



The next HGC meeting will be a Zoom meeting on October 18 at 2:00. Directions on how to join are on page 2

Homer Garden Club

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October 2020

Newsletter

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October 18 Meeting to Feature Ellen Vande Visse on Composting and Building Soil

Ellen Vande Visse will be our October speaker and will share some of her vast knowledge about composting and building soil.



Ellen Vande Visse, MS, somewhere in her shady past, was an Environmental Education Consultant in West Michigan for 20 school districts, and a developer of a nature center. In Alaska, her Good Earth Gardens have been a teaching lab as well as a market garden for her own CSA and a restaurant. She was the grower for the kitchens of the National Outdoor Leadership School, Alaska Branch, and then created & supervised a community garden for Mat-Su College.

Ellen is especially fond of all things decaying, and is known in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley as The Compost Queen.

She is known to mysteriously brew compost tea for farmers, stores, and markets. She provides consultations on eco-agriculture growing systems. Since 1987 she has been training folks how to farm and garden using organic methods. Teaching topics include selecting organic fertilizers, managing pests non-toxically, building

living soil, composting successfully, growing lush flowers, lawns, and herbs, and raising nutrient-dense vegetables. She instructs through her own Good Earth Garden School, as well as credit courses through University of Alaska Anchorage, Matanuska-Susitna College, and Alaska Pacific University.

NOTE: This meeting will be conducted via Zoom. See the page 2 note from our President Kathy Dube on how to join in the presentation and discussion.

Treasurer Report

by Louise Ashmun, Treasurer

Homer Garden Club Monthly Treasurer Report for September 2020

Income		
None		
	Total Income	<u>\$0.00</u>
Refund		
Presenter honorarium	\$75.00	<u>\$75.00</u>
Expenses		
Chamber Dues	\$37.00	
	Total Expenses	<u>\$37.00</u>
Checking Beginning Balance 09/01/2020		\$ 4,075.13
Income		75.00
Expenses		37.00
Interest		<u>0.17</u>
Ending Balance 09/30/2020		\$ 4,113.30
Money Market Beginning Balance 09/01/2020		\$ 15,049.17
Interest		<u>1.86</u>
Money Market Ending Balance 09/30/2020		\$ 15,051.03
Total Ending Balance 09/30/2020		\$ 19,164.33

October 18 Zoom Meeting

by Kathy Dube

This month our Garden Club Meeting will be held via Zoom again. This platform may be a little intimidating to you, but it really is easy (my Dad who is 88 has even figured out how to do Zoom!) You can access the meeting from your computer, tablet, or phone. As a garden club member you will receive an e-mail with the invitation and a link that you can just click on that should take you right to the meeting. It will look like this:

Kathy Dube is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: Homer Garden Club Meeting

Time: Oct 18, 2020 02:00 PM Alaska

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://zoom.us/j/92579659646?pwd=K2pSbjc2UXlveHdGWDJmN0ZQRTladz09>

When you click on the link you will go to a "waiting room" and then you will get let into the meeting. The presenter will have PowerPoint slides and we can all ask questions at the end. Hope to Zoom with you on the 18th!

A Summer at Synergy Farms

by Jessica Shepard, MFA

This summer, as the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed our usual activities, I found a great way to safely engage with the Homer community. Once a week, I drove the two miles from my house to Synergy Farms to participate in a work-trade with owners Lori and Wayne Jenkins. Each Thursday morning, after donning gloves and mud boots, I transplanted tomato seedlings, or tucked hardy broccoli starts outside into one of four tidy fields and added a concoction of soil nutrients to speed their growth. As the season progressed, I weeded newly emergent carrots and frilly cabbage, and picked the season's first Sungold tomatoes for the market while chatting with other (socially distanced) work-trade folks and two summer interns, Jessie Conti and Phil Albeski. The work, limited to three hours a week, wasn't taxing and, at the end of my shift, Lori sent me home with bags of young arugula and fresh asparagus, or armloads of Brussel sprouts on their stocks, and even the occasional jar of honey from Wayne's bees. Best of all, I had the pleasure of visiting with other, mostly young, volunteers and learned a bit about marketing from Lori and soil amendments from Wayne.

Curious about the evolution of Synergy Farms and how they weathered the COVID pandemic, I asked Lori if I could sit down with her for an interview. The following is an abridged version of our conversation.

Long-time residents of Ellijay Georgia, Wayne moved to Homer in 2011 for work while Lori packed up their belongings and followed him in 2012. Their son, Obadiah, had already settled in Alaska, and encouraged them to consider starting a peony farm. In Georgia they'd had a small nursery, Jennie Branch Natives, where they propagated rare shade ephemerals. The plants, mostly medicinal, included ginseng,

Solomon's seal, and a collection of ferns and trilliums. Additionally, they grew much of the food they ate, including several varieties of garlic.

