

KENNEBEC ESTUARY LAND TRUST'S

LOCAL Garden

Leading Our Community in Agricultural Learning

After six years as a destination for Regional School Unit #1 field trips, a vibrant outdoor classroom, and a supplier of tasty “Harvest Dinner” produce, Bath’s LOCAL garden has a newly expanded mission: to serve as a nearly year-round demonstration garden, with projects and programs to benefit adults as well as children. The larger mission and longer calendar fit the garden’s acronym, which stands for “Leading Our Community in Agricultural Learning.”

Management of the garden, located at the corner of High and Lemont Streets on Bath’s south side, passed to the Kennebec Estuary Land Trust (KELT) in the spring of 2016. Generous private donors made the land available to RSU #1 in 2009. Along with other grantmakers, they have supported its activities ever since. But keeping a garden going all summer is tough work – tougher still if it includes forty-two raised beds and a largely volunteer labor force. KELT’s management of the site supports the activities of two paid, part-time Garden Coordinators, Laurie Burhoe and Dennis Doiron. Burhoe and Doiron will keep the beds healthy and productive, while teaching visitors how to do the same in their own gardens. Other instruction will be offered by area experts, including members of the Sagadahoc County chapter of MOFGA (Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association).

Work with area schools has continued, true to the garden’s original mission and coordinated by KELT’s Program Director Becky Kolak. In June alone, 298 students in 14 school field trips visited the LOCAL garden, learning more about where their food comes from while getting their hands dirty. “Planting potatoes with elementary kids is fun for everyone,” reports Kolak, “Students were amazed that potatoes come from...potatoes!”

In the past, students from Bath Regional Career and Tech Center thanks to the guidance of teacher Emily Dittmann have used LOCAL garden produce when helping to prepare RSU #1’s annual Harvest Dinner each October. This year, the garden will be in production all summer, its harvests destined for summer meal programs in Bath. One recipient will be the Bath Area Family YMCA’s “Free Summer Meals for Kids and Teens,” which provides breakfast and lunches from June 20 through August 26. The crops grown in the garden this summer are among those most needed and wanted by patrons of the Y, the Bath Area Food Shelf, and the Bath Area Soup Kitchen. Nearly all the crops were planted by student visitors to the garden.

For the past four years, KELT has collaborated with the Brunswick Topsham Land Trust to protect farmland in Sagadahoc and Androscoggin Counties. Both groups helped to launch the Merrymeeting Food Council which supports local production of healthy, nutritious food, and efforts to make it available to everyone in the region. The Food Council created and maintains an inventory of the state of local food in the communities around Merrymeeting Bay: the “Food, Farms, and Fisheries Assessment” (FFFA). According to this “food scan,” 13.4 % of Bath residents are at risk of hunger, or food insecurity -- a significantly higher percentage than in surrounding cities and towns. KELT’s support for Bath’s LOCAL Garden is a logical extension of its goal to protect agricultural land in the face of this acute need, noted Executive Director Carrie Kinne: “We already participate vigorously in regional efforts to safeguard the future of local agriculture,” Kinne commented, “and we feel it’s important to focus on Bath given the community’s needs. KELT’s year-round involvement can help ensure that the LOCAL garden will continue to produce food, educational opportunities, and community engagement for years to come.”

