



**TREE BANK UPDATE**

The past six months or so have been a very busy time for our Tree Bank Hispaniola program. The Tree Bank works along a section of the Dominican Republic / Haiti border, to improve small-holder farm incomes and to conserve and restore forest. (We work on the Dominican side of the border but many of the people in our project area are Haitian and the program is intended to help everyone.) Here's what we've been up to.

**Birding with the Virginia Society of Ornithology:** In December, we hosted our third winter birding expedition in Los Cerezos, the little municipality where the Tree Bank is based. The three-day effort was organized by Lenny Bankester, VSO President, and included the same five birders, plus Lenny, who staffed the two previous efforts. (This year they were joined by Spencer Schubert, a graduate student at Old Dominion University and a very talented birder himself.) During each visit, the birders census the same set of four sites over three days, so that our data are as consistent, from year to year, as possible. The sites are representative of our work: there's a coffee planting, a broadleaf forest, a pine forest, and a restoration site. The highlights this time: a total of 21 species, of which seven were migratory (they overwinter in the Caribbean but breed in the eastern US). The most remarkable find this time was a species of kingbird — I believe it was the loggerhead kingbird. Its Hispaniolan populations have declined dramatically over the past 40 years or so and it is now difficult to find. We're grateful to our VSO colleagues for introducing us to our project area's bird life!

**Forest Credit:** This spring, our conservation lending effort reached more families, with more credit, and protected more forest than ever before. The program offers farmers lines of credit in exchange for conserving forest on their lands. The loans are made in April, to coincide with spring planting. The money is mostly used to buy seed and fertilizer. This year, we made 52 loans, totaling \$33,380, and protecting 318 acres of forest. (The corresponding figures for 2018 were: 44 loans, \$29,830 lent, and 265 acres.) Forest Credit is the part of the Tree Bank that has the greatest local appeal. That's because credit is difficult for small-holder farmers to secure — not just in the DR but throughout the developing world.

*Continued on page 2 . . .*

**YOU GIVE. WE GO TO WORK!**

Good news on finances: our year-end appeal yielded \$48,296, including an \$11,715 match from two very generous long-time donors. And this spring, our Wild Plant Nursery Open House raised another \$29,900 for work in local parks, including a \$3,534 match of membership purchases from Mary Sylvia, our board chair.

We're grateful to everyone who donated! Thanks to you, we did a thorough upgrade of our Tree Bank nursery. (See the article at left for a full update on the Tree Bank.) At our DC-area nursery, you helped us launch a paid intern program that offers high-school seniors and university students a chance to learn basic horticulture skills. We're also working with the Fairfax County Park Authority to set up a greenhouse or hoop house at the nursery. And of course, our planting and invasives-control projects continue at their usual frenetic pace. (More on that in the next *Acorn*.) Thanks again and please get in touch with us if you would like to discuss our work.



**Photos:** At top, our Tree Bank Nursery crew rebuilt the nursery terraces in March, under our new shade structure. Above, a Cape May warbler overwintering in the Tree Bank area in December. So far we have identified 12 bird species that breed in the eastern US and overwinter on Tree Bank field sites. (Photo by Bill Williams.)



*Tree Bank Update, continued from the front page . . .*

**Nursery renovation:** during the winter and early spring, the Tree Bank’s five-person nursery crew did a complete tear-down and rebuild of the program’s original, 13-year-old shade structure. They pulled off the old shade cloth, which had seen years of heavy storms, and had been shredded and stitched back together, over and over again, in their wake. They pulled out the battered and rotting frame, and retraced the growing space. (See the photo on the front page.) Then they put up a steel frame and covered it with new, high-quality shade cloth. (See the photo on page 4.) Later this year, we hope to add a third water-storage cistern to improve nursery production during droughts.

**Sandy, Lord of the Seeds:** in April, we hired a youngish local farmer to collect local, wild, native-tree seed for the Tree Bank Nursery. Sandy Pérez Recio is 34 — a mere sapling, compared to most of our partner-farmers, who are well into middle age, and set in their ways, and definitely not looking to add tree-climbing to their routine.



Sandy, we hope, will be a little more flexible, both physically and mentally. The Tree Bank Nursery already produces thousands of native, local-ecotype trees every year, from seed that our farmers collect when they can, and when they remember to do it. But just to manage our current sites, we’re going to need a much higher seedling volume from a much greater variety of species than we’ve currently got. We’re hoping that Sandy will improve our seed harvest.

