



## I.T. FOR THE WILD HARVEST

**T**he physical act of collecting seed is one of those things that, when done right, really can't be much improved from its Stone Age roots. There is simply no good alternative to walking the sites, carefully identifying the plants, and hand-harvesting the wild, ripe seed in proper quantities.

But managing the harvest of hundreds of species producing seed at different times over dozens of square miles — that's a different matter. One hardly needs to be a botanist to locate a stand of Indian-grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) dominating a meadow, but finding a few stems of Maryland goldenaster (*Chrysopsis mariana*) amidst that meadow's dense groundlayer is a real challenge, especially if you're just working off memories of a few flowers that you saw "right around here" last summer. Getting to just the right spot at just the right time is no easy feat.

So this year, we have been experimenting with a new tool that should make our efforts much more efficient: we're testing an iPad equipped with ArcGIS software. ArcGIS doesn't just give us GPS coordinates; it lets us build complex databases that map species locations, log seed-ripening times, compile collection histories, and so forth. As our crews move into the field next year, we'll be harvesting, not just seed, but also detailed information on the local flora.

But for us, "efficiency" is not just a matter of bringing in more seed. We're working to create a system that is also efficient at safeguarding the wild plant populations that give us our seed. Of course, we are already careful not to over-collect, but many factors besides collection affect population viability — and the effects are difficult to see without the kind of focused, long-term data that we're now planning to gather. Over time, our data should create a detailed ecological picture of our collection sites. That picture will help both the Sangha and our public-agency partners to manage those sites for the long-term benefit of all the native creatures that live within them.

— Matt Bright, Conservation Coordinator

**Photo:** Milkweed is good but whole meadows are what butterflies really need. In September, these monarchs fed on grass-leaved goldenrod (*Solidago graminifolia*) at one of our northern Virginia seed collection sites.

## WE CAN'T SEEM TO KEEP UP WITH OURSELVES

**W**e have had a very busy fall. A review of the major events: **Fall Plant Sale:** Our Wild Plant Nursery Fall Open House and Sale was a big success! Many thanks to all the volunteers who helped with tallying, check-out, and hauling plants to cars. Thanks also to our friends and guests: the Arlington Regional Master Naturalists, the Tree Stewards, the Virginia Native Plant Society, Plant NoVA Natives, and Chesapeake Natives. And special thanks, as always, to our partners at the Fairfax County Park Authority, for all that they have done to make our nursery program such a success.

We had well over 200 visitors and were pleased to welcome more than 50 new members. We sold over 1,300 local-ecotype native plants and raised over \$16,000 for ecological restoration work in local parks. Our fall sales always lag behind our spring sales in terms of both attendance and revenue but this was, by far, the best fall sale that we have ever had. We are very pleased to see such enthusiasm for native plants, and to be part of such a lively, collaborative group of non-profits working for conservation in the DC region.

**Wild Plant Nursery:** Renovations are, well, maybe three-quarters complete. That's a lot! All our shade structures are built, and all of the irrigation has been upgraded as well. The new 4,000-square-foot section of container yard will go into production next spring. Our engineer colleague, Dave Gunnarson, has produced a very professional plan for the nursery's north-east corner. That's where we'll put the truck-sized soil and mulch bins, as well as adjustable-height (and shaded!) potting benches. Those projects are also for next spring. Our special thanks to the Social Action student group at the Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda, Maryland. These students have started coming out to the nursery every other week. They are hard workers and they're going to make a big difference.

**Marie Butler Leven Preserve:** This fall, our volunteers hauled out hundreds of garbage-bags full of invasive herbaceous plants — species that we can't leave in the park because they may release viable seed even after being pulled. We also cut and yanked about half an acre's

*Continued on the back page . . .*

**IN MEMORIAM: GASPAR PÉREZ AQUINO, 1953 – 2014**

## IN MEMORIAM: GASPAR PÉREZ AQUINO, 1953 – 2014

**Gaspar Pérez Aquino**, a founder of the Tree Bank Hispaniola, and its Director in the Dominican Republic, died unexpectedly on September 3<sup>rd</sup> from a stroke. Here follow notes of remembrance from the Tree Bank's other founders: Tommy Ventre, Chris Bright, and Matt Bright.

