

# The Borner Farm Project

## A Volunteer Experience

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*By Catherine Putzier*

After a brief moment of hesitation, I pressed send on an email to the Borner Farm staff. I had no idea who would receive it or what they would say to my request to volunteer there, but that did not matter: I was determined to find a farm where I could help out. While the frozen Minnesota air made summer feel distant, I was daydreaming of sticking my hands into some warm dirt and feeling the sun beaming down. The thought of being outside and learning the intricacies of potato planting was just too good to resist! Little did I know, however, that that email (sent to a farm I had only just discovered on Google) would introduce me to more than just some nice cabbage plants. It would introduce me to an incredibly kind and generous community of people.

Luckily, I did not have to wait long before an enthusiastic response popped into my inbox. They were happy to have me for the summer! With that to look forward to, the snow melted quickly, and in no time, spring made its way onto every lawn in town. My last classes for high school finished up, and I was finally free to reconnect with my “inner gardener.”



### *The Farm*

In the summer of 2018, I started volunteering at the Borner Farm Project. The farm sits on a small, two-acre plot in the middle of Prescott, a bustling rural Wisconsin town. The property is one of the last pieces of undeveloped land from what was once a 200-acre family farm owned by the Borner's (the current operation's namesake). As one of the few remaining plots, it is nestled into the middle of a suburban community, homes surrounding it in each direction. From the street you can see a sprawling front lawn and gravel driveway, an old home and a barn, a makeshift greenhouse and a garage-turned-marketplace. Tucked away, behind all of this is the actual farm, hidden from view, but by no means forgotten. Its annual array of vegetables is impressive for its size. Everything from conventional carrots, to an unusual lone asparagus bush, grow within its boundaries, supplying the farm with a constant rotation of mouthwatering produce.

Each row is carefully planted and tended to by interns and volunteers throughout the summer, with only the worst of weather turning them away. In terms of farm animals, the team consists of a shy black cat named Zorba, a few quiet chickens, and the pollinators who regularly peruse the ever-blooming wildflower patch.

Today the farm is supported through its CSA, a self-serve market, workshops and bi-weekly pizza nights. While they are all wonderful things, I have found that the pizza nights are the crown jewel of the operation. Every other Friday, two red brick outdoor ovens are heated up and put to the test when over a hundred people arrive to enjoy freshly made pizza. Delicious topping combinations such as arugula, goat cheese and walnut, or beet and balsamic kale, entice guests to come from over an hour away. Within no time the front lawn crowds up with chairs and picnic blankets, the sounds of laughter and carefree conversations fill the air, and exclamations of delight

burst through the din as people receive their long-awaited pizza. On nights like these it is always a good idea to arrive early to avoid the line, but even if you do find yourself there, the friendly chat with the person in front of you tends to make up for it.

### *The Experience*

This is the little slice of heaven I was introduced to when I started volunteering last summer. The hum of bees and smell of compost quickly made a spot in my heart, not to mention the people too. My days mainly consisted of weeding, watering and planting, but occasionally my jobs would be a little different and I would find myself making tomato trellises or placing old burlap sacks between the rows of greens. With any job I was assigned, there was often someone else helping or working close by to chat with. Each exchange was as delightful as the next, and it provided the perfect opportunity to make new friends.

Some people are surprised when they hear that I love weed-





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ing in my free time. To a certain extent, I can understand why, but I think they are missing a key piece of the puzzle. Weeding is not the thing that gets me out of bed in the morning. If it did, then I think I would stick to just weeding my own garden. The reason I drive to Prescott to weed for a whole day, is because of the community there. It is not just about keeping a tidy garden and fresh supply of crops: it is about building community while you do it.

### *The Idea*

And as it turns out, this is exactly what Diane and Baard Webster, the owners of the farm, had in mind when they first founded it. Back in the early 2000's, before the idea of the farm had been conceived, Diane and her husband owned a plant nursery called "Funkie Gardens." This business provided them with their community and helped them keep in contact with people from all over town. While it was a wonderful business, they eventually decided it was time to sell it, and that

meant the end of their convenient community-building activity. At that point in time, Diane and Baard were faced with a question: where would they find their community?

