

LOVE OF THE LAND

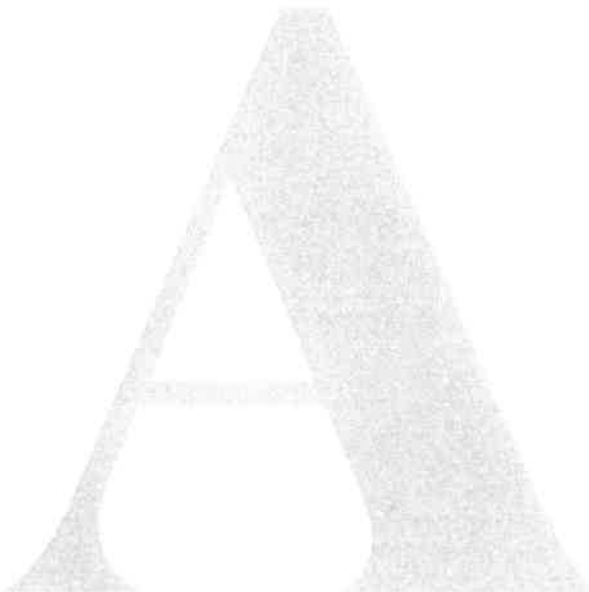
Tillers *of the Soil,* & Soul

The Coastal Conservation League has long ties with Mepkin Abbey, a relationship that now plays a role in helping regenerate their land and grow new farmers.

by **STEPHANIE HUNT** *photographs by* **GATELY WILLIAMS**



(From left) Walid Yahgy, Father Joseph Tedesco, and Luke McCusker are working with farmer Jimmy Livingston and Clemson Extension to expand Mepkin's agriculture program.



A gentle breeze blows atop the bluff at Mepkin Abbey, one of the highest points on the western fork of the Cooper River. Here grand oaks stand silent, meditative, along Mepkin's rolling expanse, their old, bowing branches robed in moss. They whisper ancient memories of the Chickasaw and Cusabo Indians who hunted and fished here, and of the enslaved people who grew rice, corn, peas, and indigo on this fertile land, once a 3,000-acre plantation belonging first to the family of Lords Proprietor James Colleton and then to patriot Henry Laurens. When late winter turns to spring, the Henry and Clare Booth Luce Gardens, named for the publishing magnate who later owned this land and in 1949 bequeathed it to the Trappist monks, erupt in a glorious chorus of azaleas, camellias, and tulip magnolia. It is holy land. As is every place of such breathtaking natural beauty.

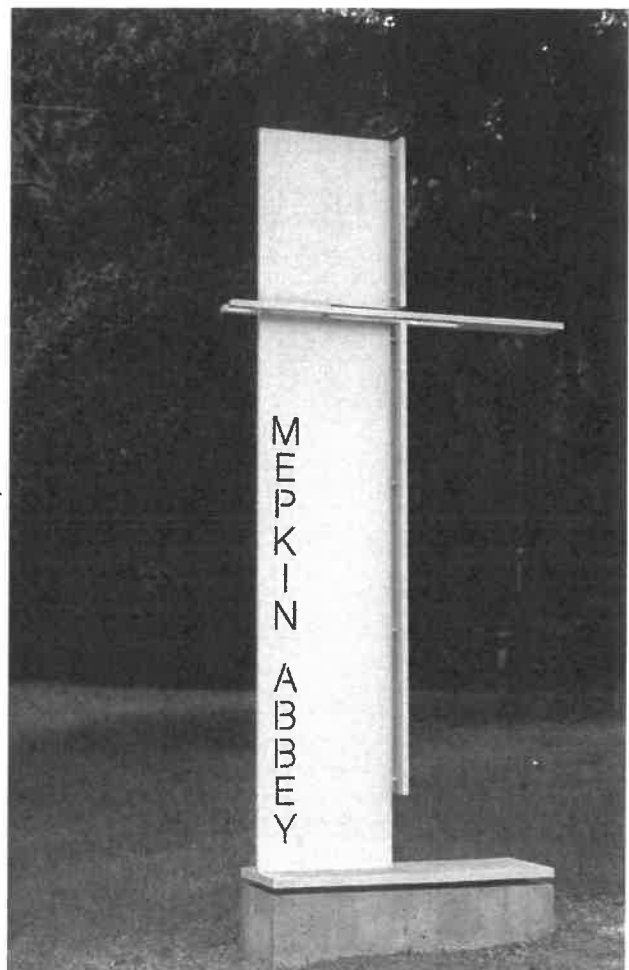
But in 2002, this place where monks pray and farm, where visitors come to picnic and reflect, was in jeopardy. A major new roadway was proposed to go right through this area, crossing the Cooper River by Mepkin, in order to connect tractor-trailers to the State Port Authority's planned Global Gateway, a massive new container port on Daniel Island. The truck route would pass through "some of Berkeley County's most hallowed lands" and "has local leaders and environmentalists on edge," *The Post and Courier* reported. Mepkin's abbot at the time, Father Francis Kline, joined efforts with then-Conservation League director Dana Beach to fight the Global Gateway and SPA expansion. Thankfully, they prevailed.