The Tree Bank is a partnership between the Earth Sangha and the Asociación de Productores de Bosque, Los Cerezos. The Tree Bank works along the north-central Dominican Republic / Haiti border to improve small-holder farms and restore native forest.

When I first met Gaspar, he was not the icon of wisdom, fortitude, and open-mindedness that he would later become in my eyes. Rather, his image suggested the very scourge of my Peace Corps service in Los Cerezos to that point — a Dominican male, all bravado, machismo, and campesino. Gaspar, I had learned, was the man to talk to about renting a house there, and as I walked into his small, hillside garden to introduce myself, I saw him take a mighty hack with his machete, felling two papayas from the tree beneath which he and his horse stood. His shirt was unbuttoned, his pant legs were tucked into his knee-high rubber boots, and the sheath for his blade hung at his waist from a belt of blue rope. Our greetings were short, limited both by my fledgling Spanish proficiency and Gaspar's practiced conciseness, a trademark of his. The bravado I had expected never materialized, replaced instead by a quiet intimidation: his giant right hand enveloping mine in a cool handshake; the sun glinting off the moist blade of the machete; the horse snuffing its indifference at the bumbling interloper in a seemingly precise echo of its owner's feelings.

I am thankful that the lasting image I have of Gaspar is quite different. Perhaps not on the surface — I can still see him carrying that machete, and I can still see the shadow cast by his brick-wall physique as he strides through the nursery in late afternoon. But what I see now that I didn't see back beneath that papaya tree is a model of the type of man I can only strive to become: deliberative in thought; gracious in meeting both setback and success; gentle and caring in relationships, yet strong and committed in principles. The Tree Bank owes a great deal of its growth to these traits of its on-the-ground leader. More broadly, we all owe a debt to the ideals Gaspar embodied. In a part of the world where dreams too often stand nary a chance of coming true, Gaspar took steps toward his every day. He knew the kind of world in which he wanted to live — a world of ideas, a world of possibility, a world that leans ever forward without forgetting its roots in the past — and he set about creating it. We will do well to remember him for that.

— Tommy Ventre

*Tommy Ventre was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Los Cerezos from 2005 to 2007. He revived and reorganized the community association that became our Dominican partner organization. Tommy currently teaches language arts to 7th-graders in Baltimore, where he lives with his wife, Krissy, also a middle-school teacher there.*

**Photos:** At right, Gaspar at ease in the meeting space section of the coffee warehouse that we built in 2012. Opposite page, Gaspar at work with Frankie, our Nursery Assistant, at the Tree Bank Nursery. (Both photos were taken in 2012.)

Gaspar was born in 1953. His father was a coffee grower and farmer in Los Cerezos, the settlement where the Tree Bank is based. Gaspar was the youngest of seven children; he had two sisters and four brothers. In 1962, he began his relationship with Maricilis Milagro Peña; for 26 years, Gaspar and Mari lived together in a kind of informal marriage that is very common in the Dominican countryside. In 1996, they were formally married. The couple had three children: Ricardo, Yinabel, and Marilesi. In 2013 Ricardo committed suicide, leaving behind his own wife, Anabel, and their three children. I do not understand why Ricardo killed himself but I suspect that, if he had been living in the US, he might have been diagnosed as vulnerable to depression. Both Yinabel and Marilesi are now married. Yinabel and her husband have two children of their own; Marilesi and her husband have one. Both families live in Loma de Cabrera, the town nearest Los Cerezos. Mari lives in Loma too.

Gaspar was one of the most remarkable people that I have ever met. He was remarkable because he grasped the ethical opportunities in his life, and he lived them to the greatest extent that he could.

