Healing Garden

BY SUMMER GONSAIVES

In the heart of Westerly, 150 acres of farmable land intermingles with a rare white cedar swamp. This is home to the Narragansett Tribal Farm. A short walk from the main entrance leads to the tribal apiary and pollinator garden, covering one-fifth of an acre.

Though still in its early stages, the ground is prepared to be planted with sunflowers, milkweed, bee balm, hyssop, oregano, tickseed and other native plants in the spring.

As a member of the Narragansett Tribe, I was raised to honor the Earth for all the gifts and beauty she gives. The tribal farm is more than a space to grow crops and to garden; it offers *auke sónkunatunk*, or land to grow, physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.

To serve my desire to maintain health and the land, I earned a bachelor's degree in health studies from the University of Rhode Island and a master's degree in public health at Brown University. Now, I am back at URI working towards a bachelor's degree in biology, with a minor in writing. I also work at Brown as co-leader of the Superfund Research Program's Community Engagement Core, which allows me to work directly with communities, including the tribe, impacted by environmental contamination.

My childhood days with the Tribe shaped my love of the land. Every August, the tribe hosted its Annual Crandall Powwow, welcoming visitors from all over the East Coast, who came to drum, sing, dance, and take in the whole experience. Here we ran in the fields as children, free and spirited. The drumbeat poured into the soil and cleansed the air of the junkyard just beyond the bushes. For more than 60 years, Irving Crandall, the last direct descendant of the family that purchased the land from the Narragansets in the 1600s and named it Crandall Farm, maintained a working junkyard adjacent to where the powwow took place. Just beyond the tree line where we danced to the beat of the drum, hundreds of scrap cars, tires, appliances, and junk lay strewn about.

As a teenager, Irving was almost like a family member. My paternal grandparents, Robin and Jean Spears, welcomed him to many meals at their home, and in exchange he allowed them to plant a vegetable garden on his farm. The 40 by 120-foot garden allowed me and my 24 cousins the chance to revisit the farm, where we climbed trees, picked wild grapes and apples, and tended the vegetables, flowers, and herbs. In the evenings, we would climb atop a scrap trailer and watch the sunset over the cedar swamp.

My love of honeybees began when my grandfather, Robin, acquired a hive, and tacked it high on a hill in his yard. It quickly evolved to over a dozen hives. As a child there was no greater treat than to see a frame of capped honey sitting on his kitchen counter.

Through these memories and moments, mixing my love of plants and bees came naturally. In the spring of 2019 and 2020, with permission from the Tribe, I established four hives on the farm.

In the fall of 2020, the Tribe approved the creation of a pollinator garden on the farm. Having seen the dire impact a few months of COVID-19 had on the tribal community, and the world, the notion of health and well-being was a focal point of my life. Having grown up in the outdoors, lockdown had a severe impact on my physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. So, I decided to design the pollinator garden around the four directions, with each direction dedicated to a different realm of health.

I chose a spot that offered a tranquil feeling. Tribal members donated funds for a split rail fence.

That same fall, Elizabeth Malloy, Co-Director of TerraCorps RI, which works with other organizations to support land conservation, sustainable farming, community justice, and food resilience, offered to collaborate. Liz oversees service-learning work, mentoring individuals from various organizations, including Aquidneck Land Table, Audubon Society of Rhode Island, Woonasquatucket River...