



St. Joseph
County
Soil & Water
Conservation
District



Today's Visions for Tomorrow's Future

March/April 2021
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What's Going On...

Events hosted by the St. Joseph County SWCD & Our Partners in Conservation

March

16th - Board Meeting

- Open to the Public.
Time and location TBA contact our office or check our website for updates.

April

2nd - Good Friday - County Holiday

20th - Board Meeting

- Open to the Public.
Time and location TBA contact our office or check our website for updates.

Applying Nature's Soil Health Principles for Improving Soil Function.



On February 23, 2021 the St Joseph and Marshall County Soil & Water Conservation Districts held a virtual workshop featuring Ray Archuleta. This workshop is now available on our website;

www.stjosephswcd.org/producers-workshop.

Ray Archuleta is a Certified Professional Soil Scientist with the Soil Science Society of America and has over 30 years experience as a Soil Conservationist, Water Quality Specialist, and Conservation Agronomist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). During his tenure with the NRCS Ray served in New Mexico, Missouri, Oregon, and North Carolina.

Ray received his AS degree in Livestock Science from Northern New Mexico College and a BS degree in Agricultural Biology plus 30 hours of graduate work in soil related courses from New Mexico State University. He served in the Peace Corps for two years in Guatemala as a Livestock Specialist.

After his retirement from the NRCS in 2017, Ray founded Understanding Ag, LLC, and Soil Health Academy, to teach Biomimicry strategies and Agroecology principles for improving soil function on a national scale. Ray also owns and operates a 150-acre farm near Seymour, Missouri that he operates along with his wife and family.

Online Events Available Through Conservation Cropping Systems Initiative (CCSI)

CCSI not only hosts trainings, webinars, and virtual field days - they help partners plan and host numerous events every year. You can register for an event by visiting www.bit.ly/CCSIevents. Upcoming events include:

- March 02, 8:30 AM – 9:30 AM EST; Virtual Shop Visit Plan A (B, C and D) for Planting Green.

- March 16, 8:30 AM – 9:30 AM EDT Virtual Farm Visit via Zoom Webinar. Precision Cover Crops / "Bio-Strips"
- March 11, 2–4 PM EST, March 18, 2–6 PM EDT, March 25, 2–4 PM EDT. CCSI-SARE Core Cover Crops & Core Soil Health Virtual Training Series.

Urban Garden Supports Community by Growing, Providing Free Healthy Food

It started with a simple idea. After spending six years working with the homeless population in South Bend, Indiana and teaching them about nutrition and wellness, Sara Stewart decided it was well past time to actually help them access healthy food.

As a public health nurse, Stewart had worked to teach them what to eat, how to care for themselves and administered health screenings to check for things like high blood pressure and diabetes. All while watching as the soup kitchen served canned vegetables, gravies and other food contrary to everything she was trying to teach.

Her initial plan was to make a small impact by planting a garden down by the docks where the homeless hung out. There, she and those she had worked with, could grow greens and vegetables while allowing people to pick what they needed to supplement their diets.

Armed with a few packs of seeds, she emailed five friends and invited them to bring a shovel and help her start planting. From that email blast, a movement began. In the 12 years since, one garden has turned into 40-60, spread throughout St. Joseph County depending on the year. The email list surpassed more than 1,000 by the end of the first year and has continued to grow.

The network of gardens is now known as Unity Gardens and includes a sprawling flagship garden in South Bend where they have based their operations since 2009. Placed between a Honeywell plant and a residential area, the garden is a pop of color in a sea of buildings and brick houses.

Stewart's idea of providing food to those in need has remained the foundation of Unity Gardens and sitting at the front of the garden, a yellow sign announces to all those who pass that they are invited to "pick for free." Behind the sign, brightly painted plots fill the space allowing them to grow a variety of food for the community. And dominating the left side of the garden is the mid-construction multi-purpose building, which will soon serve as meeting and classroom space. There, they will hold classes to teach people to cook healthy meals or plant their own gardens. It will also serve as a permanent store and center of operations for their flourishing summer camp and community outreach programs.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout America and the world in 2020, people were left out of work, supply chains broke down and fresh food sometime became hard to find. Unity Gardens filled the gap and Stewart estimates they grew 200,000 pounds of food throughout the year and had more than 5,000 people visit the garden.

