

Seminary Hill Farm and the
Land Stewardship Initiative at MTSO

2024 Year in Review



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Land Stewardship Initiative at MTSO

2024 Year in Review

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seminaryhillfarm.org



Dear Reader,

As we live in and through a cycle of seasons, there are countless moments that we want to digest into the deepest parts of ourselves. Some are grand and others as demure as feeling a shift in the wind upon your cheek on a sultry summer day. We experience the fullness of life when we awaken our senses to all around us.

In these pages, we are unable to bring you the sound of a child’s laughter in the garden, the smell of soil after rain or the taste of a tomato warmed by August sun. Nor can we fully transmit trepidation after 51 days without rain or grief from the loss of a 180-year-old black walnut tree split by a tornado.

In these pages, we can share what people, seeking to walk in rhythm with Earth and one another, have nurtured in a cycle of seasons on the 80 acres that are home to Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

Step inside to learn about Seminary Hill Farm and the Land Stewardship Initiative. 🌿

Our team

Leigh Precise
Chief Operating Officer

Leigh grew up in Alabama, where her father instilled in her the love of growing vegetables, particularly tomatoes and herbs. Managing the farm and land stewardship team is a part of her work at MTSO that she cherishes. Leigh holds a Master of Divinity degree from Candler School of Theology at Emory University.



Nate Detwiler
Farm Manager

Nate forged an agricultural vocation from childhood through his time at Ohio State University and 10 years of diverse farming experiences. For Nate, regenerative agriculture goes beyond sustaining what is already present in an ecosystem. He strives to leave a place healthy and alive for all forms of life.



Tim Bachelor
Land Steward

Tim grew up in the rural Hocking Hills of southeastern Ohio. After high school he worked in construction, landscaping and gardening, both before and after college. He received his master's degree from the School of Environment and Natural Resources at Ohio State University in 2017 and started at MTSO in 2022.



Laura Ann Bergman
Farm Liaison

Laura Ann has spent much of her life with her hands in the soil, from childhood on a grain farm in Lorain County to farming in Delaware County. She came to Seminary Hill Farm in 2022 following a career in agriculture, nonprofit management and physical therapy. She received her Master of Divinity from MTSO in 2024, specializing in chaplaincy.



Will Summers
Interim Chef

Some of William's earliest memories are baking in the kitchen with his dad. These experiences ignited a passion for cooking and a love of nourishing others through good food and fellowship. William has worked in a variety of different kitchens throughout his career before landing at MTSO in 2023 as a kitchen assistant. William is finishing his Master of Theological Studies degree at MTSO, focusing on biblical studies and languages.

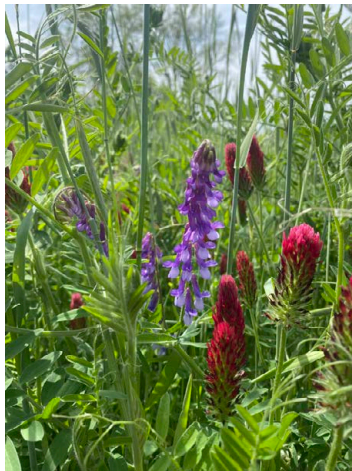


Origins

How MTSO's Seminary Hill Farm and Land Stewardship Initiative came to be

In the fall of 2013 MTSO birthed the Sustainability and Land Initiative, launching a path now in its 12th year. The intention then – and now – remains:

Seeking to live our aspiration to “prepare and invigorate transformational leaders to engage the church and the world in leadership and service,” and live out commitments in our identity and purpose “to a just and sustainable world,” MTSO is developing a sustainable campus plan which establishes a model for theological education through the cultivation



of sustainable teaching and learning communities on our land. In addition to our classroom and hybrid learning communities, we are committed to creating a sustainable campus seeking the health of all. We are

creating a campus space that pays particular attention to our impact on food, water, soil and our fellow creatures.

Today, Seminary Hill Farm and the Land Stewardship Initiative are as wings of a bird: they balance and complement one another. Seminary Hill Farm's 10 acres are nested within the remaining 70-plus campus acres that are tended by the Land Stewardship team. 🌿



Land stewardship

A year worth celebrating for the Land Stewardship Initiative

The year 2024 was significant for the Land Stewardship team in multiple ways.

On March 14 around 9 p.m., MTSO experienced an EF-1 tornado. The damage was extensive, and this set the pace for the 2024 season. Due to our rapid response and help from a tree service, we were able to clear and restore many of the affected areas around campus.