**Cosme’s bones:** in April, Cosme Damián Quezada, one of the Tree Bank’s Co-Directors, had back surgery to replace two herniated vertebral disks with prosthetic ones. By the time of his surgery, Cosme was completely incapacitated — in constant pain and barely able to walk. I’m pleased to report that the surgery was successful. But we learned in June that Cosme has a serious hip problem as well, and we’re trying to get him treatment for that. As you might imagine, these treatments are phenomenally expensive by small-holder standards. Fortunately, Cosme’s wife is Secretary at the local high school, so the family has government health insurance, and the Sangha is covering the out-of-pocket costs. Without our help, I don’t see how Cosme could possibly receive treatment. Cosme is very grateful to the donors who are helping to pay his bills — as are we, the Sangha’s staff!

**Rising Forests® Coffee and Cocoa:** people ask us from time to time about the Tree Bank’s coffee and cocoa program. These are shade-tolerant crops that are traditionally grown under native forest canopy in our project region, thereby creating an incentive to conserve that canopy. (We encourage the planting of coffee and cocoa where the forest is already disturbed, but not in our Forest Credit reserves, where the forest is in better shape.) By the end of 2015, a fungal leaf-rust epidemic had killed virtually all of the coffee trees in the DR. Since then, we have been replanting with rust-resistant coffee cultivars as fast as we can — and we’re adding cocoa trees where that’s appropriate, to create more tree-crop diversity. But we’re still probably two winters away from our first commercially viable coffee harvest, and cocoa is still at least four years away. We’ll keep you posted!

— Chris Bright, President

**Photos:** At left, volunteer Daly Chin spent much (maybe most!) of February in the Chantilly, Virginia, greenhouse. The greenhouse is owned by the Fairfax County Park Authority, which has generously allowed us to use it. Above, a vervain hummingbird hovers in one of our Tree Bank field sites last December. This species is common in Dominican coffee groves. (Photo by Bill Williams.)

# IN GRATITUDE TO OUR MAJOR DONORS FOR 2018



## Above 20,000

Sophia Lynn & David Frederick

## 5,000 – 20,000

Botanical Artists for Education  
and the Environment (\$16,550)

The Greater Washington Community  
Foundation (\$12,579)

Bill & Helen Ackerman (\$11,715)

Bruce Engelbert & Cynthia Irmer (\$10,000)

Two anonymous donors (\$10,000)

Elizabeth Ann Martin (\$10,000)

For an invasives-control internship  
at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve

The LWH Family Foundation (\$10,000)

Mary Sylvia (\$9,375)

An anonymous donor (\$5,000)

The Dominion Energy Charitable  
Foundation (\$5,000)

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## 1,000 – 4,999

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In honor of Sinead O'Neill  
& her love of plants

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Marianne Vakiener & Paul Kohlbrenner,

In honor of Katherine & Matthew

An anonymous donor

## Fairfax County: Our 2018 Government Partner

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

Last year, Fairfax County granted us \$16,150 for work in the County's parks & schoolyards.

**Photo:** In April, Matt and Katherine hosted a meadow planting in the 1.4-acre field at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve, in McLean, Virginia. Volunteers installed hundreds of native grass and forb seedlings, all grown at our Wild Plant Nursery, in a section of the field. This is a long-term effort, not an "instant meadow" event. The idea is to introduce more and more locally native material — in plantings like this one — while pushing back against the most disruptive invasives. Gradually, a more-or-less native meadow community should emerge.

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.

500 – 999

The Kirby Family Fund of the Greater  
 Washington Community Foundation  
 Nancy Hadley & Kerry Lyon  
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250 – 499

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100 – 249

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**Photos:** At left, the Tree Bank Nursery's steel shade structure was installed in March, along with new, high-quality shade cloth. It replaced a decrepit wooden structure. We still have a wooden structure adjacent to this one, but it's relatively new and still has several good years left in it. Above, in December, we found a pair of Antillean euphonias nesting in a Hispaniolan pine. This is the male. The pine is endangered; the bird is probably in decline because its preferred habitat is forest. (Photo by Bill Williams.) At right: birder down-time back in December 2016, during our first birding trip. Lenny plays banjo for Samali and Adonis while the others discuss the great issues of our times and speculate on lunch.



