



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Homestead 1839 Providing Farm Therapy in Southeast Iowa

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January 2019*

The West Burlington non-profit urban farm Homestead 1839 is finding success adopting sustainable agricultural practices and using horticulture therapy to help community members on the path to recovery. Led by co-directors Mollie and Tobin Krell, the organization grows specialty organic produce and flowers and raises chickens to promote education and love of the land.

The Krells and their son moved from Portland, Oregon, to Mollie's original Iowa home in 2015. Their farm sits on 30 acres, which was originally the Homestead of Mollie's ancestors, dating back to 1839.

"The farm is my 90-year-old grandmother's, who is alive and well," said Mollie. "We live with her in the farmhouse and take care of her, along with maintaining the land."

The farm has gone through many changes, including the city growing up around it.

Social Justice

In Portland, Mollie was a gardening teacher where she began using her small community garden to help at-risk students and kids with behavior issues. "If they were having problems, I took them out to the community garden to get them busy and working," she said.

The Krells found success helping youth in Portland and decided to take their knowledge and experience back to Iowa. After a couple years of working hard to get settled and developing their organizational model,

the couple is on their way to realizing their dreams.

They now work with juvenile court services, probation services, and mental health resource organizations to help rehabilitate youths and adults in southeast Iowa. "These folks are gaining experience with food, agriculture and farming in a totally different way and that's good for their soul," said Tobin.

One of Homestead 1839's core programs is providing vocational rehabilitation on Wednesdays. "We have a project ready for them," said Mollie. "A project might be something like picking cucumbers, pickling and canning them, and then they can take them home."

"I want them to leave here and says, 'Look what I can do, no matter how hot, sweaty and dirty,'" said Tobin. "Everyone leaves with a sense of accomplishment and pride in what they've done – and hopefully some veggies!"

Organic Permaculture

As Becky learned more about the importance of proTobin says they are running an organic farm to better sustain the type of farming that isn't dependent on inputs. They call their system a permaculture – a farming system that uses nature for maximum production which benefits people and the land.

"Producing food organically helps educate our visitors about food systems – knowing where your food comes from," said Tobin.

An example of their permaculture system is companion planting, where they strategically plant vegetables and sometimes flowers next to each other that repel





The Krells installed a high tunnel system with planning and financial assistance through USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program. It is helping to reduce erosion, provide irrigation, and extend the growing season.

the bugs they don't want or attract the insects that feast on the ones they don't want.

They also build special birdhouses to attract birds that prey on the Japanese beetle – a known scourge of plants and flowers.

Tobin says the chickens on the farm are also part of the system. "The chickens help fertilize the farm and eat bugs that would harm plants and crops," he said. "Eggs from chickens are just a side benefit."

Unique Produce

The Krells grow traditional Iowa produce, such as tomatoes, squash and peppers. But they also focus on lesser known heirloom varieties that are more difficult to access locally, including okra, tomatillos, edible flowers and fresh herbs.

Tobin says the produce is for the community. "Our goal is to feed families in the area who may not have easy access to fresh produce," he said. The Krells sell produce seasonally to the public at their roadside market, "The Veg Shop," at their farm, and at local farmers' markets.

They also have an organic flower garden, a main source of income to support the produce that feeds

the community. "Flower sales have enhanced weddings, dinners, special events, and people's homes," said Mollie. "We also donate flowers to the hospice house and other places in the community."



Mollie Krell shows off her tomatillos in the Homestead 1839 high tunnel. Tomatillos are just one in a number of unique types of vegetable the Krells grow on their farm.



USDA Assistance

Homestead 1839 currently has five acres of cropland. In Spring 2018, they seeded down 14 acres of pollinator habitat through USDA's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

"What we've found, especially here in southeast Iowa, is when you look around you see a lot of corn and beans," said Tobin. "We've been able to grow just about everything outside of citrus fruit."

"It's not totally about the number of crops, but also the variety," Tobin continued. "We have about 20 different types of tomatoes growing and three different corn plots for different uses."

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is helping Homestead 1839 to better protect their natural resources through planning and financial assistance for erosion control and soil health improvement. With NRCS help, the Krells have used cover crops, applied conservation crop rotations, and implemented pest management on their five cropland acres.

"Thanks to NRCS we used cover crops our first year, which did wonders to keep down weed competition," said Tobin.

The Krells also use worm castings to help improve soil health. "It revitalizes the bacteria and all the other good stuff in the soil," said Tobin.

NRCS also provided assistance for a high tunnel system to help extend the growing season and provide a more environmentally-friendly environment for produce. The high tunnel includes a water catchment that filters water to two 1,000-gallon tanks for irrigation.

"We wouldn't have been able to do this without USDA programs in place," said Tobin. "It's allowed us to do something innovative that we've also been able to turn other folks to."

To read more about Homestead 1839, visit their website at www.homestead1839.org. For conservation planning, practice and program information in Iowa, visit the NRCS website at www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov or your local NRCS field office.



Top Photo: Tobin Krell picks produce on his small West Burlington urban farm in July 2018. Krell and his wife, Mollie, co-direct Homestead 1839, a non-profit organic farm that offers youth and adult horticulture therapy.

Above: Tobin and Mollie Krell inspect their newly seeded CRP pollinator planting on their urban farm in West Burlington, Iowa.