Along with storm cleanup and other duties, we were able to plant roughly 2,000 bareroot saplings for Earth Day and a prairie garden with over 20 species of native perennials. We secured an AmeriCorps team for eight weeks

and were able to clear the final 10-plus acres of woodland invasives, thereby completing MTSO's Environmental Quality Incentives Program contract. We expanded the school's path system, completed repairs on existing paths, and began a long-term research project to provide students and visitors with information about the many plant species they can observe on the MTSO grounds.

In short, it was a very good year for Land Stewardship. In 2025 we look forward to building on our previous successes, as well as embarking on several new and exciting projects. 🌿



Seminary Hill Farm

Like woodlands and wetlands, the farm is part of a whole

The farm includes a greenhouse, two high tunnels, several low tunnels, a children's garden, ADA accessible gardening beds, perennial asparagus beds and production fields.

We recognize the farm's agroecosystems

and woodlands, prairie, riparian corridors and wetland ecosystems are part of one whole. Expanding the circle, we are farming within an Earth system experiencing a warming climate, rapid change and biodiversity loss, calling for continual adaptation and attentiveness. 🌱

Our mission

Seminary Hill Farm teaches small-scale farming and produces good food for all in pursuit of a just, sustainable and generative world.

Our vision and purpose: Seminary Hill Farm is committed to teaching and learning about local agriculture, the stewardship of land, engaging matters of environmental justice, and working toward food security and community health.

Our distinctiveness: Seminary Hill Farm is an integral part of MTSO, a graduate professional school that is a vibrant, diverse, inclusive community that faithfully engages the intersections of church, society and academy to prepare leaders for ministry and service in pursuit of a transformed world. As such, we are committed to becoming an open and challenging formational community, cultivating learning for leadership and service.



How we farm

We look through the lens of agroecology and cultivate a relationship of reciprocity and respect with the soil biome

There are many ways to describe agricultural systems that seek to nurture healthy soils and communities: regenerative agriculture; sustainable agriculture; permaculture; organic, holistic and natural farming methods; and more. Each has nuances that are best understood within the context of the particular

farm and its relationships. In some way, Seminary Hill Farm reaches towards all of the descriptors above, yet we orient overall to the path of agroecology that begins with soil health.

Agroecology is a lens that recognizes interconnection, synergies and the vital importance of diversity – from the soil to those who eat food that is produced. While agriculture is a human-created system that can imply action upon, agroecology intends human accompaniment with macro- and micro-ecosystems and the life that resides within.

What is agroecology?

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations describes as agroecology as “an integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of food and agricultural systems. It seeks to optimize the interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while taking into consideration the social aspects that need to be addressed for a sustainable and fair food system.”

The FAO identifies 10 elements of agroecology that we seek to enliven: diversity, synergies, efficiency, resilience, recycling, co-creation and sharing of knowledge, human and social values, culture and food traditions, responsible governance, and a circular economy.

Continues

In 2024, agroecology practices made visible include:

Ecological elements

- **Mindful tillage:** Reducing frequency, depth and intensity of soil disturbance to support the soil biome.
- **Cover cropping:** Planting a variety of plants (sorghum, vetch, rye, peas, turnips, buckwheat) between warm-season crops and over winter to optimize photosynthesis and soil building.
- **Deep mulching:** Protecting the soil between food plants with grass clippings gleaned from campus, mowed cover crop, aged arborist mulch and straw.
- **Intercropping and rotation improvement:** Exploring synergies between plants, such as growing onions following a buckwheat crop to improve phosphorus availability or incorporating pollinator-friendly flowers and herbs into fields.
- **Understanding soils:** Completing soil testing and analysis in all fields to inform management decisions and experiential education with the farm team.
- **Seed diversification:** Growing a mix of hybrid, landrace and open-pollinated varieties and learning how to save seed.
- **Small-scale vermicomposting:** Caring for red wigglers to produce nourishing vermicompost and teas for soil fertility.
- **Increasing perennial plants:** Establishing additional rhubarb, currants, persimmon and plum trees in a perimeter area that drains into wetlands.



Social and economic elements

- **Exploring culturally significant crops:** Expanding our knowledge and experience of new crops and recognizing the ethnobotanical heritage of cultivated vegetables.
- **Supplying fresh produce to food-insecure communities in partnership with four organizations.**
- **Practicing radical hospitality to all.**
- **Fostering collaborative leadership and team building within the farm and across the MTSO community.**
- **Supporting reconnection and reciprocity in our relationship with Earth.** 🌿



Good food for all

Seminary Hill Farm seeks to improve access to fresh, nutritious vegetables and herbs so that all may eat

The farm's diverse harvest is shared with Community Supported Agriculture members, nonprofits serving food-insecure communities, the MTSO community and volunteers.

Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture is a hyperlocal food system that forms a direct relationship between farmers, the agroecosystem and those who eat the harvest. Individuals and families purchase memberships that support annual operating costs for seed, equipment and labor in advance

of the growing season and receive a weekly share of the harvest in return.

CSA members enter into a relationship of trust. The Seminary Hill Farm team does its best to provide members with an array of nutritious vegetables, herbs and flowers. Members understand that there are uncertainties in farming, and they share the bounty and the risks.

The Community Supported Agriculture

Continues

program averaged 60 shareholder families a week across the 2024 growing season, with 28 distributions at Seminary Hill Farm and 24 distributions at the Livingston United Methodist Church in German Village from May to November. Each week shareholders enjoy shares of healthy vegetables, flowers and herbs grown by people they know by name. The Community Supported Agriculture food is distributed market style, allowing members to take what they like and will utilize.



CSA members who pick up their shares on MTSO's hillside campus look out over fields growing food that will soon be on their dinner tables. A vibrant children's garden with weekly activities, frequent cooking demonstrations in the barn, and the opportunity to walk field and forest make each Tuesday food distribution an experience.

Food-insecure communities

With support from the Ohio Community, Agriculture and Nutrition Program (Ohio CAN) and MTSO's Community Food and Wellness Initiative, Seminary Hill Farm was able to distribute 8,300 pounds of vegetables to organizations serving food-insecure communities. This reflects a 57% increase from 2023. Most of these pounds are in greens: chard, lettuce, kale, collards and more at the request of our partners in order to fill an unmet need.

In 2024, Seminary Hill Farm distributed vegetables through our partners: People in Need of Delaware County, the Linden Fresh Market, Central Ohio Free Pharmacy, and Food Not Bombs.

A farm-to-table dining hall

Dunn Dining Hall, where the MTSO community gathers for meals on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and for special events, has the first choice of farm produce. In 2024, the dining hall prepared over 2,300 pounds of vegetables and herbs that grew just beyond the kitchen door.

Volunteers

Our volunteers are vital to the work of Seminary Hill Farm. Among the ways we show our appreciation is by inviting them to share the harvest. 🌿

The next generation

Tomorrow's farmers and agroecology advocates are gaining valuable experience working at Seminary Hill Farm

Seasonal internships in agroecology and local food systems

From March through November of 2024, nine people participated in our internship program. Whether arriving from the work force or as university students, all came to deepen practical farming skills and experience a hyperlocal food system. In 2024, interns were in graduate or undergraduate studies or recent graduates from Ohio State University, Ohio Wesleyan University and Central State University.

At Seminary Hill Farm, internships begin with establishing personal learning goals, which shape their experience while contributing to the whole system. Interns share a lunch meal at Dunn Dining Hall four days a week, participate in weekly team meetings with intentional dialogue, visit area farms, and have the opportunity to take on individual projects and learn through focused didactics in the field. This year, interns adopted a field – and specific crops – into their care, providing opportunities for



learning, creativity and leadership. Through a partnership with Stratford Ecological Center's volunteer apiary team, summer interns were able to complete 16 hours of hands-on beekeeping, opening eligibility for membership into the Central Ohio Beekeepers Association.

Seminarian team members

In 2024, eight seminarians contributed to Seminary Hill Farm as work-study students or volunteers. Seminarians gave rise to the Unity Plants initiative, bringing plants and foodways into the fields that are new to Midwestern gardens. These plants include Intore white African eggplant, Bobo black eyed peas, several varieties of amaranth, sorghum and others. 🌿





The MTSO connection

Seminary Hill Farm and the Land Stewardship Initiative are integral to the campus community and academic life

Community Food and Wellness Initiative

Funded through a grant from the Harry C. Moores Foundation, MTSO's Community Food and Wellness Initiative is an educational program that engages Central Ohio churches and community groups on the topics of food and wellness. CFWI provided support for seminarian farmers and interns to step out of the fields and into the broader community of food and farming systems at two gatherings:

- **The Ohio Food Policy Network Annual Summit** focuses on local farms, access and education, infrastructure, and institutions. Participants dove deeper into solar energy on farms, the Ohio Healthy Soils Initiative, stories from young activists, and access to

food in both urban and rural areas. Understanding the food system as a whole, especially as it relates to access to healthy food for food-insecure communities, helps us to enliven our mission of "good food for all." All attendees that day went home with marinara made from SHF and Southside Family Farms produce by the Glass Rooster Cannery.

- **The Ohio Ecological Food and Farming Association Annual Conference** is a catalyzing event gathering over 600 farmers and sustainable food systems practitioners. CFWI provided scholarships for seminary students to fully participate.

