

CALLED TO SERVE

DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS HELP
SEED SAVERS EXCHANGE CARRY OUT
ITS VITAL MISSION TO SAVE AND
SHARE OPEN-POLLINATED SEEDS

“What is the essence of life?” pondered Greek philosopher Aristotle more than 2,300 years ago. “To serve others and to do good.” There’s certainly no shortage of ways volunteers can “do good” in today’s world, and that is especially true at Seed Savers Exchange’s Heritage Farm in Decorah. From helping maintain gardens and writing thank-you notes to supporters to compiling seed histories and packaging seed boxes for distribution to community gardens, each year dozens of volunteers freely give their time, talents, and energy to help advance our mission to save and share heirloom and open-pollinated seeds.

In fact, in 2018, volunteers donated 1,324 hours of time; in 2019, they gave 1,066 hours helping out in various critical ways across the organization. Like most nonprofits, Seed Savers Exchange has plenty of opportunities for people to pitch in and help. And we are thankful for the dedicated volunteers—including Peter van der Linden and Dale Emery, spotlighted here—who are doing just that and making Heritage Farm and, indeed, the world a better place as a result.



PETER VAN DER LINDEN

Decorah resident Peter van der Linden has worked with arboreta and botanical gardens for much of his life, so volunteering at Seed Savers Exchange after retiring as director of the Iowa Lakeside Lab would seem a natural fit.

“I thought that Seed Savers Exchange would be a great place to volunteer my time, so I called to inquire about opportunities right after moving to Decorah in May 2015,” he recalls.

Over the past five years, Peter has assisted Sara Straate, seed historian, with several key projects. He has reviewed varieties to determine whether they are “Exchange heirlooms” (that have been traded on the Exchange for at least 20 years) and updated their status accordingly. He has combed through letters submitted by seed donors to help determine if a given variety meets the requirements to be classified as a “family heirloom.” And, most recently, he has helped organize and consolidate the organization’s extensive seed-catalog collection. “It’s getting to be a pretty big collection,” he says with a laugh. “And we’re not done yet.”

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Of course, Peter is no stranger to big projects. After earning a master’s degree in botany from Iowa State University, he served first as director of the Iowa Arboretum near Boone (from 1981-87) and then as curator of plant collections at Morton Arboretum outside Chicago.

In 1998, he returned to Iowa to serve as director of the Bickelhaupt Arboretum in Clinton for two years before spending seven years as director of Fernwood Botanical Garden and Nature Preserve in Niles, Michigan. In 2007, Iowa Lakeside Laboratory, a 140-acre campus on West Lake Okoboji dedicated to teaching and on-site scientific research, welcomed Peter as its first full-time, on-site director in its (then) nearly 100-year history. There he strengthened community relationships, mapped out strategies for future growth, and (quite possibly!) hugged a tree or two.

It was decades ago, while working a temporary job at the Fish Hatchery in Decorah, that Peter discovered the natural beauty of the Driftless Area and decided to purchase a piece of woodlands just north of Decorah. "I would always drive by North Winn Road and see the sign for Heritage Farm," he says. "One day my wife, Judy, and I visited and decided to join as members—we thought that the mission was just wonderful and the work so important."

Today, he is a familiar face at Heritage Farm on many Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. "You could probably take 250 hours per year and multiply it by five and you would get pretty close to the total number of hours I have volunteered at Seed Savers Exchange," says Peter, who also volunteers with the Porter House Museum and the Decorah Tree Board. "I am pretty typical of what is said about many volunteers—you originally come because you support the mission of the organization, but you stay because of the people."

DALE EMERY

That sentiment is echoed by Dale Emery of Decorah, whose volunteer efforts at Seed Savers Exchange have focused on the Herman's Garden program.

Since 2012, Dale has answered the call time and again when asked to sort seed packets for the program, which distributes free seeds to seed libraries, nonprofits, and school and community gardens across the nation. It's detailed work—involving separating seed packets into categories to ensure the right number of seed varieties are placed in each box of 50 seed packets—but he enjoys it. "To me, it's like a concentration game," he says. "It helps my memory and provides me with a bit of exercise, too."

Dale grew up in Bluffton, Iowa, just north of Decorah and began farming soon after graduating from North Winneshiek Schools in 1974. About 12 years later, he decided to switch gears and rent out his farmland so he could embark on a new venture, installing fences (which he did until about 2001). "I didn't have to do much advertising," he recalls, noting that he even put up fencing at Heritage Farm. "It was really all word of mouth, and people just called me." He followed that venture with a state job



that he held until suffering an injury in 2005. (Initially unable to stand without pain for even a few minutes, he can now stand for hours at a time.)

Today, beginning in the fall and going into spring, Dale is a fixture at the Northeast Iowa Peace and Justice Center in downtown Decorah, where he spreads out and organizes seed packets on long tables, logging close to 185 hours on that activity in 2019 alone.

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And it's not the only good he is doing in and beyond Northeast Iowa. Along with others in the Decorah-based Friends of Recovery group, which meets twice a week, he makes birthday cards and bookmarks for residents of local nursing homes and get-well cards for patients at Winneshiek County Hospital. "Some of the nursing home residents don't get any other mail," he says. "It's nice to get out, be with friends, share our problems or challenges, and also help others while doing all of that." ❖

According to the Nonprofit Source, 63 million Americans volunteered for at least one nonprofit organization in 2016. Seed Savers Exchange is grateful for all of the volunteers who donate their time, talents, and energy not only to our organization but also to countless others across the nation.