In September, the Earth Sangha turned 20 years old. Lisa and I, the Sangha’s founders, are very grateful to everyone who has played a role in the Sangha’s growth over the past two decades — and during the next two, we’re hoping that you’ll really step up your game. (I jest; you have to indulge me at my age.) We’re planning to tell you about our hopes for the next 20 years in the December Acorn. In the meantime, we thought that you might appreciate the following chronicle of the Sangha’s accomplishments to date.

— Chris Bright

September 3, 1997: The Sangha is officially incorporated. The world does not change perceptibly on that account. Lisa starts our meditation group shortly thereafter. We sit in her Asian art gallery in Old Town, Alexandria, Virginia.

September 1998: Chris and Matt (son of Lisa and Chris; he’s nine at the time) collect acorns and hickory nuts to test the idea of a nursery dedicated to local-ecotype propagation. Matt throws most of his hickory nuts at Chris.

March 1999: The acorns begin to sprout but squirrels chew up most of the seedlings. Oh well. But they did sprout!

September 1999: Chris and Lisa begin propagating dozens of tree seedlings in their backyard, much to the neighbors’ consternation.

June 2001: We reach an agreement with Fairfax County, Virginia, to develop our Wild Plant Nursery at Franconia Park, in Springfield, and we begin work there. (See the photo above.)

September 2001: Our first, large-scale seed-collection effort begins. Those efforts have grown in bulk, area covered, species included, and technical sophistication every year thereafter.

April 2002: We begin our first, rather tentative restoration effort in a local park — Wilburdale Park in Annandale, Virginia.

January 2004: The Sangha acquires its first paid full-time employee: Chris. Sometimes you just have to work with what you got.

May 2004: We start work at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve (MBLP), which is almost completely swallowed up by invasive alien plants.

January 2005: The Sangha agrees to implement Fairfax County’s Riparian Buffer Restoration Project. Our job was to supply plants, design the plantings, and work with volunteers to put the plantings in. The project ran until April 2009. (See next page.) This effort also marked the start of our large-scale partnerships with local schools.

November 2005: The annual number of volunteer hours logged at our nursery and field sites exceeds 10,000 for the first time.

November 2005 again: The number of species in propagation at our nursery exceeds 100 for the first time.

Photos: Above, the site of our Wild Plant Nursery in June 2001, on our first day of construction. Most of the site is now shaded growing space. Below, a section of that space during our Fall Open House, last September.
The National Park Service allows us to use its facilities. Sophie Lynn approaches us about the empty house on Daingerfield Island in Alexandria. The Tree Bank acquires a large greenhouse in Chantilly; our use of it plays an important role in our local propagation system.


Photos: Matt (left) and his host, Tommy Ventre, take in the view from their Los Cerezos digs in June 2006, the month of the Tree Bank’s founding. Adonis (far right — in this photo but not politically) considers the social possibilities. Today, Adonis lives in a cabin just a few yards from this one; Tommy is a teacher in Baltimore, and Matt lives with Katherine at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve. (See the interview with Sophie.) In January, this cabin will probably host a flock of American birders for the Tree Bank’s annual bird count.
I n November 2013, we got an email from Sophie Lynn, asking whether we would be interested in working together, to do something about the vacant house in the Marie Butler Leven Preserve, in the McLean section of Fairfax County, Virginia. We had been working on the Preserve grounds since 2004, and Sophie was a neighbor of the Preserve. At the time, she lived just across the road.

The house had become a chronic source of local angst — another neighbor once approached Matt Bright, our Conservation Manager, with an offer of support if we could figure out how to have the thing torn down. But where others might have seen just a nuisance, Sophie saw an opportunity. And over the next four years, her guidance and expertise in historic preservation effectively re-created that house, building modern necessities into its original form and fabric. But she did more than just manage this process; she and her husband, David Frederick, also paid for it. Nothing remotely like this had ever happened to us before, and I don't have any reason to think that it will happen again.

The project was completed in early June and by the end of that month, two members of the Sangha's staff, Matt and Katherine Isaacson, our Development and Outreach Coordinator, had moved in, in accordance with the lease agreement that we had reached with the County. In September, I sat down with Sophie, on the Leven House porch, to get her thoughts on how the project had worked. Here is what she told me. (My questions are in green.)

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CB: Why do this project? There must have been dozens of projects that you could have done. Why this one — other than the fact that you practically lived next door?

SL: Living next door had a little bit to do with it. I'm from Washington, DC, and when I moved to McLean, I really wanted to experience a sense of community, because that's how I function best. And so very quickly I noticed that the Earth Sangha already had a marker in the landscape, through your on-going work at the Preserve. And that perception, combined with my background in historic preservation, piqued my interest in this empty house. And I was catapulted into action after a series of incidents involving young people who were using the place destructively for their partying. I'm definitely in favor of enjoying the landscape at any age, but when the fabric of the house was being damaged by glass breaking, parties after midnight, and so on, I decided to write a proposal —

And you realized that this was occurring because you were living right across the street.

Yes. The glass breaking would wake me up at night. So I decided to write a proposal to the Fairfax County Park Authority [the agency that owns the Preserve], after I consulted with you all, to see if you would be interested in being a partner in a collaborative, citizen-driven effort to rehabilitate the house and occupy it for the purposes of the Earth Sangha's management of the park.

And what about the house itself? What kind of value do you see in it? It's not of great historical importance.

Well that's right, but this is a charming, Cape Cod — style cottage that was dear to Maurice Leven, the person who built it — so much so that he sought to preserve it in the very carefully worded deed that gave this property to the Park Authority to be an arboretum for public benefit upon his death. And out of respect for his cherishing this house, one had to approach rehabilitating it and making it livable, by trying to retain as much of the original material as possible. But at the same time, we had to modernize the place, to make living here feasible — and pleasurable.

What was the toughest part of this project?

Two things. First, the toughest part was getting the attention of the Park Authority and convincing the leaders and staff there that our proposal represented a bona fide win-win opportunity for all involved. The gestational period amounted to several years. We had to find a way to allow citizens to lead the rehabilitation of a somewhat dilapidated property for the public’s benefit. Once Supervisor Foust — John Foust — got on board, the project picked up momentum and our collaboration began to work as a team. That part was really fun.

The other challenging piece came at the very end. Some heavy rains last spring showed us how porous the basement was. And having to deal with that at the end of the construction phase, and the added expense — that created a classic construction-project challenge.

So what kind of difficulty typically comes up in projects like these?

Oh, absolutely. That’s why builders want to have some kind of contingency fee built into contracts, to handle the unexpected. We almost got away without an unexpected problem, but not quite. I suppose that it’s good, in a way, that it happened during the construction phase, since it was easier to fix.

Absolutely. It happened on a day when there were workmen in the house, as well as the project manager for our Design / Build firm,
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 | info@earthsangha.org | (703) 764-4830. 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 D.C. Bay section of Alexandria on Tuesday evenings. For more information see our website or call Lisa Bright at (703) 764-4830.

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