

THE ACORN

DECEMBER 2021



Photos: At top, in November, a view of our Wild Plant Nursery container yard in Springfield, Virginia. Fallow can be beautiful. Above, Ester Garcia, a teacher at the elementary school in Los Cerezos, near the Dominican Republic / Haiti border, takes her students on a tour of our Tree Bank Nursery in October. The nursery borders the school, so it's an easy field-trip! As with our DC-area nursery, environmental education is an important part of this nursery's function. Maybe one day, some of these kids will join our staff!

2021 was a good year for us, and a busy one. Our team recalls the best moments.

Matt (plant ecology): My big moment was the roll-out of our Compendium. We finally have a resource that people can consult for plant selection questions, and for help understanding some of our natural plant communities. And it was a project that I could complete despite various medical problems!

Lisa (propagation): I realized that I no longer have any pressing daily responsibilities in the Sangha. Thanks to my brilliant colleagues, I can spend entire days in the field collecting seed, but also just looking at wild plants, listening to insect calls, following ants making up-and-down trips on a tree trunk to oak galls, marveling at the early sun shining on dewy grass leaves. Everything is achingly beautiful. Maybe that's a gift of aging.

Katherine (development): For me, organizing the nursery. We have never before had time to play Tetris with thousands of containerized plants. But this year, we finally did it. Now we have sections for different types of meadows and forests, and even a section for "special collections."

Sarah (volunteers): My big moment (aside from joining the permanent staff) was when I went on my first solo seed collection expedition. I experienced the juxtaposition of humility and pride.

Katie (coordination): My big moment was joining the Earth Sangha team as a permanent staff member this year — taking on greater responsibility and having more contact with our community. I learned so much and am already excited for the next growing season!

Chris (presidenting): My favorite moment was the purchase of the Tree Bank pickup. This was a lot more complicated than we expected, and it was very reassuring to see how well our Dominican colleagues handled it.

We hope that 2021 was a good year for you as well. Our best wishes to you and yours for a peaceful and prosperous 2022!

**HELP US GEAR UP ...
& YOU CAN ATTACH A MATCH!
See the back page.**

PERSISTENCE CREATES CHANGE. EVENTUALLY.

We've been working at the 20-acre Marie Butler Leven Preserve, in McLean, Virginia, since 2004. The Preserve is heavily infested with a huge variety of invasive alien plants, so most of our work has been invasives control, followed by the planting of locally native stock from our Wild Plant Nursery. During the second half of 2021, we were very pleased to resume work with some of our regular volunteers, and an important institutional partner: the Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart, in Bethesda, Maryland. These photos were taken at field events with Stone Ridge and other volunteers in October and November. At right, staff and volunteers replant the Preserve's malfunctioning rain garden as a sort of wet meadow. Below, center: an area cleared of invasives (again!) is planted with natives. We'll keep weeding. Lower left: a stubborn persimmon is ejected from its container. Lower right: Kelsey, one of our interns, will escape from this four-foot high cage and secure it around a vulnerable seedling with metal stakes. After years of trial, we have concluded that metal is really the best way to keep the deer away from the little trees.



THANKS AGAIN!

Thanks to our very generous donors, the Tree Bank has a new *gua-gua* (pickup truck). We need a *gua-gua* to operate the Tree Bank Nursery. Our old one, a 1998 Toyota Tacoma, was shedding parts at the rate of nearly one a month. (We'll sell that *gua-gua* soon.) Our new *gua-gua* is a 2018 Toyota Hilux with only 20,000 kilometers on it. (That's 12,400 miles.) It cost a fortune. We had hoped to pay no more than \$35,000 but we ended up at \$48,000, thanks to a raging bout of inflation, further inflamed by supply-chain issues. (Sound familiar? It's a lot worse down there.) Despite the cost, everyone agreed that the time had come to do this. So we did! In the photo, that's the new *gua-gua* with Yinabel, the Tree Bank's Coordinator, and Legares, her husband. Legares is a driver for the Dominican army; he knows a lot about trucks, so he led the search for the new one. We're very grateful to them both, and we hope not to have to do this again for a long, long time!

HOW BIG CAN THE TREE BANK GET?

I should begin by admitting that we don't know the answer to that question. But I think that not knowing is probably OK, since an artificial ceiling might mean less forest or fewer beneficiaries than we would have had if we had just kept going.

But it's an obvious question and a useful one, since it might help us prepare for whatever lies ahead. So I'll try to answer! First, here's where things stand at present:

The Tree Bank works along a section of the Dominican Republic / Haiti border, to conserve and restore native forest and to improve small-holder farm incomes. We work on the Dominican side of the border because that's where the remaining forests are, but the program is designed to help both Dominicans and Haitians — anyone who lives in our program region. The program currently serves about 70 families. It offers lines of credit now totaling about \$36,380, in exchange for conservation easements over about 340 acres of reasonably intact forest. Another 75 acres of lower quality forest and native-tree plantings are protected through a cacao and coffee planting program. (Cacao is the little tree whose seeds are used to make cocoa and chocolate.) Finally, we have one nature reserve that covers another 45 acres. In sum, 70 families and around 460 acres. Our Dominican colleagues tell me that the program is already larger than any other community-led agroforestry project in our province, which is Dajabón.

