THE NEWSLETTER OF THE EARTH SANGHA

THE ACORN

January - June 2026



New Nursery Site Updates

Thanks to the tireless efforts of staff and volunteers (especially Baray and Justin!), progress continues on our new nursery site. By way of background, we intend to relocate and open to the public at our new site in Lorton in Spring 2027. The new nursery at 9801 Old Colchester Road will be operated in cooperation with the Urban and Community Forestry Division of Fairfax County's Department of Public Works & Environmental Services and we will continue to maintain a strong working relationship with Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA).

Up until now, we've operated at the same nursery space since 2001. Because we have continued to grow many species that are uncommon or absent in the broader nursery trade, we've had plenty of opportunity for trial and error with our techniques and indeed the use of our nursery space. This new nursery site is our first clean sheet opportunity to put 25 years of growing experience into practice in a new space. As we continue to prepare the new nursery for the public, we want to share what changes toward sustainable practices in every aspect of our operation you can expect to see in the near future.

One of the biggest changes we're making is how we're managing shade. We currently use metal pipes and woven plastic shade panels. These panels last 4 to 8 years, but once they are worn out, they must go to the landfill. They require substantial labor to put up, take down, and maintain, and can make the nursery infrastructure vulnerable to early snowfall and heavy storms. The panels also disrupt rainfall, causing dribbling into some pots which damages the plants.

At the new nursery, because we have significantly more space, we can afford to use space less intensely and to that effect, we're leaving tree conservation rows between growing rows. We're preserving existing tree canopy (mostly sweetgum) on site in these spaces, but we're also planting higher-value native trees like oaks and hickories plus native shrubs and forbs. The deciduous trees will provide morning and afternoon shade for the growing rows without any regular labor input. They will naturally lose their leaves in the winter when we don't need the shade and regrow them in time for the hottest part of the year. All the while they'll provide vital habitat for all manner of critters as well as reservoirs for our own seed collection if need be.

"What about the midday sun?" you might ask. Well we have a plan for that too! Just like in our Chantilly greenhouse, we plan to swamp cool the plants. That is, we'll spray water on them for evaporative cooling in the middle of the day. This might seem wasteful of water resources, but all the water on site will be recycled water from the Noman M. Cole, Jr. Water Recycling Facility across the street. The water is cleaned, tested, and otherwise ready to discharge into the adjacent Pohick Creek or be used by other nearby facilities. Our ability to use recycled water will mean we're not competing with other sources of public drinking water but

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Above: Sprawling mats of Eastern prickly pear (*Opuntia humifusa*), photographed by Director Emerita Lisa Bright. This is the most widespread native cactus in the entire United States, ranging across nearly three quarters of the country! As shown, this species lives on shallow, rocky surfaces or in sandy habitats. Like most cacti, they are drought tolerant and thrive in full sun. The main distinction between *O. humifusa* and its relatives is the lack of pointy spines. Their bright yellow flowers bloom in the summer, attracting an abundance of pollinators. Birds and small mammals feed on the fruits and pads, which are also edible to humans!

Spring Open House

This May's Spring Open House and Native Plant Sale was the chilliest on record, BUT that didn't stop our hardy customers and volunteers! With your help we raised over $28,000 for local parkland restoration! Our seasonal open houses are some of our favorite events to host since we get to see so many familiar faces in one place, while welcoming many new ones as well. It really shows the community, or the *sangha*, that we are all creating together. Without fail, we witness friends run into each other at the Wild Plant Nursery Open House who had no idea the other one was also a native plant nut! A huge "thank you" to everyone who came out to support our work and make this year's Spring Open House another one for the books.



Above: A bustling Wild Plant Nursery, lined with tabling organizations and customers with wheelbarrows full of plants. This spring's Open House was on an especially blustery day, so we had to improvise. Notice the rocks used as paper weights on the tables!

We also want to thank our partner organizations for joining us to advise visitors on native plants best suited to their project areas, how to remove invasives, and how to get involved in local, grassroots conservation work. Thank you to the Virginia Native Plant Society - Potowmack Chapter, Plant NOVA Natives, Fairfax Tree Rescuers PRISM, Fairfax County Park Authority's Invasives Management Area, the Fairfax Invasive Removal Alliance, and both the Arlington Regional and Fairfax Master Naturalists for helping us pull off such a successful event!

