



BLACK EARTH GARDENS

Regenerative foods for justice



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Dear Supporter/Donor,

March 6, 2025

I want to take some time to thank you for your generous support of Black Earth Gardens and update you on the farm's work last year.

Black Earth Gardens is a mission-driven farm rooted in three interdependent values: regenerative agriculture (renewing the environment and returning to a right relationship with all Creation), food sovereignty (consumer choice and access to culturally-relevant foods), and food justice (healthy, accessible food for everyone at every income in every neighborhood).

Following these guiding values, the farm specializes in using regenerative and organic methods to grow vegetables, herbs, and fruits that are culturally-important to Black communities in Eastern Iowa, with a focus on dismantling food apartheid and expanding food sovereignty locally.*

The 2024 growing season was simultaneously difficult and meaningful. An exceptionally rainy spring meant soil preparation and planting were delayed. The constant wetness also increased pest pressure and introduced diseases, the latter of which are especially difficult to control with organic practices. All of this resulted in lower than expected yields across the board, and the total collapse of our cantaloupe and collard crops.

*For a definition of food apartheid, see ["The food system is racist": an activist used a garden to tackle inequities.](#)

On the other hand, it was the first season growing in the farm's new caterpillar tunnel. Caterpillar tunnels are simple greenhouse structures that help farmers extend the growing season, improve yields, and prevent disease, all without harmful chemicals. The tunnel allowed me to harvest one month earlier in the spring and one month later in the fall. I was harvesting lettuce and mustard greens right up until Thanksgiving!

CSA: Community through Food

Last year was the farm's first running a full-season Community Supported Agriculture program (CSA), which was a collaboration between Black Earth Gardens and my friend Carly McAndrews' farm, Trowel & Error. Through weekly curated boxes of produce, our two farms provided 20 weeks of local abundance to over 60 families. I loved getting to know my neighbors and swapping recipes during CSA pickup each week. Sharing the rich culinary history and traditions of Black foodways and helping CSA members explore and enjoy these treasured ingredients was a highlight of my summer and fall.

We are currently recruiting members for our 2025 CSA. You can find more details on [Trowel & Error Farm's website](#).

Senior Mobile Markets

In 2023, the farm participated in a pilot program aimed at increasing redemption of Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) vouchers. Low-income seniors receive these vouchers yearly to redeem at farmers markets for fresh fruits, vegetables, herbs, and honey. However, seniors often have trouble accessing traditional farmers markets because of transportation or mobility challenges. The pilot program established a weekly rotating mobile market that visits different senior living centers throughout Linn county, so that residents can enjoy fresh, locally-grown produce and honey right at their doorstep. Residents showed up in droves that first year,

proving that there is high demand for local produce if accessibility and affordability concerns are appropriately addressed.

In 2024, Carmen Black of Sundog Farm and I advocated for the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) to change the language of the FMNP program to allow mobile markets across the state to accept FMNP vouchers from seniors and WIC participants. Previously, only traditional farmers markets and permanent farmstands were allowed to accept FMNP vouchers, and the latter only if they were at least 10 miles from a traditional farmers market. This rule created unnecessary barriers for seniors and WIC participants looking for healthy food options, and stifled farmers' ingenuity in marketing their products.

“The senior mobile market expanded to 5 locations in 2024 (up from 2 in 2023), with plans to offer 8 locations in 2025.”

IDALS responded to our advocacy last spring, changing the rule to allow 1) moveable farmstands to accept FMNP vouchers, and 2) farmstands to operate near traditional farmers markets as long as the hours are asynchronous.

These changes have already revolutionized Iowa's FMNP program. It has allowed Carmen and me to continue offering senior mobile markets in Linn county, expanding to 5 senior living complexes in 2024 (up from 2 in 2023), with plans to offer 8 locations in 2025. Moreover, we hope that this policy change opens the door for farmers in other parts of Iowa to offer creative solutions that improve market opportunities for growers, strengthen local and rural economies, and improve seniors', mothers', and young children's access to nutritious and delicious foods.

Land Search

In 2024, Black Earth Gardens also embarked on the journey to find long-term farmland. The farm currently accesses land through Feed Iowa First. The nonprofit's Equitable Land Access (ELA) program is a 3-year farm business incubator that helps beginning and landless farmers launch their farms through technical assistance, equipment sharing, and farmland plots. Black Earth Gardens will graduate from the ELA program this fall, and so I have been actively searching for the farm's long-term home.

Finding farmland that meets the needs of specialty crop growers (i.e. not corn, soy, or wheat), is a unicorn in the Midwest. Plus, farmland prices have outstripped inflation for decades, and farmers must compete for land against developers and investors. For farmers who neither have access to land through their families nor stand to inherit any, all of this equals a steep climb to find and afford land.*

As I navigate these challenges, I have been blessed to work with two phenomenal farmland access navigators--via the Practical Farmers of Iowa and Illinois FarmLink. They have introduced me to landowners, toured farms with me, and pointed me to many helpful resources. I am deeply grateful for their ongoing support.

Policy Update

In recent weeks, the new administration has suspended several key programs that support America's next generation of farmers, making land access and financial stability even more difficult to achieve than before. These are

*Learn more about the issue of land access by reading [my op-ed in Black Iowa News](#).

programs that Black Earth Gardens directly benefits from or would have directly benefitted from, including ACEP, EQIP, LFPA, and LFS. Moreover, the administration has revoked or suspended grant funding for key nonprofits that support me and other beginning farmers, including the Practical Farmers of Iowa, the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust, and more. All of these federally-funded programs strengthen rural economies, reduce our reliance on imports, increase climate resilience, and ensure we all have food to eat and farmers to grow it for decades to come. Young farmers like myself rely on these programs to establish resilient farms that will feed the next generation.

In this tumultuous time, please keep the farm in your thoughts and prayers. And please stay tuned in your inboxes and on social media for upcoming ways you can continue to support Black Earth Gardens.

Despite the challenges that lie ahead, I remain grateful for the impact Black Earth Gardens has made over the past two years, sharing delicious food with our neighbors and furthering equity in our community. I truly could not have done it without you--your ongoing commitment encourages me and reminds me that we cannot do justice alone, but only hand in hand.

As I plant the first seeds into the soil, I am hopeful to witness the community again gathering together to share the abundant harvest.

Peace & Power,

Mari Hunt Wassink

Owner/Operator

Black Earth Gardens, LLC