Gaspar spent his entire life on the island of Hispaniola. His only travel outside the Dominican Republic consisted of trips to Haiti, where he helped implement a forest restoration project. The project failed and Gaspar had no desire to return for another try. When I asked him why not, he just shook his head and said that Haiti was "not safe."

Gaspar had a very jaundiced view of politics, even though he was active in one of the DR's national parties. His views were decidedly populist; he seemed to me to be an optimist in a chronic state of disappointment over the corruption and incompetence that he saw in



## FARMER, TEACHER, COMMUNITY LEADER

national affairs. He was a committed evangelical Christian, but he never proselytized. No one else in his family had the slightest interest in this brand of Christianity but that didn't seem to bother him. By the time I met him, in 2006, he seemed a natural leader. He was imposing, but rarely assertive; I don't think I ever saw him argue with anyone outside his family (except for me, of course, and then only in a very polite and careful way).

For Gaspar, everything had to be referred somehow to family and community. He obtained a correspondence degree in agronomy from a university in Argentina and was constantly trying out ideas that he hoped would benefit the other farmers in Los Cerezos. He started raising turkeys because he saw them as an efficient way to convert the bugs and farmyard debris that they ate to meat worthy of a family's table. He assembled a nutrient drip-feed — a network of barrels and tubing — to create a demonstration bean field that made very effective use of fertilizer. He helped a UN Food and Agriculture official test new, fungus-resistant strains of beans. Of course, he worked with Matt and me on all our Tree Bank programs. I think his favorite programs were our Forest Credit system and the “Parcela Agro-Ecológica” soil management grant, created because Gaspar worried that Forest Credit couldn't help the poorest farmers, whose soils were so unproductive that credit wasn't of much use. And he loved investigating the local flora; the other farmers sometimes made fun of him for his interest in “weeds.”

I was very lucky to have been Gaspar's friend for eight years. I miss him badly. I still can't quite believe that he is gone.

— Chris Bright, President



Gaspar's deep voice would cut through the weekly meetings of the Asociación de Productores de Bosque, Los Cerezos — meetings over which he presided. Even when he remained silent, others would study his reactions, as we sat in the open-air meeting hall. My meager Spanish, and the noise of passing motorcycles and nearby fighting cocks, prevented me from understanding much of what was said. But when Gaspar spoke, the heads nodding in sage agreement didn't need translating.

Many members of the Sangha know of Gaspar's roles as Tree Bank Program Director and President of the Association, so his high station in community life might be easy to take for granted. But Gaspar was also an iconoclast. He was a committed Evangelical in a largely *pro forma* Catholic society; he was an agricultural experimenter in a place where most farmers are very reluctant to veer from tradition; he was a savvy political operator in a backwater region of little apparent interest even to the politicians who were supposed to be representing it. I remember thinking one night, as we sat on his porch, watching moths cast dizzying shadows on the cement floor, while gospel music played from his cell phone, that if Gaspar had been born into more favorable circumstances, we would likely be working for his organization and not vice-versa.

As I look back at the last eight years of collaboration and friendship with Gaspar, I sometimes worry that we will find ourselves adrift without his guidance. But here too, we can learn from his example. Gaspar never doubted that people, especially poor people, could improve their circumstances if they were willing to work hard, work together, and work intelligently. He was taken from us far too soon — but not before he taught us that fundamental lesson.

— Matt Bright, Conservation Coordinator

## GASPAR'S LEGACY

We are fortunate that Gaspar was such a good manager. He developed all of the Tree Bank's components with care, so we have a solid structure to build on. (For a diagram of those components, see the April 2014 *Acorn*.) The only major flaw in the system was the very characteristic that made it so effective in its early years: the role of Gaspar himself.

Back in 2006, when we founded the Tree Bank, our “Great Man” approach made sense: we found this one, very competent person, we put him in charge, and we worked through him. There was plenty of back-and-forth between Gaspar and us — but implementation was entirely a matter for Gaspar. That arrangement worked well for a small program, with maybe half a dozen farms and only two project components. But the Tree Bank now has 40 farms, seven project components, and hundreds of acres of land in care.