Meadow Restoration: Pulling and Planting

Some might be surprised by the amount of staff and volunteer time we're allocating to one part of our new nursery site: the meadow. At first look, we knew what a valuable opportunity we had to restore it with native plants from our nursery and someday provide educational tours to the public – and that we had our work cut out for us! The area was overgrown with thorny and persistent invasives like mile-a-minute. After an initial clearing, we dispersed heaps of native seeds across the area in hopes of introducing good competition. Native meadow species such as ironweeds (*Vernonia spp.*), goldenrods (*Solidago spp.*), and aromatic mountain mints (*Pycnanthemum spp.*) are robust and, once established, can withstand invasive pressure fairly well. But invasive management is ongoing. As natives spring up, the intruders creep back in to take their places. We are fortunate to have so many people eager to contribute their efforts to keep invasives at bay!



Once the meadow had several more cleared areas, we installed plants from our Wild Plant Nursery. In addition to the native meadow species named above, we also planted other hardy perennials such as beaked panic grass (*Coleataenia anceps*), white heath aster (*Symphyotrichum ericoides*), hyssop-leaf thoroughwort (*Eupatorium hyssopifolium*), and dense blazing star (*Liatris spicata*). We selected these species because they require little maintenance. We lack access to water at the meadow, so we'll rely on drought-tolerant species. These are plants that you'd find growing along sunny roadsides and other dry, disturbed habitats.

Left: Students from the Northern Virginia Community College botany class joining Sangha staff for a large meadow planting back in April.



Above: Sangha staff and volunteers removing mile-a-minute/devil's tearthumb (*Persicaria perfoliata*) from the Lorton site meadow in June before it seeds. As its common names suggest, this barbed invasive vine grows extraordinarily fast, requiring diligent maintenance and monitoring. An annual, it's also a prolific seeder, rapidly smothering an area if left unmanaged. The fruits are blue and borne on the stem tips. Though prickly, mile-a-minute can be easily hand-pulled because of its shallow roots - just be sure to wear protective clothing and gloves!

Rare Species Distribution

This spring we were delighted to distribute almost our entire stock of state-rare Virginia Sida (*Ripariosida hermaphrodita*) to Prince William County Environmental Management for stream restoration! They were planted along the Potomac River and Powell's Creek to establish new populations of the species, but also to provide shade on the restoration site for other species.



Above: Volunteers of Prince William County Environmental Management posing on a Potomac River shoreline with Virginia Sida (*Ripariosida hermaphrodita*).

Those who have visited the Wild Plant Nursery in the last two years have likely seen pots of Virginia Sida crowding up our growing rows, unavailable to customers as we typically limit the distribution of rare and/or threatened species to restoration projects on public lands. In Northern Virginia, stands of Virginia Sida are generally only found established along the Potomac River, requiring us to reserve our stock for very specific restoration projects. Happily, our friends over at Prince William County agreed to take a whopping 500 of them off our hands! Not only were we stoked to finally see them get into the ground, but we were also relieved to free up such a large amount of space at the nursery. We still have ample Sida in propagation, and we look forward to having the space to extend cultivation for future restoration projects.



Right: Staff and Conservation Interns gathered at Arlington County's Native Plant Nursery on a "field trip". Every year, our interns go on various tours of organizations within the field. The intention is to meet with professionals from diverse backgrounds who can share their experiences. This gives interns the opportunity to learn about potential career paths and explore the many facets of conservation and horticulture!



Above: Conservation Interns posing in a meadow during a training field day. When going on these hikes, we designate "target species" - species which we make it our goal to find. We walk slowly, heads turned to the ground, until eventually we find what we are looking for. Seeing a plant in its natural habitat builds identification skills considerably more than seeing it potted in isolation. You see how it grows, where it grows, and what species it grows near. At the end of these days, we leave with our heads filled with invaluable knowledge and our camera rolls filled with happy photos of plants.

Native Species Highlight

Frequent visitors may have noticed new leaves (or flowers) at the Wild Plant Nursery. Below are several species that we haven't had in our collection for a few years, but which we've been excited to offer again! Which is your favorite?



Right: Foxglove beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*) is a charming and sturdy perennial that can thrive in dry, poor-quality soil. It blooms in early summer, attracting a bounty of pollinators such as the little bee pictured!



Left: Groundnut (*Apios americana*) is a herbaceous perennial vine that twines rapidly in moist, shady environments. In late summer, clusters of red-pink flowers appear. It's a great choice for trailing along a fence or up a trellis.



Right: Hyssop skullcap (*Scutellaria integrifolia*) is a darling little perennial with a column of purple flowers blooming in early summer. It prefers low, moist areas, but can sometimes be found in dry-mesic forests.



Left: Southeastern prickly-pear (*Opuntia mesacantha*) is a special plant because it is the only cacti sold at our nursery! Like most cacti, it prefers well-drained substrates, often growing on rocky outcrops in the sun.



Right: Cornel-leaved aster (*Doellingeria infirma*) is a dainty perennial that is found in dry to mesic woodlands and clearings. Its elegant white flowers are loosely arranged in terminal flat-topped clusters and bloom in early summer.

