



The American Center for Sustainability souped up a retired 1986 TriMet bus to transport garden starts.



75,000 SEEDLINGS ONBOARD

THE AMERICAN
CENTER FOR
SUSTAINABILITY
DELIVERS
SEEDLINGS BY BUS
TO COMMUNITY
GARDENS AROUND
THE STATE

PHOTOS BY LEAH HARB

BY EMILY GROSVENOR

The months of planning have come down to this: A woman, three men and a five-and-half-year-old Malamute dog named Wasilla climb into an old TriMet bus outfitted to store 75,000 seedlings.

Theirs will be an odyssey of sorts—at 45 mph down the main thoroughfares and back roads of Oregon. The stories they bring back will be of rural communities that have lost their only grocery stores in the throes of the national economic crisis, of kids eager to know where their food comes from

gardeners might not have had the resources needed to take the strides they have in feeding their populations. ACS, whose mission is in part to explore the divide between rural and urban farming, receives something in return: a pulse reading of Oregon's rural food landscape.

"This project isn't just about the plants we provide," says Frankie Leigh, an ACS program coordinator who helped to plan, execute and evaluate the project. "It's about figuring out what's actually going on in the state."

"There is a growing number of us who are convinced that all the world's challenges can be overcome in a local garden."
Ken Burrow, American Center for Sustainability founder



and of Oregonians turning to the values of self-reliance. The tender plants they have grown from seeds will find new homes in community gardens throughout the state. The bus—named "Annapurna," after a Himalayan mountain chain, and meaning "full of food" in Sanskrit—will have earned her name on her maiden voyage.

The American Center for Sustainability (ACS) is a Portland-based nonprofit organization launched in 2007 to distribute garden plant starts and, in the process, spread good land stewardship. In the spring of 2009, ACS delivered roughly 75,000 seedlings to 37 community gardens across the state. Without ACS's work these past three years, the community

PLANNING AND PLANTING

Long before the bus wheels crunched pavement, there was one man who dreamt of a way to translate the growing need for sustainable food systems into a real, on-the-ground project: ACS founder Ken Burrow. A 31-year-old greenhouse builder, Burrow believes that "the best way to help communities is to pick up a shovel and help them."

Launching a new community garden takes copious volunteer hours. Moreover, few community gardens have access to greenhouses or hoop houses, which makes growing ample and adequate starts difficult for even the most ambitious gardeners. Especially for hothouse produce such as tomatoes,

zucchini and eggplant, acquiring seedlings can be financially prohibitive. ACS provides the leg-up to help those volunteers focus on other challenges at their sites: gathering manpower, securing infrastructure and fine-tuning projects to meet community need.

ACS began its first year with a single box of 27 seed varieties donated by Territorial Seed, based in Cottage Grove. They contracted with various greenhouses outside Portland to cultivate the seedlings, planning to sell half of them to support the organization and give the rest away to community gardens, but they had gotten a late start and didn't receive the seedlings until mid-June.

"Just try selling tomato starts in June—by the end, we were saying: "Take these plants, please!" " Burrow said.

In 2008, Burrow formed a board of directors and established the American Center for Sustainability as a 501(c)(3). After setting up a network of community gardens, ACS distributed about 40,000 plants, mostly in Portland. It also started reaching out to rural sites in Oregon.

In March 2009, the volunteers gathered at Cook Family Farms in Albany, the sole site where the seed propagation was taking place, and planted roughly 75,000 seeds, generating 73,400 plants. They used a commercial seeder for the bulk of the planting, but took a moment to gather around the seedlings as a group.

"When you plant a seed there is this love energy and possibility and intention put into it," Burrow said. "We've been able to do this with very little money and largely on word-of-mouth. The center isn't a physical space but a common ideological ground."

In Albany, the seeds grew into starts. Meanwhile, in Portland, Burrow and his volunteers set to work planning a trip that would ultimately change the course of the organization, allowing it to develop the kind of people-to-people relationships that would cement its success.

Years before, Burrow had acquired a retired 1986 GM TriMet bus which had run the Wilsonville route. Newly christened Annapurna, the bus worked great mechanically, but if it was going to transport the seedlings and the volunteers, it needed some interior rehab. Frank Leigh, Frankie Leigh's father, spent a month outfitting Annapurna with shelves and beds. SeSequential Biofuels donated 100 gallons for what the volunteers had started calling the "Living Loop," a 650-mile trek that reached sites as far east as Pendleton, as far south as Medford and as far west as the Pacific Ocean.

In May 2009, three ACS volunteers set out on a four-day tour, the mighty hum of thousands of seedlings at their back.

BROWNSVILLE, OREGON, USA

In many ways, Brownsville is a typical rural Oregon town. It is a close-knit community with a restored historical Main Street, a somewhat reliable tourist destination and a satellite residence for workers to nearby cities—in this case, Eugene and Corvallis. Like many rural towns, Brownsville also faces



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the constant challenge of feeding its population. After a recent attempt to launch a local natural food store failed, the town once again has no grocery store of its own. Of its 1,640 residents, roughly a quarter depends on the regional food bank system for sustenance. Getting lower-income families access to fresh produce is a major concern. Residents often drive many miles to buy food.

“Our garden is about reconnecting back to the community where we live,” said J.D. Cochran, a Lane and Linn County Master Gardener who directs Brownsville’s community garden.

When Annapurna rolled into town in May, the ACS volunteers discovered a one-half acre swath behind a now-closed elementary school that had been transformed from a baseball diamond into a thriving community garden that helps to feed 400 clients of the Callapooia Food Share. Where the dugout once stood is a steaming compost heap; in place of first base is a row of medicinal flowers planted in concert with produce; at second base is fertile soil that had been mulched by the leaves of ancient maples; and at third base, a jolly scarecrow, which was crafted by one of the garden’s volunteers, stands sentinel. The ACS volunteers were greeted like rock stars. “We were like these mythical people from Portland, giving away plants for free,” Leigh said.

In the end, ACS helped Brownsville produce 1,669 pounds of food in its gardens, a combination of privately leased and community plots. “ACS was a lifesaver—they got us going,”

said Cochran, who added that Brownsville is returning the favor by launching a seed-saving program to feed back into ACS’s work.

CLOSING THE LOOP

Communities like Brownsville are at the heart of the ACS’s seedling project. Connecting with the people on the ground proved an imminent success for the organization, which is eager to foster discussion with rural farmers about providing greenhouse space for community gardens. ACS knows the challenges of changing established practices from the outside.

“It’s these little things like showing up that matter,” Burrow said.

With few models to follow, ACS is developing its best practices along the way. For the 2010 season, seedling propagation will take place in the group’s new greenhouse network in Portland, closer to the project’s volunteers. Based on their evaluations from the previous year, ACS will plant 50 varieties of seedlings—35 of them edible and 15 floral and medicinal.

“We don’t overplant—we know the need first, then we plant the seeds,” Leigh said.

Following each garden’s story season to season provides the center with something invaluable—the chance to get a crystal-clear picture of the real need being met in Oregon’s community gardens by their work. That information will translate into more projects.

“There is a growing number of us who are convinced that all of the world’s challenges can be overcome in a local garden,” Burrow said. “There is already a shift in progress; we’re just here to support it.” *eP*

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[Learn more about the American Center for Sustainability and how you can volunteer at sustainableshift.org.]

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