When they began looking for land in Homer, Lori explained, "We thought we were going to start a peony farm. We joined the Peony Grower's Association and we also got Kyra's list serve, Sustainable Homer. Wayne, since he moved here first, went to a Peony Grower's conference."

Lori continued, "I think it was the winter of 2012 or 2013 when half the peony growers lost their peo-



Lori & Jessi preparing to plant garlic

nies due to an unusual winter. There was rain on top of icy snow, and there were a lot of peony growers that lost a lot of stock." They began rethinking their approach. "That year we were beginning to get our land cleared and looking at our resources and I quickly realized the expense of clearing land left us with no resources to buy peony roots. So, I knew how to grow vegetables very well and I love growing food. Wayne had a full-time job and it was kind of up to me." (Wayne retired from his job this year and has jumped into fulltime farming.) Lori paused to reflect and then added, "I heard Carol Demers at the Garden Club [give a talk about garlic] and she inspired me. I had done classes on growing garlic and braiding

in my garden in Georgia. So, after hearing Carol Demers and being very inspired, I ordered four varieties from Filaree and grew garlic."

I asked Lori when Synergy Farms got its start. "March 20, 2014," she told me, "that's when the first set of high tunnels were done". The tunnels were funded under the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and two additional EQIP tunnels were completed in the fall of 2017 and planted in 2018. Supplied by Oregon Valley, the tunnels measure 30 feet x 72 feet and allow for an extended growing season.

I was curious how her marketing approach had evolved over the years and she told me, "I tried every market outlet I could think of, restaurants, the Farmer's Market, the Food Hub, on-farm sales [to individuals], lodges across the bay, and Save-U-More, and CSA



Jessi Conti and fiancé Phil Albeski plant garlic for the 2021 crop



Garden Planting Crew, left to right Obi, David, Jessi, Jessica, Phil, Lori, Wayne & Alex

(Continued on page 4)

sales.” (i.e. Community Supported Agriculture) “And now, since it’s garlic, I market with our website and social media and I’m mailing garlic around the state. Since I was new, and eager I guess, I went to restaurants that ran specials, or were open year around because with our experience with season extension techniques, using the tunnels for season extension, I have food in May and I have food in October and those are months the market isn’t open.”

Expanding on her experience with restaurants, Lori added, “La Baleen opened when my farm got started, so they were new and I was new and we worked really well together. So they helped support what I was growing. And then Two Sisters is just one of the most gracious. They buy from so many Russian growers, they buy from so many neighbors. They make a point of it. And now with Chef Miller at Land’s End, he’s converting most of his menu to buying everything local. I love selling to chefs because they get excited about food, and when I see other people get excited not just about the beauty but the flavor, that’s my motivator.”

I asked if there was an overarching philosophy that drives them, she replied, “It’s good to grow food and to share food. Our philosophy is, we take care of the soil so the soil can take care of us.” Continuing on that vein she added, “We spend an inordinate amount of time in our compost. We gather local horse manure and I love to make compost using local beer grain. I use compost from restaurants I sell to, and a lot of my work-trade people bring me their compost, and I get coffee grounds from many restaurants.”

And, of course, I had to ask, “How has this year, with COVID, been different than prior years and how have you adapted?”

“Some restaurants didn’t even open

and the Farmer’s Market attendance is really down by half, and because I’d been growing now consistently for seven years, I was able



to recruit forty-two CSA families and so I sold direct, with weekly shares that made up for the restaurant sales.”



In answer to my question about the interns she brings on each year, she told me she uses the ATTRA website (which somehow stands for National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service). This is a federal website matching “interns, generally from universities to farmers like myself.” Synergy Farms, one of a number of internships available in Alaska, offers a stipend and housing for a 4-month commitment.

And then there’s the work-trade opportunity, which is how I got involved in Synergy Farms. Lori told me, “I have eight slots, so I’m going for eight people who can make a seasonal commitment, and they get a weekly share of vegetables which

is valued at about \$30 for three to four hours of help on the farm.”

The scope of work involved in the farm seems immense and I asked “Is there any downtime in the year?”

“I do seed orders really in December and January. And that’s really fun. There’s nothing I like more than a good cup of tea and putting my nose in a seed catalog. I’ve found myself with four seed catalogs open at the same time. Not necessarily comparing prices at all, but just looking at varietal differences. With these tunnels you can push a lot.”

Wrapping up my questions, I asked, “Do you have any advice for other folks who are interested in starting a market garden?”

She thought for a moment, then said, “Ask yourself if you like selling it. A lot of people love growing. But if you don’t enjoy the selling energy, that’s a challenge.”