An answer came shortly after Diane started a garden in her front lawn. She needed an area with a lot of sun, but the only place with enough of it was right by the road. As she set up her elaborate trellis system and began weeding the oddly-placed bed of veggies, neighbors started to walk over, sit down, and help her do the work. As Diane said, "I had an instant neighborhood. Our house is fairly isolated, but suddenly people came out of the woodwork." Her neighbors started coming to her, and great conversations would ensue. When that started happening, she "realized how much gardening and working with your hands can facilitate community building." Having an activity to preoccupy your hands makes it so much easier to talk with people! This had potential to be her new community-building activity, and

what better way to build community than by gardening? Not only did it help facilitate conversation, it also helped people live healthier lives.

This idea was mulling around in her head as she was walking her dog one day, and when she passed a large, undeveloped property in the middle of her neighborhood, a lightbulb went off in her head. She had walked past it many times before, but her recent experience gardening completely shifted the way she saw it that day. She saw potential. It was a place where community-building-gardening could thrive.

As soon as she got home, Diane figured out who owned the place. Her name was Virginia, and the property used to be her family's farm. It had been a long time since anyone had farmed it however, and Virginia was planning to sell it. Diane quickly leapt into action. She made a thermos of coffee, ran up the hill to talk with her. Three thermoses of coffee and a plate of cookies later, an agreement was made. Virginia would not sell her



property. Instead, she would let Diane run some gardening plots on it. This was the start of the Borner Farm Project.

From that point on, the farm slowly evolved from one thing to another. Originally, neighbors were allowed to have plots on it, but that soon changed to a more controlled operation run by Diane. After five years, Virginia decided she needed to sell it, and Diane and Baard made the leap to own the farm themselves. They started doing a marketplace one year and a CSA another. An intern was hired, and they received a grant to start the pizza nights. Each year, Diane and Baard learned something new and expanded their realm of work.

While Diane has loved the journey, she admits that it has not been all rainbows and butterflies. She said, “Making the leap [to start the farm] was terrifying but also exciting, especially when we had to buy the property. We’ve had some really really hard times. It has been so much labor. There have been many tears and sleepless nights. We’re dedicated though. We’ve worked hard for so many years and I think we’ve finally made it.”

When asked about her favorite memories from the past fifteen years, Diane immediately said, “working in the field or the kitchen with people is the part I love—anytime two or more people are working on a project.” She clearly has a love for the people around her, and this love has really shown through in her work and mission. The goal of the project is centered around serving the nearby community.

### *The Hope*

Publically, the farm’s mission is described as: “a community orga-

nization based on agriculture that brings together members of the Prescott community to grow food, share stories, promote cross generational learning, raise awareness of our place in the past, and our responsibility to the future.” The amazing thing is that it truly is all of these things, and Diane wants to grow it into even more in the future.

Looking ahead, she hopes to expand the educational aspect of the farm by offering gardening and permaculture classes. With the added help of some new staff, she thinks it is possible. In fact, she believes a lot is possible. She has always been concerned about the world food system, but these years on the farm have given her hope.

When asked about her experience working with younger volunteers and interns she said, “There are so many. It makes me feel like the human race might be OK because there are a lot of young people that care. This is a great generation. It is amazing how hard they will work for the experience on this farm. I didn’t start ‘till I was fifty! Imagine what all of these volunteers and interns will know by the time they are fifty!”

That thought really struck me. I am only nineteen at the moment, and I have so much more to learn. I am still working on being able to identify what is being grown in each row, let alone how to keep it alive. But, that is OK, because at least I know I am learning. The opportunity to work on this farm has been such an incredible experience, and I know that the future holds some amazing things for it. In the end, I am glad my hesitation did not get the best of me. I chose to send that email, and I have learned so much as a result.