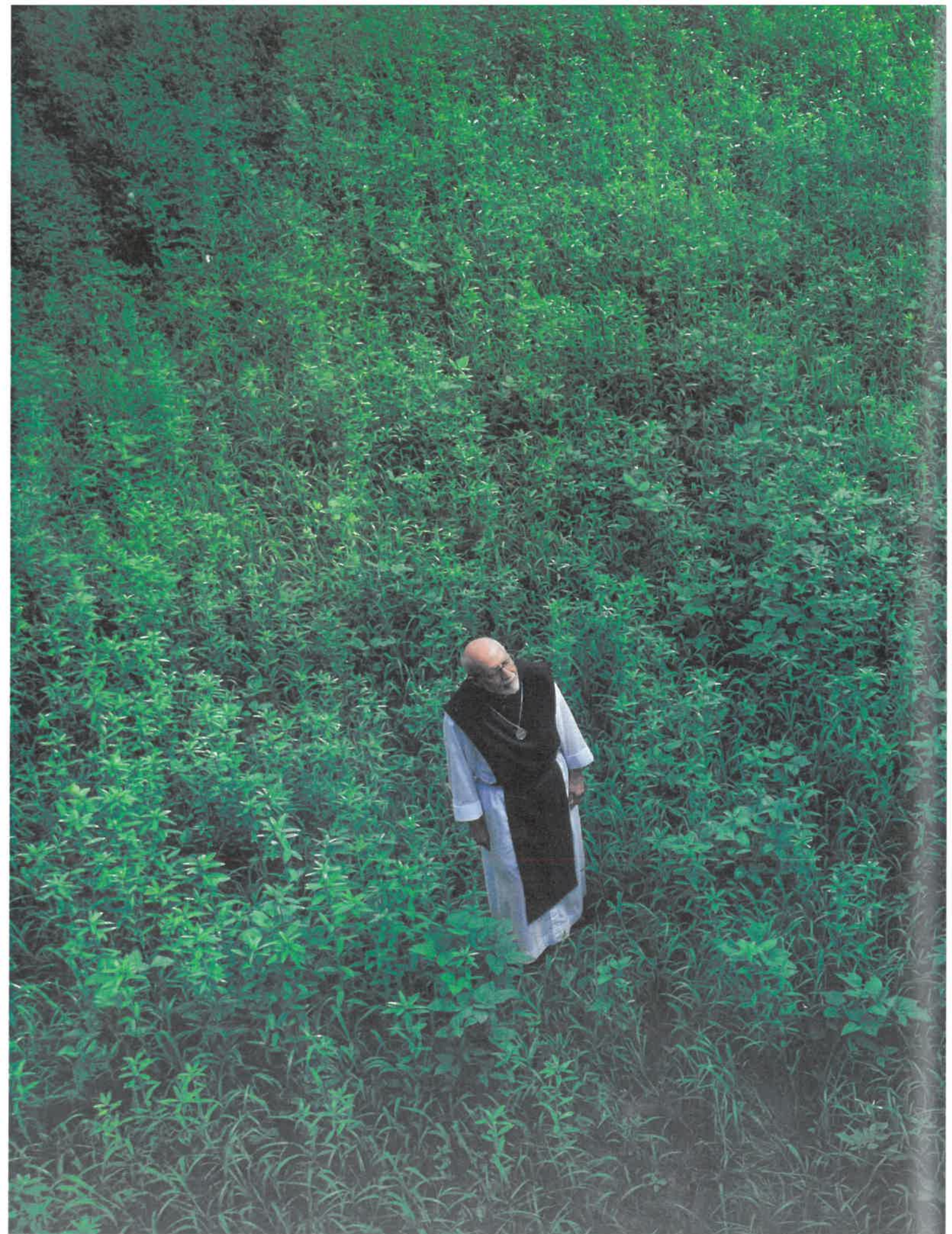
Today the land surrounding Mepkin remains rural, and the Abbey retains its essence as a place of contemplative refuge and sanctuary. Nestled by the Francis Marion National Forest as well as a few small farms, this corner of Monck's Corner, thanks to work by the Conservation League and other partners, is a green buffer that helps keep development in check.

