New Gardening Workshop Program provides knowledge and support all season long

Matthew 25’s Cultivate Hope Urban Farm is hosting a Gardening Workshop Program for beginners and garden veterans alike! This new workshop program will allow you to get your hands dirty and support you in gardening all season long, from planting to harvesting and preserving.

This Gardening Workshop Program consists of five hands-on classes from May-September, held at our Urban Farm near downtown Cedar Rapids. Each monthly session will have small class sizes for maximizing time and individualized attention. During harvests, you’ll take home some of the produce, and the rest will be provided to the Cultivate Hope Corner Store, a small nonprofit grocery store with affordable groceries.

Monthly workshops will have two time slots available for each session with identical lesson plans, one from 6:30-7:30 pm on Tuesdays, and one from 10 am-noon on Saturdays. Attendees can choose whether Tuesdays or Saturdays will work best with their schedule.

Through this program, you’ll receive hands-on instruction from a seasoned grower, tips and tricks to use on your own garden, produce to take home from the urban farm plots you’ve cultivated, and interactions with other gardening-minded individuals.

The cost of this five-month program is $150. Register now at matthew-25.org/event/workshops. Email us with questions at cultivate@hub25.org, or give us a call at 319-362-2214.

A note from Clint Tweed-Ball, Founder & Executive Director

Change is hard. Real change takes deep and long-lasting commitment. This is true for individuals. It is even more true for a system as big as a neighborhood with thousands of people. Nearly fifteen years ago, Matthew 25 began working in the Northwest Neighborhood of Cedar Rapids.

Honestly, the place was a mess and kind of ugly! A major flood had just happened. Homes were in various states of disrepair. Eventually, hundreds would be torn down. Others were abandoned and some were caught up in bureaucratic red tape, just sitting and rotting. The neighborhood looked more like a place of despair than one of hope.

It was in the middle of winter, 2009, that we at Matthew 25 decided we couldn’t go into spring without some joy and brightness. That spring, we purchased large flower pots, enlisted youth and adults to paint them, filled them with flowers and put them on corners throughout the neighborhood. The high school shop class at Kennedy created simple, wooden signs that read, Cultivate Hope. That was the first time we realized we were in the growing business.

A couple of years later, we started a blacktop urban garden on the old Boys & Girls Club basketball court. It was during this time that we really began to recognize that the neighborhood was considered a food desert. The only food retailers consisted of three bars and three convenience stores, primarily filled with high-calorie, unhealthy food. We realized that long-term, systemic change was needed.

Over the last eleven years, we’ve slowly and methodically worked to shift the neighborhood from a food desert to an oasis of fresh food. Let’s be honest, it hasn’t been easy. The first time we brought up the idea of using vacant flood land to build large gardens we would call the Cultivate Hope Urban Farm, a city council member derided and laughed at us. Fortunately, enough of his colleagues liked the idea that it moved forward and city staff created Iowa’s first urban farm policy.

In 2018, when we developed the idea of a cafe where meals would be fresh, organic and free to those who needed it, some thought we were a bit crazy. Five years later, Groundswell Cafe is on track to sell about $300,000 of food and give away 20%, or about $60,000, in free meals. It’s become one of the most unique restaurants in all of Iowa.

In 2019, we decided to take the next step and move towards the creation of the Cultivate Hope Corner Store, a small grocery focused on fresh, healthy food. At this store, fresh produce is the superstar, front and center as you walk in the door. We even give produce away! The store is kind of a magical place, with many elderly, disabled, and those without a license, walking in as customers.

Why is it so important that we keep expanding this work? Why does fresh food being located in what was considered a food desert matter so much? A lot of research has been done in this area, with lots of books and papers being authored. At the core, the research shows what we were told growing up is true, we are what we eat.

In neighborhoods where the healthy food choice isn’t always the easy choice, the percentage of people overweight and obese is far above the norm. This leads to things like increased diabetes, absenteeism from school and work, and a general loss of productivity and happiness. Unhealthy choices can often snowball in a way that holds people back.