"This model is unprecedented, and yet it's working,"



Sara Stewart (L) discusses her operation with NRCS District Conservationist, Deb Knepp (R)

Stewart said. "And as long as people value it, they'll support it. So here we are, 12 years later, and it's just as scary as it was on day one, maybe more so because I

feel like I have a bigger responsibility. But I also have faith that I take one step in front of another, and I'll continue to enjoy those serendipitous moments."

Spring and summer growing seasons turned to fall and winter and the lush garden full of food and life has become empty plots that are being prepared for the next planting. The beehives that produce Unity Gardens' award-winning "Honey from the Hood" have been closed for the season.

But no matter the season or the temperatures, growing never really stops at Unity Gardens. Hidden in the back corner of the property beside the two goats that call the place home, are four high tunnels that allow for year-round growing.

The outdoor plots are in a state of upheaval as maintenance is done and soil is nourished, but inside the high tunnels, life still flourishes. Kale, sorrel and mustard greens grow in the warm and humid spaces defying the near freezing temperatures outside that should have ended the growing season.

The area of the garden where the high tunnels reside is the commercial section. The plants grown there are taken to market and sold, which raises funds to keep the rest of the gardens throughout the county operating. Four-season growing is a key part of providing adequate food for commercial resale and in recent years they have expanded from two high tunnels to four to enable efficient planting and crop rotations.

"If we have two greenhouses, they're constantly in action," Stewart said. "We're using the soil. We're using every piece of it. We're growing food just to survive ... We would never have grown hot peppers, for instance, and hot peppers have been one of the single biggest things. The only reason we learn to grow potatoes well, is because of that fourth greenhouse."

The third and fourth high tunnels were built in 2017 with help from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. The NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides cost-share assistance to urban farms like The Unity Gardens to build high tunnels, enabling them to increase their production capabilities.

Unity Gardens applied and was approved for two EQIP contracts in 2017. One of them was used to build the two hoop houses as well as a rock trench drain, which captures rainwater to be used for irrigation inside the high tunnels. The second contract funded a two-acre pollinator garden. Within the native plants growing there, honeybees and other insects that play a key role in pollinating the garden and helping the food grow flourish can be found.

The NRCS and the local Soil and Water Conservation District have also actively participated in field days and other education outreach initiatives at Unity Gardens.

"Without people like the NRCS, we couldn't even survive," Stewart said. "We wouldn't grow the food well because there'd be no pollination or that kind of thing. So, one thing leads to another. And I really can't underestimate how important it's been."

To learn more about Unity Gardens visit <https://www.theunitygardens.org/> and for more on EQIP and how it could help your operation visit <http://go.usa.gov/x7Q3H>.



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Please consider helping us to continue our work in 2021 by donating today!



FREE WILDLIFE FOOD PLOT SEEDS

The free wildlife food plot seed is available on a first come first serve basis, while supplies last. The seed comes in one gallon sized bags. Limited to two bags per household. We have sunflowers, pollinator mix and a wildlife mix. Our office is still closed to the public due to Covid 19, so we ask that you contact our office to reserve your seed. We will then have it ready for your contactless pick up.

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St. Joseph County Soil And Water Conservation Partnership

Applications Now Available for Cost Share Practices

The St. Joseph County Soil and Water Conservation District is working to improve water quality by promoting and providing cost share for practices in the conservation cropping system (CCS) (no-till, cover crops, nutrient management, filter strips, and pollinator habitat). The goal of this program is to encourage producers to utilize all aspects of the cropping system which will increase soil health and improve water quality. The SWCD will cost share practice acres as follows:

- ◆ No-till - \$15.00/ acre (max 200 acres per producer/1 year practice lifespan)
- ◆ Cover crops - \$20.00/ acre (max 200 acres per producer/1 year practice lifespan)
- ◆ Nutrient management - \$20.00/ acre (max 200 acres per producer/1 year practice lifespan)
- ◆ Filter strips - \$350.00/ acre (max 6 acres per producer/5 year practice lifespan)
- ◆ Pollinator Habitat (native wildflower planting)– cost share 75% (up to \$750)/acre (minimum of 1/2 acre up to 10 acres/5 year practice lifespan)

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Are you ready to “GO GREEN” and help us save money and natural resources? We can deliver your “Conservation Kaleidoscope” newsletter by email ... Give us a call or send us an email and tell us you’d like to “GO GREEN” THANK YOU!!!!



Scan me to go Green!

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