Plant Grants

This Spring, we were incredibly heartened to receive the most applications for our Plant Grant program than ever before. While it made choosing our recipients that much more difficult, our staff was buoyed by the number of grassroots groups taking action at their local parks, schools, places of worship, and HOAs. While federal funding for environmental work continues to be cut, our communities are springing into action in whatever ways they can.



Above: Plant Grant recipient posing with cartfuls of plants destined for a restoration planting along the Shenandoah River.

This cycle we focused on two plant communities kits (Dry to Moist Meadow/Forest Edges and Moist to Wet Meadow/Forest Edges) each with 55 herbaceous plants representing high-value generalist species. The kits also include a reference PDF with growing conditions, height/width, and wildlife supported for each species, giving our grantees a foundation to build from and educate their communities. The Earth Sangha's Plant Grant program is designed to reach grassroots restoration projects that have no or limited funds and would otherwise not be able to engage in restoration. We had initially planned to distribute 5 of each kit for a total of 10 Plant Grants, but after going through all the applications we decided to increase the total number of Plant Grants to 15 because we just couldn't narrow it down any more. We wish we could have supplied plants to all of our applicants because there wasn't an unworthy project amongst them. The deciding factors came down to which projects would provide with the most ecological and social value. One of the ways we evaluate applicant sites is by using their Tree Equity scores. This metric assesses how essential tree canopy advantages are shared across our urban landscape, ensuring these ecological benefits reach the neighbors who require them most. This equity-focused framework helps organizations like us prioritize our resources for communities that often bear the brunt of environmental stressors like poor air quality and urban heat islands. The rating itself consolidates various indicators into a simple 0 to 100 scale; the lower the number, the more critical the need for immediate conservation support and greening efforts. The score indicators include the unemployment rate, health burden index, heat disparity, and percentage of tree cover.

This Spring our grantees included seven schools (including a Title I school), multiple parks (including one adjacent to a Title I school), and a couple of nonprofits. Currently, we don't have any specific funding for this program, but we are committed to supporting grassroots restoration work as much as we can. We're continuing to look for funding opportunities to expand our Plant Grant program to hopefully reach more sites in the future. Applications for our Fall Plant Grant will open in early September.



Above: Staff working with 2nd graders at Jefferson-Houston Elementary School to plant their Plant Grant kit. As a Title 1 school, adjacent to a community center, this site was the perfect opportunity to add wildlife value and make native plants more accessible to the local community.

Meet the Interns

This season, we're excited to welcome two Full-Season Conservation Interns and two Summer Conservation Interns. Meet them below! A special "thank you" to the donors who help support our internship program. We couldn't offer opportunities like these without your support, especially with recent funding cuts. We are incredibly grateful for those who help our program thrive each year.



Above: Full-Season Conservation Intern Peyton Gravatt before an invasive removal event!



Above: Full-Season Conservation Intern Dante Julius kicking back in a wheelbarrow.



Above: Summer Conservation Intern Claudia Chaplain practicing her plant ID skills.



Above: Summer Conservation Intern Brooke Ehmann-Jones during a seed collection day.

Spring Propagation



This spring marks another year, and possibly the last, at our Chantilly greenhouse. Despite being hampered by persistent snow and ice, we managed to yield another full batch of plants for the Wild Plant Nursery. As soon as the weather began to warm, we started filling hundreds of trays of quart pots with soil and sowing seeds in earnest. Pictured to the right are Nursery Manager Kayla and Director Emerita Lisa sowing milkweed species (*Asclepias spp*). After weeks of patience and tending, the bounty of fresh seedlings were ready to be hauled out to the Wild Plant Nursery!

This spring's greenhouse propagation was especially crucial following another challenging winter at the nursery and unpredictable spring temperature swings. Many species overwintered poorly in their pots due to the combination of drought and extreme freezing temperatures. Then the early batches of tender, young plants brought from the greenhouse to the nursery suffered some loss due to the late freezes after an unusually warm March. To compensate for the losses, we continued to sow densely throughout the spring and then rapidly divide seedlings into additional flats of pots as space opened up in the greenhouse. The race to divide and repot continues at the Wild Plant Nursery as summer temperatures rise, and the greenhouse potting mix used in the top inches of those pots daily dries up in the sun. Luckily, we have no shortage of loyal volunteers and interns to help us!



Left: At the Wild Plant Nursery, seedlings are packed like sardines in rows, awaiting division. Limited space continues to cramp our ability to grow more plants for distribution. The new, larger nursery site solves this problem! By expanding our growing area, we can grow more (and larger!) plants. As the demand for natives increases for both the public and for restoration, so too does our ambition to keep up!