## PICK UP A SHOVEL!

One peculiar aspect of suburbia is how tranquil and natural the lawns look. These ankle-high monocultures of alien turf grasses (achieved at the expense of considerable fossil fuel combustion) just seem so reassuring, while the meadows, woody oldfields, wetlands, and other wild plant communities that the turf is replacing — these places look strange and kind of scary. (“You want me to go in there? Forget it.”)

This perceptual disconnect is important because the burbs are now so extensive. It wouldn't matter much if there were just a few houses here and there, but when half or more of our landscape is buildings, turf, and asphalt, it's risky to allow our perceptions to deceive us. Here in the DC region, we live within a panorama of enormous biological wealth, thanks to varied soils, complex topography, abundant water, and mild temperatures. But that wealth, which took thousands of years to accumulate, is melting away. We are losing our native flora and fauna, but the loss doesn't bother us much because it's so comfortable.

Lots of comfort is not good for people — and lots of this kind of comfort is definitely not good for the landscape. We are homogenizing our environs, eliminating more and more of what is distinctive about them, and in the process, we are threatening their integrity in ways that we don't understand very well. One example: will continued decline of local native-plant populations accelerate the conversion of meadow and forest to invasive thicket? I don't know, and I'd rather not find out.

Since, as usual, we don't understand what we're doing, the prudent course of action would be, at a minimum, to look for cost-effective ways to slow the degradation, or even reverse it in some places. If you're a local homeowner, you can help. You can sacrifice a little turf to the cause. Create a garden of locally native plants. Such a garden will offer native insects and other small creatures a little more habitat, and improve the pollination chances of the plant species you grow. And maybe just as important, you can help introduce your family and friends to the local natural landscape. In a non-scary way! Our region badly needs a healthier rapport between our built and our natural environments. You are already living in both of those realms. You can help us become better citizens of both.



### Not Sure Where to Start? These Resources Might Help.

Our *Wild Garden Manual* provides additional context, suggests techniques, and offers plant lists that might serve as a model for your project. The manual is available as a pdf on the nursery page of our website ([earthsangha.org/wpn](http://earthsangha.org/wpn)) or from our office as a hard copy.

A Plant Grant could reduce the cost of plants. We've just opened up our Plant Grant program to qualifying home garden projects. See the article on pages 7-8.

A site visit from Matt, our Conservation Manager, might help, especially if your project is large or complicated. Visits cost \$100, but that's deductible from purchases of plants at our Wild Plant Nursery. Matt's schedule is pretty full so visits may take some time to arrange. You can also just email Matt pictures and questions, which he will try to answer for free. His email is [mbright@earthsangha.org](mailto:mbright@earthsangha.org).

— Chris Bright, President

**Photos:** In May, our Wild Plant Nursery's Spring Open House and Plant Sale, in Springfield, Virginia, was a rainy affair. But that didn't stop nearly 350 people from turning out! Above, the checkout table was staffed, from left to right, by “Dollar Bill” Ackerman (as he is commonly known during these events), Katherine Isaacson (our Development & Outreach Coordinator), and nursery intern Ashlina Chin. Below, visitors browse a section of our container yard.





## Thank You Mr. Matt!

During the school year 2017-18, we launched a pilot program to propagate native plants in the classroom with seed collected from already established schoolyard gardens. This past school year, we brought in-school native-plant propagation to five public schools and one private school, all of them in Northern Virginia. The schools are in Arlington County, Fairfax County, and Vienna. At each school, “Mr. Matt,” aka the Sangha’s Conservation Manager, did workshops for students and educators on how to collect viable seed, prepare it for sowing, grow seedlings, and plant.

A total of nine gardens were established or expanded! But we also faced challenges — some that we expected and some that we did not. For example, some species grew far slower than expected due to chilly classrooms. And, as you can imagine, second-graders — even under close supervision — aren’t as careful sowers as twelfth-graders.

We are learning from the challenges, but our basic idea seems to be working. By involving students in every step of propagation, we can greatly expand the educational value of schoolyard native-plant gardens and engage students year-round. Our program encourages students and teachers to become leaders in reestablishing habitat at their own schools. The program also offers valuable insights into environmental stewardship, sustainable horticulture, and ecological restoration.

