

WISCONSIN STATE FARMER

NEWS

Here they grow again: Madison group's 15-acre purchase will help supply food pantries

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TOWN OF MIDDLETON – When people go to Madison area food pantries, they traditionally have access to many shelf-stable foods like macaroni and canned goods. But one group and its host of volunteers are making sure that they also have a wide variety of fresh, locally grown vegetables too. The Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens (MAFPG) has been growing these fresh vegetables for food pantries since 2001 and have been registered as a non-profit organization since 2014.

The group took a step further at the end of March by purchasing a 15-acre parcel in the Town of Middleton that they call Forward Garden. The group has rented the property for the last three years, and now has worked out a deal with the Pope/Zoerb family for the purchase. The site is the former home and sheep farm of the late Art Pope, a former University of Wisconsin Extension sheep specialist and his wife Betty. The MAFPG purchase includes their farmstead surrounded by 12 tillable acres that will be used in plots to grow vegetables.

Now that they own a piece of land, the organization plans to add fruit production where they can – notably strawberries and apples. Fruit is something that surveyed food pantry users always say they would like more of.

The Forward Garden site joins nine other, smaller gardens ranging in size from a quarter acre to two acres that provide fresh food to the local emergency food system. Volunteers from the group held an event to celebrate the purchase of the Forward Garden site. They said the purchase was made possible thanks to a \$660,000 grant from the Dane County Parks Commission as well as generous individual and organizational donors.

Matt Lechmaier is the farm manager/head gardener and will work exclusively with the Forward Garden site. He has all kinds of vegetables started in a rented greenhouse nearby,

just waiting to be planted. He's actively looking for volunteers and waiting to see if his farm will get help from AmeriCorps volunteers this summer. "This would be the third summer we would have those volunteers. We had 1,500 volunteers of all ages and abilities last year," he told us.

Some volunteers are part of a "day of giving" at their workplace and many local companies organize events for non-profit groups like the MAFPG. "Exact Sciences pay their employees for 16 hours per year that are donated to groups like ours," he said.

As spring weather nears, Lechmaier has plans to plant bok choy, cabbage, tomatillos, broccoli, celery, onions, fennel and a variety of herbs. Those are just a few of the vegetables that he will plant as summer nears.

He grew up in the area but took a detour to California where he worked in environmental education for 10 years and ran his own Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm. "When I found this position I figured it would be a good excuse to move my family back ahead of the fire season in California."

The non-profit's Forward Garden site was once part of the Pope's 110-acre homestead, where they raised sheep and cattle, he explained. The Pope's son lives on 20 acres just over the hill from the Forward Garden site.

It was the family's intention to keep the traditional homestead productive rather than see it swallowed up by the housing developments that sprouted all along Old Sauk Road. Just across from Forward Garden is a large water tower and some vacant land that Lechmaier said will soon become housing.

The working plots on the land that is now owned by MAFPG include 35-foot by 100-foot growing beds that are a "nice size" for a given crop, he said. Buffer strips between the plots help protect the soil and the fact that there are separate plots helps maintain a system of crop rotation for the various crops.

Lechmaier said they used to rototill the plots but are trying to get away from that as they transition to a three-in-one soil conditioner. It will be a better way to protect the soil and prevent new weed seeds from getting brought into the top layer of the silt loam soils they are working with. He plans to add cover crops to his soil management practices with vegetation like tillage radishes, oats and winter wheat.

New compost system

Another project that's in the planning stage is an aerated system for producing compost that will yield usable product in 60 days. The way the farmstead is built, he plans to load un-composted vegetation – including scraps collected from area restaurants -- from the top, near the silos, and accessing the finished product below in the old cow yard.

As of the end of March 2023 MAFPG had collected over 20,000 pounds of pre-consumer food waste from a variety of Madison restaurants and businesses. They plan to collect even more in the coming year to help improve soil health at Forward Garden and also reduce food waste in the Dane County landfill.

Drip irrigation is already being used for particularly drought-sensitive crops like carrots and beets. Rain water is collected at the farmstead, which luckily is uphill from the plots they have been using, and gravity carries it down to the plots.

“We are happy to be here and happy to add a little green space to what is a rapidly developed area,” he said. It also helps him make plans now that the property is in the hands of his group rather than being on an annual lease. “This is the first time the Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens has owned any property. We have some big plans.”

One of them is renovating the old dairy barn, as plans call for keeping it and using it in a variety of ways. An old machine shed that may not be structurally sound will be replaced with a new facility that will allow volunteers to wash and prepare vegetables for donation to the food pantries, he said.

Dagny Knight, who was a produce coordinator for three years at the Badger Prairie Needs Network in Verona, said all the food donated by the MAFPG was appreciated, especially by people from various ethnic groups who got to pick up food they were familiar with.

“With additional Covid benefits ending and inflation, the numbers of people who need help from food pantries is just off the charts,” she said.

The produce that comes in from MAFPG allows her Verona site to offer fresh vegetables on a regular basis and even host a special vegetable day that serves as a kind of farmer's market on extra days during the peak of produce season. Some of the items favored by visitors that visit her market include greens, peppers, tomatoes and winter squash.

Deal inked in March

Larry K. Binning has served on the board of the MAFPG for nine years and was proud to have been the vice president when he was called on to sign the purchase agreement for the farmstead. (The president was unable to do it due to health issues.) Binning, who retired from the horticulture department at the UW-Madison, said the organization has been extremely valuable from the community standpoint in getting agriculture out to the people.

When the board held listening sessions, groups told them that they “needed a home” and some paid employees. Lechmaier is currently their one paid employee.

Binning said now they have their location and it is protected from development forever by the land agreements that have been signed. He complimented the Pope family for wanting to see the land protected. “They could have sold it for a lot more than we could afford to pay if they sold it to developers, but they wanted it protected this way,” he said. “And they wanted something to memorialize Art and Betty (Pope).”

During the process, Binning said they had also looked at a 40-acre piece of land in Fitchburg but when this homestead became available they knew it was the right spot. The deal was signed on March 29. As part of the deal, the board agreed that the original house and barn would stay on the land.

Volunteers fuel the group

The organization is fueled by the efforts of many volunteers, including Katie Schmitt, who began giving of her time in the summer of 2017 after she moved to Madison from Minnesota. “It was serendipity that I found this group.” Since that time she has been involved in leadership of the MAFPG – the discovery and implementation group. She is proud of the 115,000 pounds of “grown and gleaned” food that was donated by the group last summer.

“It is also a great way to showcase sustainability in an urban setting and showcase how different produce is grown as well as preserving green space.” She finds it impactful that the food produced by the group is culturally relevant.

Schmitt said that the name Forward Garden was a play on the state motto and it fit because the garden group is about moving commitments forward with sustainable practices. She loves giving time to the organization and has met a number of others who are very committed to it. “I will give this organization as much time as I can. People are just

incredibly welcoming here and when I got here it was just amazing to see their mission come to life.

“I really, truly believe in their mission and they are incredible people to be around. Everybody sees what needs to be done and is open-minded,” Schmitt added. An active member of MAFPG’s 11-member board of directors, she added “I would never give up volunteering here. Here, everybody has always been welcoming and I just love this work.”