Critter Corner

Below are some of our animal friends that visited the Wild Plant Nursery this spring.



Common Five-lined Skink
(*Plestiodon fasciatus*)



Monarch Butterfly Caterpillar
(*Danaus plexippus*)



Grey Treefrog
(*Dryophytes versicolor*)



Common Whitetail Dragonfly
(*Plathemis lydia*)



Above: This May, Earth Sangha had the opportunity to participate in the U.S. Botanic Garden's panel event, "Cocktails & Conversations: Future-Proofing D.C.'s Flora." Pictured above, Executive Director Madeline Bright took to the stage as part of a panel discussion focused on restoration, seed collection, and cultivation. She was joined by guest panelist Dr. Todd Rounsaville and moderator Dr. Susan Pell, USBG's Executive Director. Not pictured are Sangha staff members Shogofa and Kayla tending an information table alongside other organizations.

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using water that would otherwise be going right back into the Potomac.

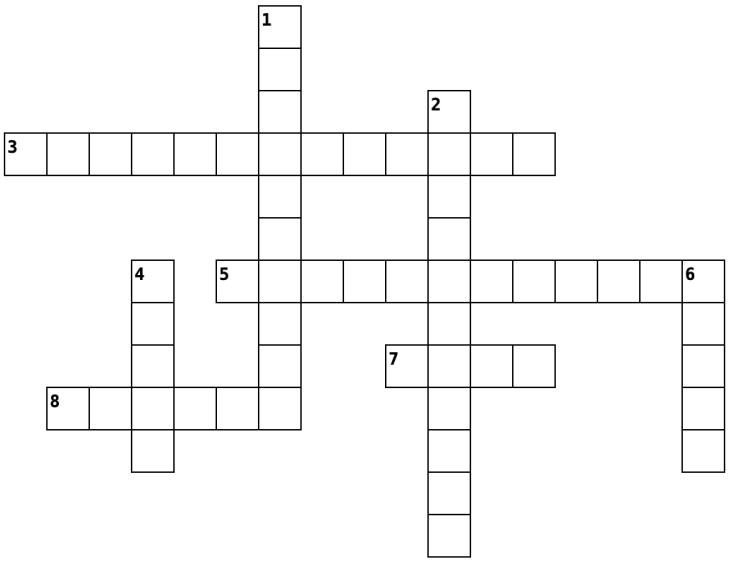
Our carbon footprint will be reduced in a few ways. We have been using greenhouse space generously provided by FCPA in Chantilly, but had to transport all those plants 45 minutes or more to our Springfield site. Locating our greenhouses on site at the new nursery will not only make our work easier, but we'll burn less fuel moving things around. We also believe we can heat our new greenhouses more efficiently with inflated film greenhouses which trap more heat than the old steel and glass greenhouse we've been using.

Substantial conservation efforts are in the works as well. In addition to our tree conservation rows, we have a significant RPA buffer and a managed meadow and forest-edge area where we will continue to remove invasive species, restore with native plants from our nursery, and provide educational walks and tours to the public.

While we plan to begin welcoming folks to our new site in Spring 2027, many of the benefits – like the plants we will be growing there – will take time to come to fruition. More optimistically stated, we will have ample opportunities to shape the site together to expand our mission, add amenities for visitors, and continue to expand restoration work on site. We look forward to welcoming you there next spring!

Crossword Corner:

Who's ready to learn some vocabulary? We've hidden the answers throughout this issue of The Acorn. Before you start Googling the answer, go back and see if you can find it for yourself!



Across:

3. what we search for on a hike
5. aromatic meadow species
7. found on Potomac shores
8. genus of the monarch butterfly

Down:

1. local conservation groups
2. barbed invasive vine
4. pointy part of a cactus
6. the motion of herbaceous vines

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The Earth Sangha is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charity based in the Washington, DC area. We are devoted to the restoration and conservation of native plant communities.

Donate: Donations are tax-deductible. You can mail us a check (made out to "Earth Sangha") or donate on our website at earthsangha.org/donate.

Volunteer: We work with volunteers at our Wild Plant Nursery and our field sites in Northern Virginia. Sign up to volunteer at earthsangha.org/volunteer.

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

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



Above: Let there be water! We're extremely grateful to Fairfax County for extending a water pipe from the Noman M. Cole, Jr. Water Recycling Facility to our new nursery site. Work on the water pipe broke ground in August 2026, but the plans have been in the works for over a year so you can imagine just how excited we are! Our staff can start on installing irrigation to the new propagation yard once the pipe is complete.

Crossword Key: 1. grassroots 2. milkweed vine 3. targetspecies 4. spine 5. mountainmint 6. twine 7. sida 8. danaus