Continues

CFWI also supported the development of an ADA garden with eight wheelchair-accessible beds and several stone raised beds. In its first year, the garden was home to tomatoes and okra destined for seed saving, culinary herbs and flowers.

CFWI also provides support for Seminary Hill Farm to distribute vegetables to food-insecure communities.



Practicing Ecotheology course

All first-year MTSO master's students participated in a required week-long intensive course: Practicing Ecotheology, taught by Dr. Tim VanMeter. The course gathered 52 students who experienced 2 1/2 days in field and forest supporting work happening in the classroom space.

While on the farm, students participated in activities to learn physical soil properties

with accompanying reflections on our interrelationship with the soil biome and explored the agricultural landscape while focusing on sensory engagement. Land Steward Tim Bachelor also accompanied them in learning about the riparian and forested campus ecosystems.

Soil-keepers student organization

Soil-keepers is a student organization

focused on ecotheology in practice. It hosts two activities a year celebrating and nurturing a community of place: caring for the land as an expression of gratitude for this wondrous planet, while feeding ourselves and food-insecure communities. 🌱

Course description: Practicing Ecotheology

Through an immersive experience on Seminary Hill Farm, students are invited into deep reflection on the relation of theology and ecology, and to construct new relationships with food, land and community. In doing so, they are exploring understandings of faith and spirituality through ideas and metaphors reflecting their commitments to community and agrarian values and are introduced to the meaning and significance of MTSO's values of justice, sustainability and generativity.



Rooted in community

Creating a culture that welcomes people to experience and know the land and each other

Volunteers

In 2024, we received the gift of 700 volunteer hours across field and forest, including seminarians, Community Supported Agriculture work share members and area residents. Volunteers helped us plant trees, clear invasive garlic mustard, tend flowers, plant flats of seeds in the greenhouse, harvest garlic, offer nature-based crafts to visiting children, and build the Nest, our 90-foot-diameter children's garden.

In the practice of radical hospitality, volunteers are invited to come home to this land and experience it to nurture themselves while we work together to support thriving ecosystems.

Among our volunteers, in 2024 we would like to honor two who spent an average of 16 hours every week during the summer and fall tending the children's garden: David Mansperger and Chris Walsh.

We are also thankful for Chris Cree, who sustains queen-rearing beehives at MTSO.

Community connections

Seminary Hill Farm welcomes individuals and groups for tours, workshops and retreats. In 2024, we welcomed:

- Green Teens from Highland Youth

Continues

Garden in the Hilltop neighborhood of Columbus

- Youth groups from Hilliard United Methodist Church, Church of the Messiah in Westerville and Worthington United Methodist Church
- University of Wooster pre-ministry students
- Shorth North Church congregants
- Hilliard United Methodist Church lay leaders
- The garden crew at Stratford Ecological Center.



- The FairShare CSA Coalition
- The Hunger Alliance of Delaware County
- Faithlands.

We participate in local, state and regional networks including:

- The Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association

MTSO hosted the national Faithlands conference, where we had the opportunity to network with people from across the

country engaged in “partnerships between farmers, faith communities, land stewards, and food systems in celebration of our interconnectedness to one another and our common home.” Farm Liaison Laura Ann Bergman is on the Faithlands national coordinating committee. 🌿



Thank you, donors

We are grateful for those who have financially supported the Seminary Hill Farm Fund and MTSO's Sustainability Fund from 2023 to 2025

The Seminary Hill Farm Fund is dedicated to direct support of the farm. A gift to MTSO's Sustainability Fund supports MTSO's broad commitments to sustainability, of which the farm is a part.

Financial contributors

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Growing into 2025

A look to our goals for the year ahead

The Land Stewardship Initiative will continue to develop swaths of prairie throughout campus, build a memorial garden and fire pit area, enhance Weiser Run's riparian zone and our local watershed, sustain native tree and shrub planting, and develop a plant nursery.

Seminary Hill Farm's goals include:

- In agroecosystems: Completing redesign of the north fields for water and soil conservation, expanding utilization of intercropping and establishing a system for terminating cover crops.
- In providing good food for all: Producing abundant flowers, vegetables and herbs for 60 CSA families and Dunn

Dining Hall; establishing Community Greens, a permanent field for crops to feed food-insecure communities; opening a self-serve farm market.

- In community: Organizing three regular teams of people to support the children's garden, habitat restoration and community greens.
- In experiential education: Holding our first children's camp and a two-part intergenerational skills intensive.
- In infrastructure: Establishing a covered area near the barn as a gathering place and outdoor classroom, and exploring rainwater catchment systems. 🌿