

# THE NEWSLETTER OF THE EARTH SANGHA

# THE ACORN

JUNE 2018



## PLANT-GRANT UPDATE

This spring, we launched our “Plant Grant” program, which is intended to boost restoration efforts on local public lands. We want to make it easier for small-budget operations to do meaningful restoration work on these properties. We want to reduce their costs without diminishing the quality of their work.

The program concept is simple. It’s a kind of match: if you are purchasing stock from our Wild Plant Nursery for use in local parkland, a school landscape, or other public property, then for every plant that you buy for a qualifying project, we will provide another plant for free.

In addition to providing more plants, the program also aims to help people choose the right ones. People often bring us species lists — lists of species for their plantings — that are not ecologically appropriate. The lists frequently include species that would be out of habitat on the project site, or that aren’t even native to the project area. We want to help people tailor their lists to their sites.

Of course, there are some restrictions on the grants, but we are trying to keep these, and the paperwork, to a minimum. For more details, email Matt at the address below, or see last September’s *Acorn*. (On our web site, click on About Us: The Acorn.)

We plan to offer two rounds of Plant Grants per year, one in the spring and another in the fall. Our initial round included eight recipients, all in Northern Virginia: one Arlington County Park and a supporting Civic Association; one Fairfax County park; a park owned by the town of Herndon; a state park; a national park (through its “Friends of” affiliate), and three schools or school affiliated groups. (All of the schools are in Fairfax County.)

One project — the state park one — is still waiting for funding, but setting that project aside, here is a preliminary take on the program numbers. The nominal value of the grants thus far is \$3,383. (That’s the total value of the plants we’re donating, at our standard discounted rate, which is the rate generally available for projects like these.) About 450 trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants have thus far been distributed under the program, and we still have some plants to go — some projects have not yet collected their full allotment.

We’re off to a good start, but eager to do more! If you’ve got a project that might benefit from a Plant Grant, email Matt Bright, our Conservation Manager, at [mbright@earthsangha.org](mailto:mbright@earthsangha.org).

## THANKS FOR EVERYTHING! INCLUDING THE FAILURES

Dear Donors,  
At the western end of Cedar Avenue, a little street of handsome and agreeably varied houses in Fairfax City, there is a clump of post oaks. There are two medium-sized ones and three big ones. The biggest one is huge; it has a circumference at breast height of over nine feet.

Post oak (*Quercus stellata*) is a close relative of white oak (*Q. alba*). It’s much less common than white oak, but it isn’t rare. The two species look similar, and as you approach these trees, you might mistake them for their cousins, until you’re close enough to see that their leaves have that distinctive, Maltese cross-like shape that is typical of post oaks.

Post oak is a creature of disappointment. It grows in dry, unpromising soils, probably because it can’t compete with the various other trees that flourish on richer soils. And it grows slowly, measuring its years in inches, if that. A medium-sized post oak may be much older than neighboring trees of other species, even if it is no taller. Even its name tastes a little of hardship: it’s called “post oak” because its heavy, durable wood found favor with European settlers — but only for fence posts.

Given their size, the Cedar Avenue specimens might well be remnants of a forest or upland meadow that disappeared long ago. Now they’re bereft. We have taken nearly everything away from them — including their capacity to reproduce, since all of the nearby space is now turf or asphalt and there is no longer any place where their seedlings could grow.

We cannot give them back their meadow but we can probably manage the next best thing: reproductive success. At least I’m determined to try, so every couple of years, when these oaks go into mast (when they have a year in which they produce a lot of acorns), I scour

*Continued on page 5 . . .*

**Photo:** About as close to vertical as we’ve ever planted! In March, our staff and volunteers put in nearly 700 native forbs and grasses on this bank at Windmill Hill Park in the City of Alexandria. This is one of many projects directed by Rod Simmons, botanist extraordinaire and the City’s plant ecologist. The site is small but conspicuous, so we hope that it will make visitors curious about our local flora.



# FOREST CREDIT SETS NEW RECORDS

In March, the Tree Bank's Forest Credit project set three new records: we helped more families, lent more money, and conserved more threatened tropical forest than ever before.

Forest Credit is now the largest component of the Sangha's Tree Bank Hispaniola program. The Tree Bank works along a section of the Dominican Republic / Haiti border to improve small-holder farm incomes and conserve remnant forests. We work on the Dominican side of the border because that's where the forest fragments are, but about 40% of the local population is Haitian and the program is meant to help both peoples.

Forest Credit is the region's only low-cost farm credit program. It makes modest lines of credit available to farmers, in exchange for conservation easements over forest remnants on their lands. Farmers — even small-holder farmers — need credit to run their farms properly. The most common uses of credit are standard operating expenses: the purchase of seed and fertilizer, and sometimes livestock. But in the Dominican Republic, as in most of the developing world, commercial credit is generally not available to small-holders.

