

Green Bay Press Gazette.

DOOR COUNTY

Washington Island teaching farm more than doubles in size with plans to expand programs

The farm, which teaches sustainable and resilient agriculture practices, is using the new space that includes a 5-bedroom farmhouse to greatly expand its programs and further diversify its crops.



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Green Bay Press-Gazette

July 24, 2025, 6:00 a.m. CT

A Washington Island teaching farm that practices sustainable and resilient agriculture has more than doubled its size with the purchase another farm that allows it to greatly expand its programs and further diversify its crops.

[Gathering Ground](#) recently acquired the Aznoe Farm and already has planted new vegetable crops and held programs at the site. The new 40-acre property more than doubles the nonprofit organization's space when added to the 34 acres on which it was founded in 2016 at Lakeview Farm. The two Gathering Ground farms are about five minutes apart, and classes and farm work will be divided between the two sites.

Alessandra Rolffs, executive director and co-founder of Gathering Ground with her husband, farm manager Russell Rolffs, said they've looked for more farmland to be able to expand its [Ground School](#), a 10-week, paid summer internship program for college-age adults.

"To really grow our programming, we either needed to build a new building or acquire a building," Rolffs said to the Door County Advocate. "There's a housing shortage, as we know, and we needed program space, housing, cooking space for our students."

Rolffs said they initially considered an opportunity to construct a new building from scratch on the Anzoe Farm, but then the opportunity came up to instead buy the farm, its existing five-bedroom farmhouse with kitchen and other infrastructure for a similar price to building new, maybe a little more expensive, but without having to wait three years for construction to finish.

A news release from Gathering Ground said the organization will preserve the Aznoe and Lakeview farms forever as working farmland, in line with the town of Washington's 20-year comprehensive plan that seeks to preserve the Island's longstanding agricultural traditions and open spaces.

The Aznoe farmhouse allows Gathering Ground to expand the class sizes for its Ground School. Along with that, the organization plans to offer workshops and farm experiences as soon as this fall to adults, such as field-to-kitchen classes and home composting workshops. Further down the road, Gathering Ground also hopes to develop an apprenticeship program to offer first-hand experience for adults with some farming background who are interested in a career in agriculture.

Along with housing Ground School students, the farmhouse also is where Gathering Ground will hold community meals as well as classes and seminars on agricultural subjects; Rolffs said a visiting professor already has given a seminar there. Book clubs and cooking classes are other possible future events. The farmhouse garage has a walk-in cooler, and the open-air pavilion kitchen includes grills and a pizza oven.

The added farming acreage also is vital because it is being used to grow various vegetables that aren't widely grown, if at all, at the Lakeview Farm, along with crops that can withstand storage over the winters. Rolffs said the Lakeview Farm has a community garden and raises a few vegetables on a smaller scale but it's mostly a farm for fruit and chestnut orchards, a grape vineyard and other perennial crops. The news release from Gathering Ground noted that squash, onions and garlic are among the vegetables already planted at the Aznoe Farm and that the organization is working to donate the new veggies to Door County food pantries.

"It's truly a game changer for us," Rolffs told the Advocate. "We'll be able to expand what we're able to do, able to recruit people for our programs, able to focus on growing our offerings and services."

The news release also said Gathering Ground plans to use its new farm to expand its experiments with sustainable agriculture as the farm aims for fully organic certification. Alley cropping and windbreaks are among the techniques that will be tried to help make the farmland more resilient. Gathering Ground plans to make the farm available to colleges and other research organizations interested in performing scientific research there.

"Farming at Gathering Ground is about more than producing food," Russell Rolffs said in the release. "It's about nurturing the land, creating resilient habitats and inspiring people to understand the role farms can play in conservation and biodiversity."

Gathering Ground is a teaching farm focused on sustainable farming practices and how the growing and cultivation of food creates a connection between people and nature. Along with the Ground School and other workshops, it also hosts field trips for K-12 students, Washington Island's weekly farmers market each summer, the community garden, and events such as the Farm & Field Bike Tour and the Island Garden Tour.

The organization is developing a "Planting for the Future" fundraising campaign to support its expanded vision, with more information on the campaign to be announced soon.

It also is holding a "[Dinner in the Vineyard](#)" fundraising event at 4 p.m. Aug. 8 with tours of Gathering Ground's gardens, vineyards and orchards; a five-course meal under white tents featuring fresh, locally sourced ingredients under the directions of chef Matt Poole (formerly with Hotel Washington) and winemaker Erin Rasmussen, both of the American Wine Project; a silent auction; and a performance by musicians from the Washington Island Music Festival taking place at that time.

For more about Gathering Ground, to get tickets for "[Dinner in the Vineyard](#)" or to sign up for the organization's newsletter, visit gatheringgroundwi.org.

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