

Gardens that give back: The Lord's Acre in Fairview



Photos by Paul Jones

by FRANCES NEVILL

Planting a garden can change things. It can change an unremarkable few acres into rows of rainbow-colored harvests. It can change the gardener's hands from soft and pristine to calloused and scraped from years of digging and weeding and working in the hot sun.

But a garden, as The Lord's Acre is proving, can also change how we look at and deal with hunger. And maybe even transform communities.

In 2009, The Lord's Acre (TLA) set out with a simple mission – stock the Food for Fairview food pantry with fresh produce. Leading the effort to bring this idea to life was Pat Stone, editor of *GreenPrints* magazine and former editor of *The Mother Earth News*. He noticed that the pantry contained a lot of boxed and processed food. He envisioned a pantry full of greens and fruit and healthy options for the

pantry's clients. He gathered up a team of people, including fellow garden writer Susan Sides, who now serves as TLA's executive director, and soon the garden was launched. Though not affiliated with any church, TLA derives its name from the Depression Era when farmer's would reserve a portion of their harvest for those in need.

"A local church let us borrow six acres to grow vegetables," recalls Sides. "Our original harvest yielded a few tons. It's grown each year and in 2014 we harvested nearly 10 tons of fresh produce." The harvest includes a variety of fruits and vegetables including lettuce, carrots, potatoes, corn, watermelon, kale and dozens of other options that change with the growing seasons.

Sides emphasizes that the garden strives to grow a variety of vegetables that are both nourishing and beautiful. "You'll see green peppers, but also purple and red and yellow peppers, too. It's as beautiful to look at as it is to eat.

And in some ways, bringing beauty to our clients is part of what we do.”

TLA relies on a small staff and a large corps of volunteers that include individuals and families as well as scouts, churches, sports teams, and corporate groups.

“We had a men’s college soccer team spend a morning with us,” says Sides, “and their coach said that in the morning on their way out to the garden the guys had all kind of complained about getting up so early and the work that was awaiting them, but after the experience of being out on the land and in the garden, it’s all they could talk about the whole way home. They couldn’t wait to come back.”

She adds, “We strive to make this a safe place where people can speak freely, meet new people and be fed by what volunteering can do for an individual; but also, it’s a place that can spur the kind of dialogue and thinking that can change how we think about and address hunger.”

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“We like to provide the freshest food possible for our recipients and TLA’s fruits and vegetables are essential to our meals.” Trombatore uses the produce in salad bars, fruit salads, and main courses. “If we have any overages of something like tomatoes, we’ll can it and use it for soup during the winter months.”

The garden is also a place where friendships are made. “Volunteers come in and work side-by-side so they form this connection over shared work,” says Sides, “Maybe weeks later they cross paths and come to find out they are different in some aspects, but they’ve formed a bond over what they have

in common, so it’s great to see how relationships can be formed in a place like a garden.”

The garden houses an educational garden that shows visitors different ways of growing in your own backyard. Another popular feature is the kid’s garden where children get to plant seeds and learn the basics of growing.

Where does



PLANTING PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships are integral to the fabric of TLA. Warren Wilson College regularly sends interns to partake in the vision of the garden.

“They really are a co-educator,” says Cathy Kramer, dean of service for Warren Wilson. “TLA helps students see the connection between caring for the land, maintaining sustainable practices and caring for the community.”

While TLA primarily stocks the local pantry, portions of the harvest are given to the Fairview Welcome Table, a nonprofit in Fairview that serves weekly meals on a pay-what-you-can-if-you-can basis.

“TLA is a big part of what we do,” says Barbara Trombatore, executive director of Fairview Welcome Table.

TLA go from here? Bringing so many people together and yielding such successful harvests has inspired others from around the state and the country to inquire about how to start such a garden in their own community.

“We get about 10-12 visits a year from other groups wanting us to mentor them in how to get a similar garden up-and-running in their communities. This led us to write a manual outlining the beginning steps of getting a garden like ours off the ground.”

But the most valuable lesson The Lord’s Acre teaches can’t be found in any manual. “The work we do here ultimately changes you and challenges you,” says Sides. “The gifts of this garden go far beyond the harvest.”

For more information visit thelordsacre.org