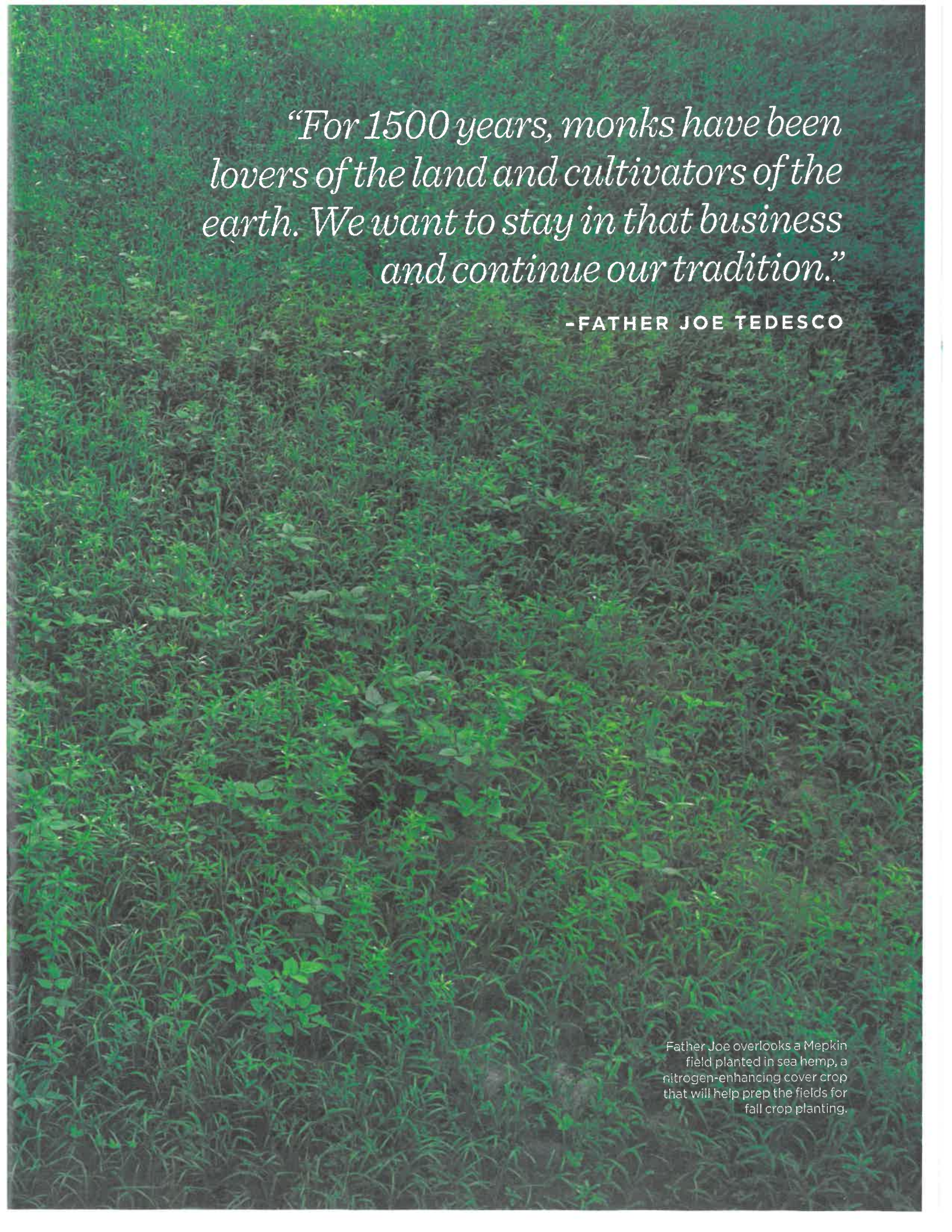
Just twelve or so miles down the road, the landscape is changing as growth around industrial Cainhoy and North Mount Pleasant creeps up Highway 41, but at Mepkin, time slows. Here the monks practice their centuries-old disciplines of prayer, singing the Psalms, and tending the land. Theirs is a life of simplicity and reverence.