I’m already looking forward to next year and hoping for a COVID-free summer so Synergy Farms can resume the tours and themed dinners that make them unique. All of that was scaled back this year. I see



myself, once again, spending a sunny morning picking peas and laughing with other workers before heading home with young zucchinis and the first Sungold tomatoes of the year. What a soul-satisfying trade-off.

Starting From Scratch—Again!

by Marylou Burton

In 2004 my husband and I moved from Fairbanks to Homer, from a large house with an established garden to a small cabin on two acres of largely treeless but otherwise untamed ground. Fireweed, pushkie, wild roses and geraniums right up to the door.

The first summer I dug up a small patch and planted a few potatoes. Over the next 16 years I added raised beds, a moose fence and a greenhouse. I dug up sod and built perennial beds, amended soil and tried to keep up with the weeds. I am at best a so-so gardener, but we ate well and were graced with beautiful flowers.

Then early last March we – now both in our seventies and thinking to make our lives a little easier - moved from the ridge into town. This time we traded a small house with an established garden to a large house with a forever view and half-acre of steeply sloped weedy lawn. A mature lovely maple down in one corner, but otherwise no flowers, no shrubs, and certainly no vegetable beds.

View notwithstanding, a house without a garden was not what I had in mind. So with spring just around the corner and Covid keeping us close to home anyway, I set about building yet another garden from scratch. By the end of March we had five raised beds of various sizes built mainly out of scrap lumber. Two weeks and countless wheelbarrow trips up and down the expanse of lawn later, they were filled with six yards of dirt. There was still sod to dig up to make room for potatoes and a few precious perennials I brought down from the ridge, seeds to be started, and of course we were going to need a moose fence. And the rotten deck needed to be replaced, and oh, yeah – what

about that leaking water heater and ancient oil furnace? So much to do! So I mixed a little lime, bone meal and steer manure into my various piles of dirt and called it good.

It wasn't long before I got my first inkling that we were in a whole different climate zone. For lack of

Road. Our move to town in search of a simpler life was proving to be darned hard work.

But it paid off, and by mid-May, we had an enclosed garden and were eating kale and broccolini. The snap peas quickly out-grew the frame that I had hastily put up,



Burton Garden

anything better, I laid out my trays of little seedlings on a table in front of a large, south facing window (something I didn't have at our old house). Within two weeks I had dozens of broccolini, kale and chard demanding more room. So I took a chance (it wasn't even May!), moved them outside, installed some hoops covered with plastic, and hoped for the best. Why not a few seeds while I'm at it? I thought, so in they went too, covered with remay. That upped the pressure for a moose fence sooner rather than later, because – to our surprise – moose were much more frequent visitors here on Mountain View than they were up on Manor

things I had never planted before (Brussel sprouts!) or only grew in a greenhouse (zucchini) flourished, and even reliable crops like broccolini, carrots and potatoes were over achievers. Of course there were also some dismal failures (beets, for example), and my new garden has pests that were not nearly as common at our old house (notably slugs, voles and tropical sized dandelions). But all in all, I'm liking this sunnier, lower version of gardening. And now that all the really hard work is done, maybe next year I can concentrate on improving the soil. And getting the dandelions along the fence under control. And expanding my perennial beds. And that rose bush bordering our driveway that I can see out my window right now is in serious need of pruning ...



Seed Library

by Saskia Esslinger, teachgardening.com

Did you know there is a **seed library** germinating in Homer? A seed library is a collection of seeds that people can "borrow," grow the plants, and then save some of the seeds to return to the seed library.

Ideally, people would return more than they borrowed and the seed library would grow. If people fail to save the seeds there is no penalty.

Gardeners are encouraged to only return seeds which they are fairly certain have been saved correctly. We will categorize seeds as easy, medium, or difficult to save and plan to get grants to offer free workshops on how to save seeds, as well as general gardening.

The benefits of a seed library are many—

- *Offers a free source of seeds in the community to encourage people to grow their own food, flowers, and herbs.

- *Fosters a community of gardeners and seed savers that can exchange information and make everyone's gardens more successful.

- *Provides education around seed

saving and gardening.

- *Develops seed varieties which are acclimated to our local area.

- *Promotes seed interdependence.

As a community we can become more self-reliant and not depend on outside sources of seeds for our gardens.



The Homer Public Library has agreed to host the Homer Seed Library, and we are hoping to open it in January or February of 2021.

Right now we have two families working on the project, and we are

hoping to include a few more people. We would love to have a diversity of ages and experiences to make it a rich learning experience for everyone. Our aim is to let the children take an active role in the project so that they can feel empowered in the community, and encourage other young people to learn to grow food, save seeds, and get involved in the community.

We have a small collection of seeds started and are now accepting seed donations!



If you have seeds to donate or would like to get involved in helping grow this project, please contact Saskia Esslinger at 907-299-9306 or alaskasaskia@gmail.com

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