Most schools in our area have limited discretionary funding for gardening, and funds have to be raised by teachers or students. By teaching students and educators to propagate from their own gardens, we are helping to create a self-sustaining effort that can continue restoring schoolyard habitats with appropriate native plants, while keeping costs low. Our partner schools can reuse their grow-trays, stakes, watering cans, and grow-lights, and will only need to purchase more growing medium.

Bringing the outdoors into the classroom serves multiple missions: it expands native-plant and animal habitat on school grounds, it increases hands-on student involvement, and it grows environmental stewardship.

— Katherine Isaacson, Development & Outreach Coordinator

## Plant Grants Come Home

Our Plant Grant program for spring 2019 just concluded with over 635 plants donated to groups across Northern Virginia. This brings the total number of grants awarded to 23.

A quick refresher: our Plant Grant program donates a plant for every plant purchased from our Wild Plant Nursery, for qualifying projects, up to a specified cap.

We’re eager to expand our role in supporting conservation on public lands, and in communal, semi-public areas (schools, HOAs, places of worship, and so on). But we also want to help people who are contributing to native-plant conservation at home. So to improve

*Continued on the back page . . .*

**Drawings:** Jamestown Elementary, in Arlington, was one of the schools that Matt included last year in his in-school propagation effort. (See the article at left.) At Jamestown, Matt worked with Master Naturalist Kathleen Freeman, Teacher Sheri Sharwarko, and Sheri’s second-grade class to collect seed from a native-plant garden that had already been established on school grounds. The project went well — as you can see from the drawings above. These are two of 20 notes with drawings that we received from the class as a thank-you for the event.

The drawings are worth a close look. If you compare the two above, you’ll see that Jack, at left, is definitely a structure kind of guy. Note the tree in his drawing and the varied herb layer. Claire, on the other hand, has opted for detail. Those shrubs with yellow fruit are sumacs, and a couple of different pollinators are passing by overhead. Additional thoughts from the class: Max writes, “Thank you for choosing us out of the whole school! I am very happy, so also can we have more things like the seed hike? I also think you two are not strict and that is good.” (That’s Matt and Kathleen, presumably.) And Wren observes, “Dear Ms. Freeman and Mr. Matt, Thank you for a very wonderful lesson on plants. You taught me and my friends things that I did not even know.”



*Plant Grants, continued from page 7 . . .*

the program, we're making a few quality-of-life changes:

1. Plant Grant applications will now be done on a rolling basis through an easy-to-use web-form. (We'll send out a link soon!)
2. Plant Grant awards will run the full growing season (spring through fall) to allow more flexibility to time plantings.
3. Successfully completed projects on public and communal lands will be eligible to reapply in subsequent years.
4. We will begin accepting applications for private property. To be eligible, homeowners must be Earth Sangha members, and must have or be pursuing some form of wildlife habitat certification (for instance, Audubon at Home, or National Wildlife Federation Certified Wildlife Habitat). Private property grants are issued once for the lifetime of the property in order to jumpstart conservation at home, but homeowners are of course welcome to continue to purchase from our Wild Plant Nursery as they have before.
5. To increase transparency and equity, awards will be standardized. Natural areas will be offered a match of up to \$1,000; communal areas up to \$500, and homeowners up to \$100.

Our criteria for evaluating applications will remain the same: the highest priority will be given to projects likely to have the greatest ecological benefit. As always, our preference is for projects in our home jurisdiction of Fairfax County, but we are happy to support projects across Northern Virginia.

— *Matt Bright, Conservation Manager*

**Photo:** In February, Daly Chin and Matt set out oak and hickory seed in our special "Squirrel No-Go" structure. Daly is a volunteer of formidable dedication and stamina. More than a match for any squirrel! Chris built the structure, so you won't be surprised to learn that it was damaged by a heavy snow fall — something that either Daly or Matt would have anticipated. But it's easy to fix! And so far, it's squirrel-free.

## 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, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707 | \(703\) 764-4830 | earthsangha.org](mailto:info@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.

**The Acorn:** Our newsletter is printed on paper that is 100% post-consumer waste recycled, process chlorine-free, and manufactured entirely with wind-generated electricity. This issue copyright © 2019, Earth Sangha.

**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."