LOVERS OF THE LAND

In keeping with ancient monastic tradition, the brothers follow the Liturgy of the Hours, observe silence, and support their livelihood through agriculture, specifically through mushroom farming. Mepkin's prized shitake and oyster mushrooms are favorites in local restaurants, and are sometimes available through GrowFood Carolina, a program of the Coastal Conservation League. They are cultivated in high-tech, climate-controlled growing rooms, some of which had housed the Abbey's chicken farm (prior to switching to mushrooms in 2007, the monks had a profitable egg operation). Meanwhile there are more than 100 acres of farmable fields on the Mepkin property. "We see







“For 1500 years, monks have been lovers of the land and cultivators of the earth. We want to stay in that business and continue our tradition.”

-FATHER JOE TEDESCO

Father Joe overlooks a Mepkin field planted in sea hemp, a nitrogen-enhancing cover crop that will help prep the fields for fall crop planting.

(Clockwise from top, left to right) Mepkin benefactors Henry and Clare Booth Luce are buried on the property, in the gardens named in their honor; oyster mushrooms growing in their substrate; The Cooper River curls along the shores of Mepkin; figs growing outside the greenhouses; farm manager Jimmy Livingston oversees the agriculture and mushroom programs; GrowFood tomatoes like those from Livingston's Wabi Sabi Farm and those soon grown at Mepkin.

an opportunity to do more," says Father Joe Tedesco, who oversees the mushroom farm. "For 1500 years, monks have been lovers of the land and cultivators of the earth. We want to stay in that business and continue our tradition."

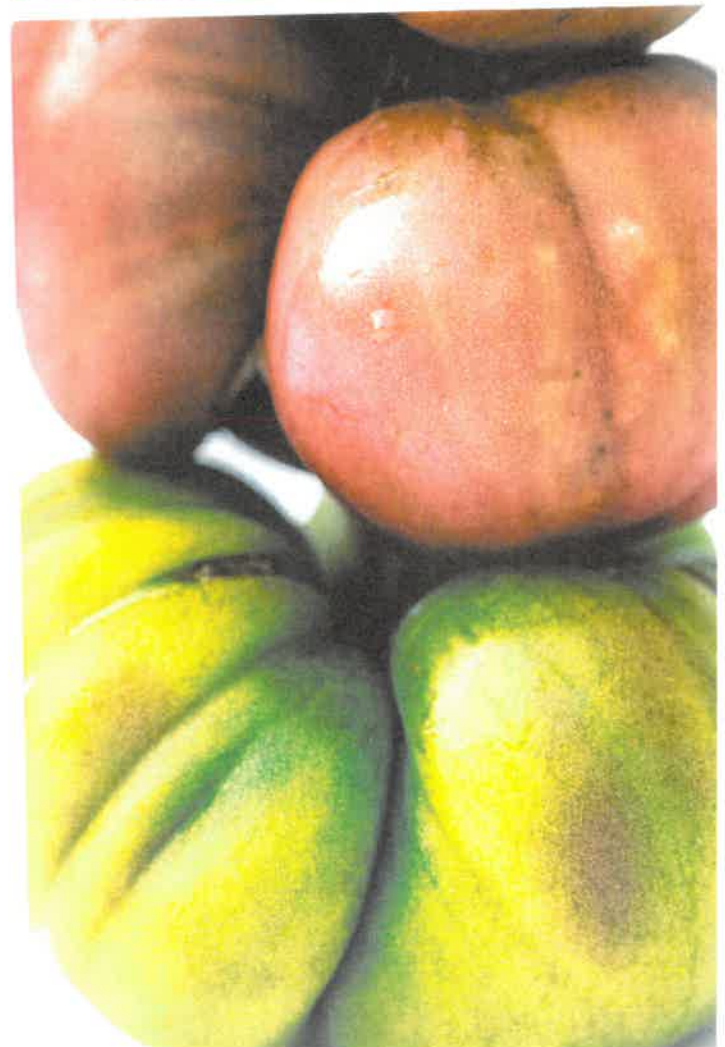
For years, the Mepkin community has had a vegetable garden to provide for their own food needs, but the monks are older now. Their numbers, along with those in monastic communities in general, are dwindling (there are currently 14 Mepkin monks, average age of 77). Just sustaining the mushroom operation is difficult; expanding into growing produce on their own would be impossible.

