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Harvesting Fresh Produce and Goodwill in a Cemetery: GreenHorn Gardens

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IMPACT

GARDENING



Sean and Stacey McNicholl are dedicated urban farmers living and sharing their dream with their hometown community. The McNicholls have been farming together for almost a decade in the Philadelphia region, sharing their life's passion with everyone they encounter. After farming in several locations, the McNicholls wanted to start their own farm but didn't have a lot of funds, so they made an unconventional choice and leased a greenhouse — in a cemetery.

They imagined growing vegetables, fruit, and flowers to sell in their community and teaching the fundamentals of food production and gardening to those who wanted to

learn. Their vision also included sharing the fruits of their labor with those in need. Already established and much-loved by their community, they never could have anticipated how this past growing season was about to change for them. Their tiny garden, [GreenHorn Gardens](#) led the way in produce donations to local food banks that totaled 15,148 pounds as part of PHS's food-growing initiative, [Harvest 2020](#).

Planting the Seed

The wonderful bounty all began with an email from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society introducing Harvest 2020, PHS's initiative to grow and share food with local food banks and neighbors in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The McNicholls wholeheartedly knew they wanted to be a part of this important effort, and they immediately made their pledge to Harvest 2020 to grow and donate food to local food banks.

"We have always been vegetable people," says Stacey McNicholl. After growing vegetables in their backyard years ago, the couple graduated to larger spaces every year. At their current site, in what was a vacant, 80-year-old greenhouse on the grounds of the historic Arlington Cemetery in Drexel Hill, PA, they set to work revitalizing the greenhouse and creating their dream location for growing produce.

Life-long gardeners with giving hearts, they made a pledge to share their passion and expertise with those in need. They increased their seedling and plant starts orders by 5,000 units above their total for 2019, filling the 13,500-square-foot greenhouse. Between February and June 2020, the McNicholls tended several thousand seedlings. When they were ready to transplant, the seedlings were moved from the greenhouse to their farm, a total of three acres of land split between the cemetery and the adjacent farm they built in 2018 on the sub-divided grounds of the former Monsignor Bonner and Archbishop Prendergast Catholic High School in Drexel Hill.

Popular Produce

The McNicholls focused on popular produce that the community would enjoy, like cherry tomatoes, large tomatoes, bell peppers, radishes, as well as six different varieties of eggplant. Some new additions this season were Casper eggplant (a crowd favorite), along with habanero peppers and daikon radish. With the help of eight regular volunteers working in shifts, they planted, cared for, and harvested more vegetables than they could have imagined possible. They also grew herbs and flowers in the pollinator garden that everyone enjoyed.

Giving Back

The McNicholls had already been active in their neighborhood, holding farmers markets at the cemetery the previous year. The couple had also started donating unsold produce to local food banks and churches as well. By pledging to participate in Harvest 2020, PHS connected them to several food banks participating in Harvest 2020 as new food donation sites for their produce bounty. Recipients included local organizations like the Upper Darby Food Bank, St. Vincent de Paul Society at Blessed Virgin Mary Church,

Christ Lutheran Church, Connect by Night Adult Shelter, and the Life Center of Eastern Delaware County, as well as the Hardy Williams Elementary School in Philadelphia. "We are so grateful that our community is open to us — we love this town! This is our way of giving back to them," says Sean McNicholl.

"PHS Harvest 2020 was a real inspiration to us this year. Giving back has always been part of our mission but being part of a wider network of growers dedicated to helping our communities during such a difficult year really motivated us and renewed our sense of purpose," he says.

With participation in Harvest 2020 from generous growers like the McNicholls, total Harvest 2020 donations topped 31,000 pounds, with almost half of this food coming from GreenHorn Gardens! Based on the success of this initiative, PHS will look to 2021 for additional food growing opportunities for gardeners around the region.

Learn more about growing produce with PHS.

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