During the last few years of Gaspar's life, we thought he had too much to do, so we hired two paid staffers to assist him. We didn't realize it at the time, but a shift to a different model had already begun. Now that Gaspar is gone, reorganization has become our top priority. Chris has been in near-weekly contact with the Association and we are charting a new way forward — a way that distributes functions to many more participants, and encourages a team-based approach. The Tree Bank's goals won't change, but we are trying to make our efforts, in effect, a part of the local culture. We'll describe our plans at greater length in the next *Acorn*.



... continued from the front page:

worth of invasive shrubs, trees, and woody vines. And we started a “native canopy” project, which aims to clear invasive alien trees and vines from the canopy. (We’ve removed the vines before so that part is not too hard — we just have to cut the regrowth.) The little meadow project that we installed at the Preserve last fall is beginning to take shape. In the spring, we’ll begin weeding it, and doing some additional planting. Also by spring, we hope to be working on a complete renovation of the Preserve’s rain garden. (It seems that garden’s soil mix has to be replaced and an under-drain has to be installed; these are jobs for the Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District.) We’re also working with a local Eagle Scout to rejuvenate the pollinator garden near the meadow project.

**Tree Bank Hispaniola:** We were deeply saddened by the loss of our friend and colleague, Gaspar Pérez Aquino, the Tree Bank’s Director. (See inside this issue.) Since Gaspar’s death in September, we have been working with his family, our partner farmers, and with Christina Houtz, a Peace Corps Volunteer in Los Cerezos (the settlement where the Tree Bank is based), to reorganize the way that the project is administered. We’ll write more on this in the next issue of the *Acorn*.

**Rising Forests Coffee:** Our own brand of sustainably grown coffee, produced by the Tree Bank’s farmers, is now available at three retailers in the DC area: Roberta’s Natural Foods in Fairfax City, Willowsford Farm in Loudon County, and England Acres Farm in Frederick, Maryland. It’s also available online, both for single orders and subscriptions (go to [earthsangha.org](http://earthsangha.org) and click on coffee).

**DC-Area Programs:** We’re looking for people to fill new “volunteer staff” positions at both the Wild Plant Nursery and the Marie Butler Leven Preserve. We need experienced volunteers to help manage day-to-day tasks at the nursery, and lead field events at the Preserve. Minimum commitment would be once a week at the nursery, and once a month at the Preserve. If you’re interested, write Matt at [mbright@earthsangha.org](mailto:mbright@earthsangha.org).

**Photo:** Garbage bags never looked so good! This fall, Earth Sangha staff and volunteers removed over 130 garbage bags of mile-a-minute (*Polygonum perfoliatum*), an invasive alien annual vine, from the Marie Butler Leven Preserve in Fairfax County, Virginia. The September 21<sup>st</sup> haul is shown here.

# EARTH SANGHA

## BUDDHIST VALUES IN ACTION

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.) **Contact us at:** [Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707](http://Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707) | (703) 764-4830 | [earthsangha.org](http://earthsangha.org). Complete program information is available on our website.

**Want to volunteer or meditate with us?** We work with volunteers at our Wild Plant Nursery and our field sites in northern Virginia. We meditate in the Del Ray section of Alexandria on Tuesday evenings. For more information see our website or call Lisa Bright at (703) 764-4830.

**The Acorn:** Our newsletter is produced with “print on demand” technology, which consumes far less energy and materials than does conventional printing. This paper is 100% post-consumer waste recycled, process chlorine-free, and manufactured entirely with wind-generated electricity. This issue copyright © 2014, Earth Sangha.

**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.”



**From the Tree Bank’s farmers  
To you:  
Rising Forests Coffee.  
Revive yourself.  
Restore the forests.  
[earthsangha.org/coffee.html](http://earthsangha.org/coffee.html)**