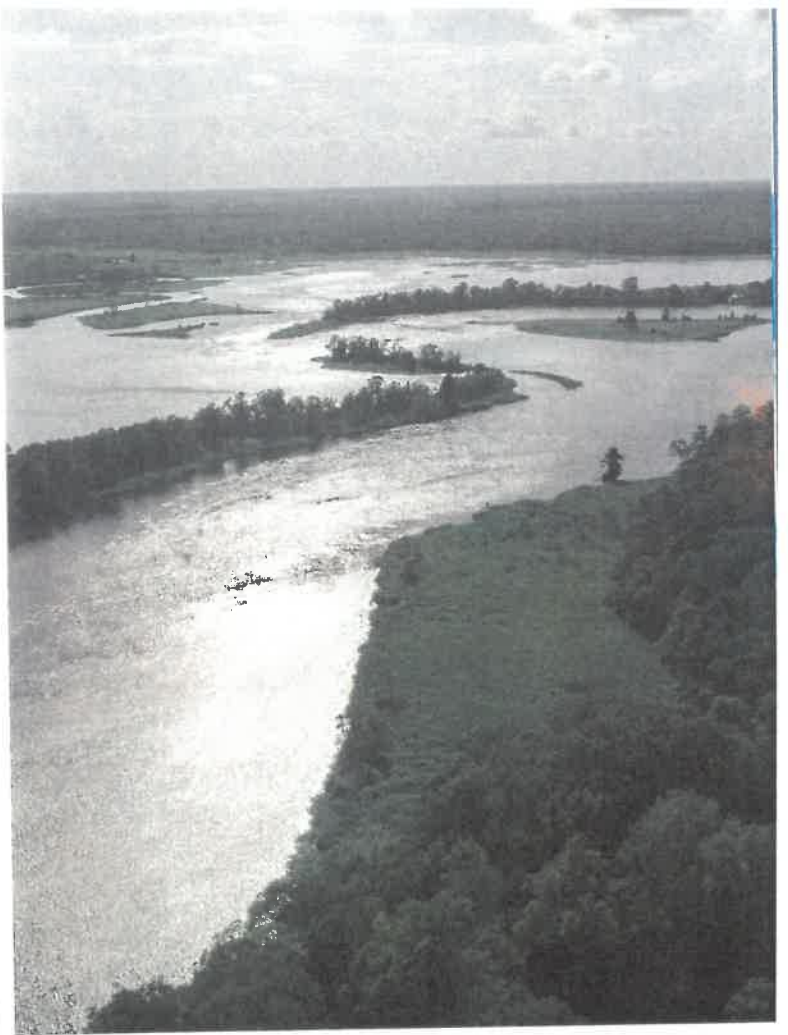
And that's where local farmer Jimmy Livingston, GrowFood Carolina's Anthony Mirisciotta, and the Abbey's new Institute for Regenerative Agriculture come in.