At Matthew 25, more than anything else, we want people to be free to develop and use their God-given gifts and talents. We know that helping children, youth and adults easily access healthy foods is a key ingredient in helping individuals and neighborhoods to become healthier in a holistic and natural way.
Building Bridges: The Importance of Community Building

Way back in Matthew 25’s early days, an artist friend named Ella Yates offered to paint a mural for us in our first home, the basement of Trinity United Methodist Church. After listening to Clint and I discuss our dreams for the organization, Ella painted “Bridges”, an image with children playfully reshaping the city’s connections by adding new bridges to the landscape.

The idea Ella tried to communicate through “Bridges” is that we could take on a childlike openness as Jesus suggested and find joy in the important work of bridging divides in our community. Divisions caused by geography, wealth inequality, religion, race, politics, and other factors were not permanent. They could be overcome by open-minded, curious people committed to seeing each other as fully human no matter how different we might appear.

Relationships are started and built in all kinds of ways, but often the most reliable way is through listening and conversation. That happens naturally and organically in our lives all the time. However, there’s a lot of data to suggest that as a society we are less relational, more isolated, and more divided than we’ve been for quite some time. On a system-wide level, the work of building bridges is perhaps as important now as it has ever been.

That’s why Matthew 25 decided last year to create a new role in the organization entirely focused on Community Building. Clint invited me to rejoin the Matthew 25 team as the Community Building Director and to look for structural ways that Matthew 25 could become better at listening, conversation, and the other practical components of relationship building, especially with residents in the neighborhoods we serve.

I remember taking a learning journey several years ago to visit an organization in Shreveport, LA called Community Renewal International. One important lesson they emphasized was that a healthy, safe, thriving community doesn’t just happen on its own. It has always taken people who focused on building, nurturing, and maintaining community. And that’s really what this new position, this emerging department within Matthew 25, is all about. By laying out structured processes and dedicating resources toward the work of listening to, learning from, and organizing our neighbors, we will strengthen the fabric of community in Cedar Rapids.

If listening, conversation, and relationship building are activities you enjoy, I invite you to reach out and let me know. I would like to meet you and possibly invite you to help us in our community building efforts.

In community, Courtney Ball
courtney@hub25.org

Cultivate Hope in 2023

It’s officially spring, and we have lots of things happening within our Cultivate Hope food programs this year!

Community Gardens - Looking for space to grow your own garden? Rent one of our 20' x 20' Community Garden plots for $50 for the season. Email us to get started at cultivate@hub25.org.

Spring Plant Sale - Save the Date for the Spring Plant Sale from 10 am-1 pm on Saturday, May 6 at the Cultivate Hope Urban Farm! We will have edible plant starts, as well as some flowers and other decorative landscaping plants and grasses. For more information, visit us at matthew-25.org/event/spring-plant-sale

Farmers Markets - Stop by our Farmers Markets at the Urban Farm from 4-7 pm on Thursday nights from May 25-Oct. 5 to pick up locally-grown produce.

Mega Markets - The last Thursday of the month, from May-September, is our larger Mega Market! Join us for locally-grown produce, brick-oven pizza and beverages, live music, kids activities, and more.

Stay tuned for more upcoming events and programs by following us on Facebook: @Matthew25MinistryHub

Matthew 25 Has a New Website!

We’re excited to announce that we have launched a new and improved website at a new web address: matthew-25.org (Don’t forget the dash between Matthew and 25 when typing it into your browser!) This site has a lot of new features, such as:

- Fun video about Matthew 25 at the bottom of the homepage
- Unique landing pages for Groundswell Cafe and the Cultivate Hope Corner Store, each with their own menu options
- “Get Involved” section
- Improved events calendar
- History of Matthew 25 timeline
- Stories of impact
- More information about our philosophy and approach to neighborhood revitalization

Be sure to check it out!