I don't think that the program's managers worry much about the program's size or growth per se, but they're definitely aware of the consequences. So for example, Cosme and Manolo, our Dominican Co-Directors, sometimes worry about whether to expand into communities that are nearby, but where the program is not yet present. Their concerns are mostly logistical, not political. These other communities welcome our interest because of the potential financial benefits. The only hostility that we have ever encountered was when some very poor farmer upbraided Matt and Gaspar for not expanding the program fast enough, and in his direction. (Gaspar was our first in-country Director; he passed away in 2014.) There are growing pains on the American side too; for example, my administrative responsibilities for the program are expanding — and I'm hoping that this type of growth will eventually level off!

There are some other factors that may limit the growth of the program, the most obvious of which would be a decline in revenue. If we can't keep people interested in what we're doing, and donations



dry up, then that would cause us trouble. I don't have any reason to think that this is about to happen, but I'm trying to anticipate the possibility by reestablishing our coffee import effort, as soon as our little coffee trees begin to bear at a level that would make such imports worth while. The Dominican Republic lost virtually all of its coffee trees to the coffee leaf fungus epidemic of 2014-2015. We have been replanting frantically ever since, with fungus-resistant strains. Our planting efforts include cacao as well. Where we can, we diversify! Coffee and cocoa revenue could help support the program directly, through sales, or by attracting additional donors.

A more subtle growth limiter is perceptual. This I think is an intriguing phenomenon, and a little scary. I call it "no room to plant." Even in landscapes that were once wholly forested — and that are now just scrub or sparse pasture — one may hear that there is just no place to put any more trees. How can this be? Or maybe a better question is: what do people mean when they say this? I think it's usually a complex of things. There may be an economic fear: forests are often seen as obstacles to economic progress. Forests must be cleared to make room for roads, and cattle, and soybeans. And paradoxically, forests are often cleared to make way for more trees — not the kinds of trees that make up native forest, but plantation trees: eucalypt, rubber, oil palm, and so on. There may also be a cultural ingredient here. The forest may be perceived as a threatening environment, and not as a benign place for humanity. And sometimes an interest in forests is seen as "unscientific." In much of the developing world, tree-plantation development is seen as cutting edge forestry; conservation is something for tourists. But I think that these attitudes are less common now than they used to be.

Why has the Tree Bank grown so well? This question is easier to answer. Right from the start, we anticipated some of those objections. For example, the program is designed to show that a kind of modified native forest can make money, through coffee and cocoa. On our farms, if you consider net profit, I think that coffee and cocoa stand a better chance of making money, in most or many years, than do cattle. Another example: we have enlisted our local leadership to teach trees, and to try to foster a greater degree of ecological literacy in the local schools. (See the cover photo for an example of this effort.) Some day, I hope, those young people will inherit our program. I'm looking forward to asking them these questions!

— Chris Bright, President



Photo: Interpretation is the language of conservation. In October, Matt (center) took a little time to talk ecology during a field day at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve, in McLean, Virginia. Matt is our Conservation Manager. See inside for more on these events.

HELP US GEAR UP!

Last year, your December donations helped us improve the infrastructure of our local Wild Plant Nursery. This year, we're hoping that you'll help us improve our field capabilities. We think that this would be the best way to add value to the efforts of our colleagues in local land-management agencies. Here's a partial list of what your support would help us buy:

Hand tools that aren't broken or fossilized with rust and unidentifiable crud. **Field sleds** for pulling plants and supplies onto sites that are distant from roads. One or two **augurs**, and maybe even a two-person augur for stony sites. **Canopies** — those collapsible roof things that look like not-very-convincing Renaissance Festival pavilions. The few that we still have are torn. A supply of **metal fencing and posts** to protect seedlings from deer. Metal is definitely the way to go on that front, but it's expensive. Finally, on the high end, we could really use **a new trailer**. The one that we have is not big enough, and the shelving in it is mostly broken.

Now for the Tree Bank. Oh boy. This is the place where every week should be infrastructure week. But for now, we would be content with progress on just one item: a little office, as an annex to the Association building that we put up in 2012. As with that building, the office would have a poured concrete base, and be made of concrete block with a barred window and a corrugated metal roof. We need it to keep papers, hold private meetings, and do various other office-like things. It would be a big help. There's an electrical line nearby, so we might even be able to have electricity. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Attach a match! Two very generous donors will match you! Our benefactors will match the first \$50 of your gift! You give at least \$50, we get at least \$100 — and you can designate the full amount for either our DC-area work or the Tree Bank. See the enclosed reply card, or give on-line at earthsangha.org. The match runs through January 2. One \$50 match per household.

EARTH SANGHA

CONSERVATION IN PRACTICE

The Earth Sangha is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charity based in the Washington, DC, area and devoted to ecological restoration. We work in the spirit of Buddhist practice, but our members and volunteers come from a wide variety of religious and secular backgrounds.

Want to contact us or make a donation? You can support our work by becoming a member. Membership starts at \$35 per year. Donations are tax-deductible. You can mail us a check (made out to "Earth Sangha") or donate on our website. We will send you a receipt and include you in our mailings. (If your name and address are correct on your check, there is no need to send us anything else.) To donate specifically to our DC-Area programs, write "DC- Area" on the check memo line; to donate specifically to the Tree Bank, write "Tree Bank" on the memo line. **Contact us at: Earth Sangha, 5101 I Backlick Road, Annandale, VA 22003 | (703) 333-3022 | earthsangha.org.** Complete program information is available on our website. Want to volunteer with us? We work with volunteers at our Wild Plant Nursery and our field sites in northern Virginia. For more information see our website or call Matt Bright at (703) 333-3022.

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Gold-rated: The Earth Sangha has a gold rating from GuideStar Exchange for commitment to transparency.

One of the best: The Earth Sangha is recognized by the Catalogue for Philanthropy as "one of the best small charities in the Washington, DC, region."