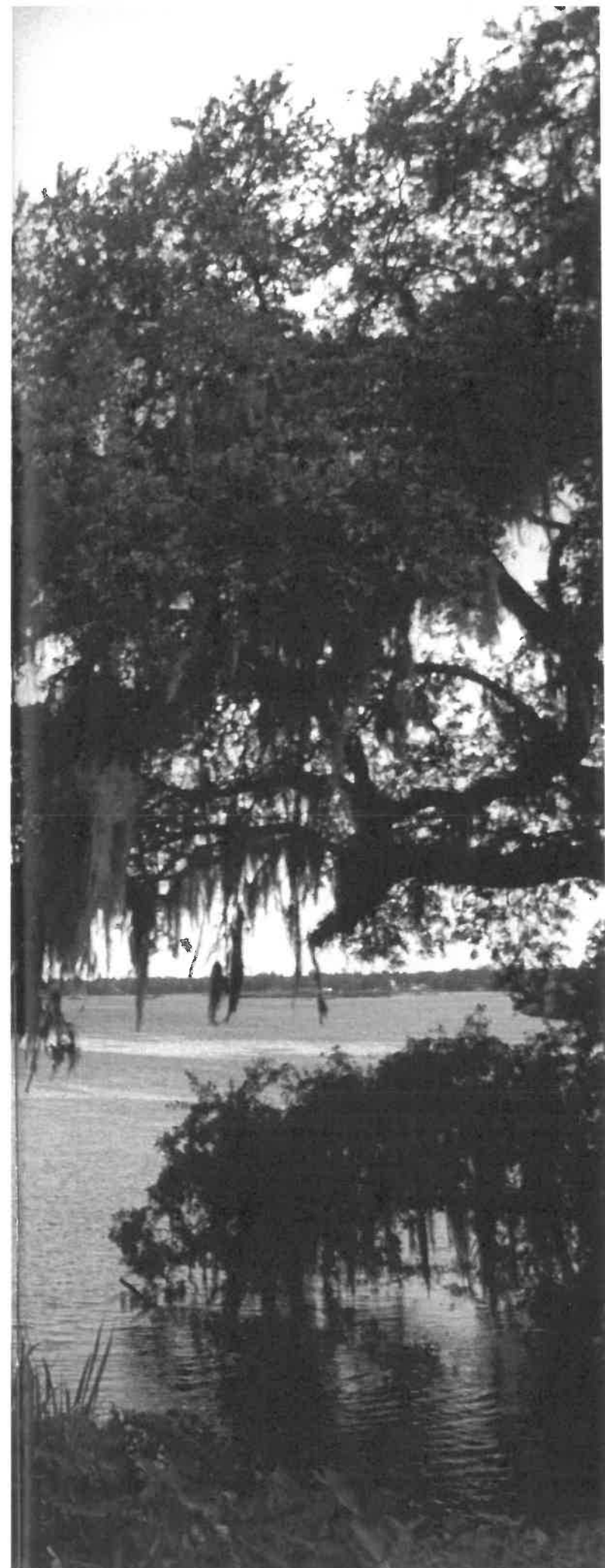
LEAP OF FAITH

Jimmy Livingston lives and farms at Wabi Sabi Farm, a neighboring property just a few miles up the road from Mepkin and the only other farm in this area. When Jimmy's screenprinting business succumbed to the 2008 recession, he and his wife Jo took a leap of faith and shifted to farming—a return to their respective family roots. "We both came from food producing and farming families, Joanna from tobacco farmers and me from commercial fishermen and eel farmers, basically whatever you can harvest from the water," he says. Transitioning from hobby gardening to a commercial farming, however, turned out to be daunting. They started small—planting only a few acres of their 20-acre property—and had good success. But as they grew and diversified their crops, competing against the lower price points of larger scale farms was challenging.

"Your pay does not exponentially go up with exponential growth in farming. You have to work every day as hard as you can work, then in one small storm you can lose everything," Livingston says. But after partnering with GrowFood Carolina, things changed. He







The Abbey sits high on a serene bluff overlooking what once would have been Mepkin Plantation rice fields.

found a reliable market for Wabi Sabi strawberries, eggplant, kale, and squash.

“The team at GrowFood is committed to the success of small farms, and that’s what we are. They’re our kind of people. They could sell stuff that others wouldn’t take, squash blossoms and borage, for example, and get a good price,” he says. “Sara (Clow, the former director) could move it. Everyone there was equally energetic. They were excited to see what you were growing, and got chefs and restaurants excited about it. They advised us on what would be profitable,” Livingston adds. “GrowFood is the reason we could keep our farm. It was powerful.”