To obtain credit in our program, a farmer must declare a "Credit Reserve" — a forest fragment of reasonably good quality on his or her land — and agree not to cut any native trees within it. The reserve is visited by project officials, who evaluate it and gather some basic data from it. The farmer must also be accepted as credit-worthy by our local partner association, the Association of Forest Producers of Los Cerezos. (Los Cerezos is the little municipality where the Tree Bank is based.)

The loans are made once a year, all at the same time, to coincide with spring planting. The highlights of this year's lending:

- ✎ We lent money to 44 families, a new record. The previous record was set in 2014, at 40 families.
- ✎ Ten of this year's loan recipients are women; that number ties the program's record set on this front last year.
- ✎ The total lent was about \$29,830, also a record and a 40% increase from the previous record, set last year.
- ✎ And the total amount of forest in easement reached about 265 acres, another record, up by 46% from last year and about three-quarters of all of the land that the Tree Bank now holds in care (about 350 acres).

Forest Credit is the most cost-effective way that we have found to conserve forest owned by small-holders. (The current cost to protect an acre of forest is about \$145.) This type of community-based conservation is essential because most of the region's remaining forests are controlled by small-holders, and most of those forests are in decline, primarily from disturbances due to agriculture — a common developing-world scenario.

**Photos:** Top, a Tree Bank meeting comes to order in August 2017. From the left: Matt, our Conservation Manager; Yinabel, the Tree Bank's Coordinator; and Co-Directors Cosme and Manolo. Chris took the picture. The cheerful venue is Chavo's new house in Los Cerezos, where the Tree Bank is based. Chavo is one of Manolo's sons. Bottom: Quick shade! Manolo shows off a coffee tree shaded by fast-growing banana, also in August 2017. Eventually, native trees will provide cover.

Our region's forests host a wide variety of plants and animals, some of them unique to the island. And most of the farmers in our region will readily agree, at least in the abstract, that deforestation is a serious problem. But they often perceive their own forests as an obstacle to their family's economic well-being. Forest Credit is helping to change that way of thinking, by giving the forests their own economic role. In effect, a family's forest becomes a kind of credit card for the farm.

The benefits of this system are strengthened through the Tree Bank's other components. The Tree Bank's nurseries and financing help farmers replant patches of native canopy, which can then be underplanted with coffee or cocoa, two high-value shade-loving tree-crops. Pasture can be improved by scattered, light shade, with loose plantings of the native and endangered Hispaniolan pine, the region's only remaining high-value timber species. And the nurseries themselves serve as social centers focused on restoration.

All of the Tree Bank's activities share a single goal: helping to develop a new form of agriculture — one that conserves forest instead of destroying it.

— Chris Bright, President





# IN GRATITUDE TO OUR MAJOR DONORS FOR 2017



## \$50,000 & above

Sophia Lynn & David Frederick  
For the Leven House project

## \$5,000 - \$20,000

An anonymous donor (\$20,000)  
The Community Foundation for the National  
Capital Region (\$12,830)  
Bill & Helen Ackerman (\$11,635)  
Bruce Engelbert & Cynthia Irmer (\$10,000)  
Two anonymous donors (\$10,000)  
The LVH Family Foundation (\$10,000)  
The Shared Earth Foundation (\$10,000)  
Mary Sylvia (\$8,295)  
An anonymous foundation (\$5,000)

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In honor of Katherine Isaacson's &  
Matthew Bright's first wedding anniversary  
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Of which a portion was given in honor  
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Patricia Weeks

## Our 2017 Government Partners

Our government partners are crucial allies in conservation. We are grateful for the funding that these agencies provided for our work last year.

**Fairfax County, Virginia:** \$16,150 for work in Fairfax County parks and schoolyards.

**The Virginia Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund:** \$5,000 for restoration of riparian plant communities in Northern Virginia.

**Photo:** In April, Matt Bright checked the groundlayer in a patch of forest near Centreville, Virginia. Early spring is the most important season for many forest herbs: they must resprout and bloom before the forest canopy leafs out and returns them to the shade.

We thank everyone who has given to the Sangha, in whatever form. We owe a special debt of gratitude to these people and organizations, who made major donations to our work last year. The Sangha has drawn great strength from their generosity and vision. May the spirit of their gifts continue to live within our work and practice.



**\$100 - \$249**

James Ackermann  
Anonymous  
Ana Arguelles & Jeffrey Wneck  
The Ayr Hill Garden Club  
Laura Beaty & J.P. Berry  
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Anne Zimmerman



**Photo:** A full house! By early April, Lisa, Matt, Beverley, and The Usual Suspects had just packed the Fairfax County Park Authority greenhouse in Chantilly, Virginia, with various native grasses and forbs. We and our partners will use these plants for stream-buffer and meadow projects this year. Maximum production is Lisa's standard procedure — in both greenhouse and nursery.



*Failing Upwards: continued from the front page . . .*

the sparse turf beneath their canopy to collect at least one big baggie of ripe, promising seed, preferably without weevil holes. At home, I dump my harvest into a bucket of water and float off the buoyant acorns — almost always duds — then I plant the rest in containers which I cover with hardware cloth to ward off mice and squirrels. Then I wait for spring.

