an organic farm in action, to learn everything we can and to

experience the beauty of God's gift of growing our food," said Sandeen on one of these summer visits.

Momentum is building towards this interfaith garden, as Sandeen notes: "the seeds of the idea have been planted, and we are watering and fertilizing right now." After a September planning meeting, Rev. Dana Allen Walsh of Hancock Church stated: "There is a lot of excitement and energy in town

for an organic, sustain-

able interfaith garden. I think issues of food insecurity, hunger, and sustainability have touched a nerve with many people in town." According to Barbara Munkres of Pilgrim Church, "It is an idea whose time has come." A location for a garden has not yet been chosen but there are three strong possibilities with each currently being evaluated. "We are not ready to announce the location yet. We



Gorgeous beets with bright red spines yield treasure above and below ground. Beets are full of folate, manganese and potassium. The greens are loaded with beta-carotene, vitamin C, iron and calcium.



A small shelter provides a gathering place for all of the volunteers at the Gaining Ground farm.

Ground comes back.

Gaining Ground does not just provide food for the hungry, but it also teaches people about organic gardening, the basics of agriculture, how food is grown, cultivated and distributed. According to Emily Wheeler, the administrative coordinator, "We serve the community in two ways. We help feed the hungry, and we also provide a way for volunteers to become part of the process. People from the suburbs and the city alike love learning about gardening." This learning

through the fields, they learn a little bit about turkeys. And our staff is right there with them, learning as well." And while teaching and learning may be involved, Gaining Ground's website states: "In the end our volunteers, Board, staff, and supporters have to find their work with Gaining Ground rewarding and fun." In the materials of their thirty-page model and mission, a whole page is devoted to fun, with one item on the list playfully announcing: "We have a fully operational funnelator at the garden that



Volunteers weeding the carrots under the supervision of Michelle from Gaining Ground.

Pantry, Concord-Assabet School, Loaves and Fishes (Ayer), Project Soup (Somerville), Walnut Street Center (Somerville), and Cameron Senior Center (Westford). Gaining Ground also maintains a waiting list of organizations in need. "By introducing high-value, healthy, fresh organic produce into the hunger-relief system, we reach people who may not get anything like it. And who really appreciate it. We've seen food recipients get all misty-eyed at the sight of all the produce we give away—because they can't believe it's

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is a lot of excitement and energy in town for an organic, sustainable interfaith garden. I think issues of food insecurity, hunger, and sustainability have touched a nerve with many people in town." According to Barbara Munkres of Pilgrim Church, "It is an idea whose time has come." A location for a garden has not yet been chosen but there are three strong possibilities with each currently being evaluated. "We are not ready to announce the location yet. We are hoping to announce it at the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service on Tuesday, November 24th at Temple Emunah," said Rev. Walsh.

The Mission

A plot is not yet in place for the groundbreaking and tilling of this garden, and a website is still under construction, but the mission statement articulated on the site is complete.

The Lexington Interfaith Garden builds meaningful interfaith relationships by working together to grow organic produce for our hungry neighbors.

Our Hope is:

- *To provide fresh produce for people in need.*
- *To educate ourselves and our community on the value of local, sustainable farming.*
- *To build connections within our interfaith communities.*
- *To have fun while doing rewarding work.*
- *To foster the notion of community and community work.*

At this stage, ten faith communities are actively involved in the planning for the Interfaith Garden: First Parish U.U., Temple Emunah, Islamic Center of Boston in Wayland, Hancock Church, Temple Isaiah, Pilgrim UCC, The Religious Society of Friends, Follen Society, Church of Our Redeemer, and Grace Chapel. One hundred percent of the harvest of an interfaith garden will go to feeding the hungry; the Lexington

Interfaith Pantry will be one of the ways this produce is distributed.

Rev. Walsh notes: "We are hoping to get a \$100 contribution from each faith community for the garden. We plan on starting small and using the first year as a 'pilot' to see what works and what doesn't. To accomplish our long-term goal of having a permanent, sustainable garden in Lexington, we will be working with LexFarm to advocate and support their mission." (LexFarm is the Lexington Community Farm Coalition, whose goal is to bring community farming to Lexington.)

The home page of the interfaith garden's developing website announces:

Communities of faith can play a substantial role by demonstrating a commitment to supporting a sustainable food system by creating interfaith gardens that grow food for any one who may need it.

Food is a profoundly spiritual and ethical concern. In today's interconnected world we further acknowledge the interconnectedness on the planet by growing and sharing food.

Acknowledging this interconnectedness and need for sharing of food, Pat Rabby, of the Religious Society of Friends, recalling Fred Small's lyrics about being "temporarily able-bodied," noted that "we are temporarily well-fed..."

"Interconnectedness by growing and sharing food": basic elements of the vision and work of Gaining Ground and a goal of the Lexington Interfaith Garden. Perhaps a vision captured succinctly in a statement on the Gaining Ground website: "It takes a village to raise a carrot."

FIND OUT MORE:

- www.gainingground.org
- www.interfaithgarden.org
- www.lexfarm.org