FULL CIRCLE

Meanwhile down the road at Mepkin, Father Tedesco and the monks were planting seeds for a new program that would deepen their ties with the land, grow more produce, and also potentially boost and expand their monastic community. Their proposed Institute for Regenerative Agriculture would be a 10-month residential internship opportunity for those interested in deepening their spiritual life while learning how to farm—“Grow Food and Find Your Center” is the tag line. If they could pull it off, it’d be a win-win—introducing men and women to the monastic way of life while also growing new farmers through a comprehensive, hands-on organic small farming curriculum, with support from Clemson University’s Cooperative Extension program. But they needed an experienced local farmer to help them both with their existing mushroom operation and to launch and manage the new Institute.

So Father Tedesco knocked on Jimmy Livingston’s door. After saying yes, Livingston, in turn, reached out to the team at GrowFood to advise and consult on market opportunities and what the Institute farmers should be growing, just as GrowFood advised and supported him at Wabi Sabi.

“The history and the power of the land up at Mepkin has always spoken to me,” says GrowFood Carolina general manager Anthony Mirisciotta. “We are excited about the Institute for Regenerative Agriculture as a way not only to reinvigorate Mepkin Abbey and the land it’s on, but also to continue to elevate the agricultural scene in South Carolina. It aligns directly with

GrowFood's work to make local food systems more resilient," says Mirisciotta. He is particularly excited about Mepkin's opportunity to reintroduce heritage varieties historically tied to monasteries around the world. "That really makes this project special. It's a great way to tell the Abbey's story and connect people to the land and what they're doing up there," he adds.

SPIRITUALITY OF THE EARTH

Connecting people to the land is at the heart of what Mepkin hopes to do. Eventually a Mepkin Farm Stand will help financially support the program, but it's not about profit. It's about "what happens when you get your hands in the dirt," says Father Tedesco. It's about how contemplative monastic practices can deepen one's connection with the land, and how small farms can in turn support more viable local food systems, reconnecting people to fresh food and health. "A spirituality of the earth has a big impact on our life as monks. Working with the earth and healing the environment rejuvenates you, and the spirituality piece gives a deeper reality to that focus," he says.

The Institute for Regenerative Agriculture wel-

comed its first intern farmers this July, though Covid-19 has meant an initial group of four rather than the planned six. They've been working in fields currently planted in a cover crop of sea hemp, an organic way to boost soil nitrogen levels, and prepping greenhouses for starting fall vegetables from seed. Hundreds of pounds of Mepkin's nutrient dense mushroom compost stand at the ready. "The idea of regenerative farming, it's solid, man. When you come out to this beautiful land and separate from outside influences, when you devote yourself to being more reflective and focus on growing things, which requires attention and dedication, it kind of heals you," says Livingston.

Knowing that the GrowFood Carolina team is there offering support gives him assurance. "Anthony is nothing but optimistic," Livingston adds. And optimism goes along way, especially given all the risks in farming. For Mepkin's monks and for Livingston, it's an optimism rooted in faith and in a love of the land. "This is a business of hope," says Livingston, "when you put a seed in the ground, you're looking to the future." ©

A PANDEMIC PIVOT

When restaurants closed, GrowFood found new avenues to distribute fresh, local produce. *by* ADAM FINDEISEN

Charleston's restaurant scene has an international reputation. And GrowFood Carolina has been a part of that. If you've enjoyed a meal from one of the city's innovative chefs, chances are it included local ingredients that came through GrowFood's warehouse.

Last year, 70% of GrowFood's revenues came from restaurant sales. Then the Covid-19 pandemic struck, and that market almost vanished overnight. But GrowFood's mission didn't vanish; in fact, connecting local farmers with local communities became more urgent than ever. Farmers needed

to find new markets for their produce, and the coastal communities where the Conservation League works were gripped by economic crisis and food shortages.

GrowFood's solution? General manager Anthony Mirisciotta and his team got to work getting food directly to the people who needed it. At first that meant packing food boxes for sale directly from the warehouse. Then participating in state and federal programs and working with local partners like the Lowcountry Food Bank to get food boxes directly to communities and people in need.

By summer, GrowFood was back to pre-pandemic distribution levels and this work with local communities has become hardwired into the mission. Its new Soil to Sustenance program is on track to get thousands of food boxes a year to people in need, thanks to generous donors. That helps communities stay healthy, enables farmers to plan for the future and stay on their land, and strengthens local food supply chains. This in turn will boost Charleston's struggling restaurants and help ensure foodies keep coming back for second helpings.