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# Local Food Pantry Garden Prioritizes Sustainable Farming This Earth Day

APRIL 17, 2023 BY FAYE PARKS AND WORT NEWS DEPARTMENT

WORT 89.9FM Madison · Local food pantry garden prioritizes sustainable farming this Earth Day

Nestled in the sprawling fields in the outer limits of Verona is [Forward Garden](http://foodpantrygardens.org/forward-garden.html) (<http://foodpantrygardens.org/forward-garden.html>), a fifteen-acre piece of land recently bought by Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens, a local nonprofit that grows vegetables for local food pantries.

Over the past two decades, Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens has produced more than 2.2 million pounds of produce for dozens of food pantries across Dane County.

The organization bought Forward Garden, located next to the Pope Farm Conservancy, in 2020. It's now the organization's largest piece of land. Nine other gardens, spread out across Dane County, are also part of the network.

Here in Forward Garden on a sunny April morning, spring has arrived. Planting has begun in earnest, and the garden is bustling with volunteers. And plans are in motion to bring more sustainable farming initiatives to Forward Garden.

Farm manager Matt Lechmaier says the purchase has opened a new frontier for the produce they can grow: "we've been focusing on mixed annual vegetables because we've only had an annual lease that we've had to renew each year, and we haven't known if we're gonna be there the next year. The last thing you wanna do is put thousands of dollars into an orchard, for example, and not see return on that investment. But now we're able to."

Lechmaier says now that they own the land, they're planning to bring an expanded composting program to the property: "When I think about sustainability, I think about the resources you need to create your product, so that's water and that's soil [...] We're harvesting about 30,000 lbs of produce and taking it off site every season so we have to replenish the nutrients those are removing from the site. So, we've been fertilizing with synthetic fertilizers up until recently and now we're putting together a project where we can compost our weed scraps [...] compost is also really useful in increasing organic matter which is lacking here on the property. So we want to increase the organic matter, and what that does is make the ground more spongy and it can absorb more moisture and hold the moisture longer for the plants to access."

They're also changing up their irrigation practices to be more efficient. Lechmaier says, "There's lots of ways of conveying that water to your plants – some are more efficient than others – and so drip irrigation is what we've focused on doing, so we can deliver the water to the roots of the plants we want to grow versus watering broadly and supporting weeds as well."

Dr. Brian Arndt is a board member with the organization and a family physician. Dr. Arndt explained that reliable access to produce for lower income individuals and families is instrumental to a healthy diet: "So in my care of folks with chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity, I really coach a lot on adequate produce consumption and – unfortunately at this point – only about one in eleven or one in twelve people with low income consume the recommended four to five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. So in my role as a family physician as well as an organization like this I've been thinking about how we can improve produce access to first choice, fresh, culturally relevant produce for the folks that need it most."

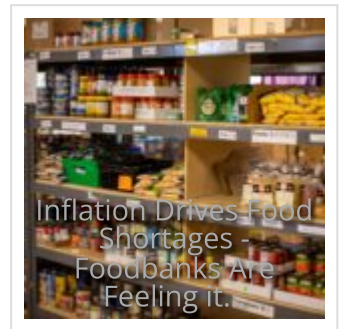
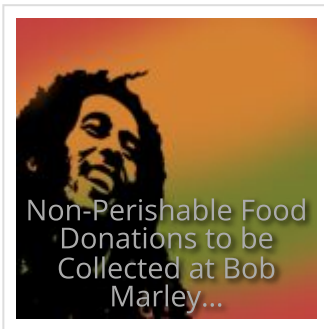
Jane Mount, in addition to being a volunteer, is also a board member. She touts the organization's commitment to accessibility and catering specifically to communities in need: "We actually did a survey with all of our food pantries, because Madison is such a culturally diverse community and we wanted to make sure that we were providing food for people that they really wanted, that they could use, and food that they might not be able to get at the farmers market or a food pantry. And so we are growing culturally relevant food and some of the things that have been requested are okra and bitter melon."

Mount wanted W-O-R-T listeners to know that all volunteers – of any ability or level of commitment – can have an impact. She says. "We welcome families to come out, we welcome anybody of any age and abilities; there's always something to do on the farm. You know, some people would need to sit and do some things but we also have people who want to plant potatoes and that's really hard work. So a variety of things. I also love that you meet so many people when you're out here ... and being out, you know, working the earth is amazing and all for the purpose of feeding your neighbor."

The organization accepts volunteers at all locations, such as [Anderson Farm Center](http://foodpantrygardens.org/anderson-farm-center.html) (<http://foodpantrygardens.org/anderson-farm-center.html>) in Oregon and [Lacy Garden](http://foodpantrygardens.org/lacy-garden.html) (<http://foodpantrygardens.org/lacy-garden.html>) in Fitchburg.

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