

New Life at Living Light of Peace:

Congregation partners with Ukrainian and Russian neighbors, Denver Urban Gardens to transform environment

By Jeni Hiatt Umble, Pastor of Living Light of Peace, Arvada, Colorado

An idea germinated within our congregation when we received a newsletter from Mennonite Men highlighting their [JoinTrees](#) campaign with a goal of planting one million trees by 2030. That spring challenge came about the same time that our congregation began our annual search for someone to mow our 1.5 acres consisting of mostly weeds. And it came as the reality of climate change hit closer to home with increasing temperatures and wildfires consuming entire neighborhoods in nearby cities. We wondered if our congregation could use our small plot of land to benefit our community.

Our pastor reached out for more information from the US Coordinator of Mennonite Men, Steve Thomas. Steve encouraged us to be in contact with local experts to determine what trees would grow best in our Colorado climate. He suggested also planting a variety of climate-appropriate bushes and flowers. And he reminded us that volunteers from the community are often available to help with a new project.

We began to envision how our 1.5 acres could be an oasis in our Denver suburb of Arvada. We used our monthly potlucks as forums for brainstorming: planting trees, wildflowers and herbs, installing beehives, expanding our current community garden, creating walkways, maybe even developing a solar farm. Instead of an annual headache, our yard became a source of dreams.

Of course, there were voices of caution. We are a small, older congregation. Do we have the energy to take on an ambitious project? Who will do the initial work and who will provide continuing care? As it turned out, the experts and the volunteers we needed were already onsite!

For many years there has been a community garden managed by Denver Urban Gardens (DUG) on a portion of our land. We learned that they were eager to expand that garden with their [Food Forest Initiative](#). Staff members facilitated a neighborhood meeting, complete with a translator, for our mostly Russian and Ukrainian neighbors. Many of these families already have plots in our community garden. We learned that they especially wanted sour cherry trees. Last spring DUG volunteers planted twenty trees and assorted bushes adjacent to the garden. They are providing the initial care for the trees and have identified volunteers in the neighborhood for continuing care. In a few years, our orchard will provide our neighbors with apples, peaches, pears, and hazelnuts in addition to sour cherries. Any extra produce will be donated to the local food bank and a nearby day shelter.

We are happy to add our first twenty trees to the 80,000 that Mennonite Men will have planted by the end of this year, on their way to one million by 2030. And this is only the beginning of our land transformation! We still have room for wildflowers, herbs, beehives, and more trees. Hopefully, each year will bring an expansion of climate-friendly uses.

For more information: www.mennonitemen.org/jointrees and dug.org/giving-grove/



Pictured: (left) Tree Prep and Garden, (middle) Maurice Briggs digging, (right) New Tree with Community Carden