And most of the time, nothing sprouts. Post oak seed is frequently infertile. But I got lucky last year, when four or five acorns sent up shoots in early spring. By last fall, the seedlings were still under six inches but they looked healthy. Alas, I counted my post oaks too soon: during this past winter, they all died. It was a droughty winter and we think that their containers dried out too much.

I'm disappointed but not worried. I'm pretty sure that we'll eventually succeed with these oaks, just as we have with so many other hard-to-propagate species. And I learned a valuable lesson: make sure that the potting medium doesn't dry out over winter! That's one more mistake that I won't make again.

So much of the Sangha's work is built from such experiences. A few of our more notable failures:

🌱 For years, I tried, over and over again, to germinate healthy stands of our local, wild ericads (plants in the family Ericaceae). Huckleberries, blueberries, pinxterbloom azalea — years of failure with these and related species eventually taught me the art of germinating them. Currently, my germination space — we call it the "Fern Lab" — is packed with healthy pinxterbloom, high-bush blueberry, deerberry, and mountain laurel. Although it didn't seem this way at the time, I was lucky not to have succeeded earlier, before I had had a chance to work through all the relevant variables.

🌱 In 2015 a leaf-rust pathogen killed all of the coffee trees in our Tree Bank project area, and many of our client farmers saw their incomes collapse. The Tree Bank's Forest Credit lending facility (see page 2) finished that year with more than a quarter of its loans past due. Today, Forest Credit is breaking its own records on nearly every front, and all of last year's loans were paid back in full. (We're still working with three past-due borrowers from previous years.) The coffee failure taught us how to succeed with struggling borrowers.

🌱 Here in the DC area, we've done scores of plantings over nearly 20 years — all sorts of plantings under all sorts of conditions. Many of those efforts, especially the early ones, failed or succeeded only in part. Those experiences have made us reliable advisers and partners for local land-managers, both institutional and individual. Our own experience has taught us what will likely work and what will not.

Usually, we thank our donors for our successes. But we're also grateful to you for our failures. Of course, we do our best to keep our blunders to a manageable size, and to learn from them. And we'll never try to hide them from you. We understand that you're not paying us to be stupid — but we also know that you're not paying us just to play it safe.

— Chris Bright, President

**Photo:** In February, the Marie Butler Leven Preserve (see back page) acquired this handsome, state-of-the-art purple martin condo set-up, complete with metal predator deflector and predator-confusing dummy bird (the black thing at the top). The structure was a gift from Mike and Sheila Bishop. That's Mike at right, with Matt. (Sheila's absence from photo is unrelated to predators.) Mike and Sheila are mainstay volunteers at our greenhouse operation. They also work with the Purple Martin Conservation Association. No purple martins here by press time but we'll keep you posted!







## THIS YEAR @ THE PRESERVE

We have big plans this year for the Marie Butler Leven Preserve, the 20-acre park in McLean, Virginia, where two of our staff members now live (and work). Our main activities for 2018:

1. We're continuing our work along the edges of the Big Field. We're yanking out invasive vines, pulling stiltgrass, and replanting with native forest-edge plants. Eventually, we'll probably replant the field itself, but we're still making arrangements for that with the Fairfax County Park Authority, which owns the Preserve.
2. We're following up on two great Eagle Scout projects done earlier this year: a pollinator planting of over 500 plants, and some trail work that will help make the southern part of the forest more accessible.
3. We're creating a variety of native plantings around the House, in areas that were mostly unused turf. These are displays, rather than restoration plots. They're meant to show off particular species and give visitors a sense for the horticultural potential of exclusively native plantings. They will also extend native pollinator habitat, reduce mowing, and lessen storm-water runoff into the Park's forest.
4. We're doing several spot erosion-control projects on forest slopes, to stop the formation of gullies created by heavy rains. We're putting in deep-rooted native grasses, some forbs, and even some native shrubs. The shrubs will also help to reestablish the forest's native understory, which has been lost almost entirely to the invasives.
5. Also within the forest, we're doing some supplementary plantings of areas already in care.

Want to help? Check our field schedule at [earthsangha.org](http://earthsangha.org) (go to Take Action: Volunteer), or email Matt Bright, our Conservation Manager, at [mbright@earthsangha.org](mailto:mbright@earthsangha.org).

**Photo:** Restoration step by step. In January, Matt and Katherine restored a slate walkway leading to the old house at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve in McLean, Virginia. We upgraded the house itself last year — thanks to some very generous donors. Matt and Katherine now live there, and they work on the grounds nearly every week — pulling invasives, planting natives, and doing miscellaneous projects like this one. You're welcome to join them! See the volunteer page of our website at [earthsangha.org](http://earthsangha.org).

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, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707 | \(703\) 764-4830 | earthsangha.org](mailto:Contact us at: Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707 | (703) 764-4830 | 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) 764-4830.

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