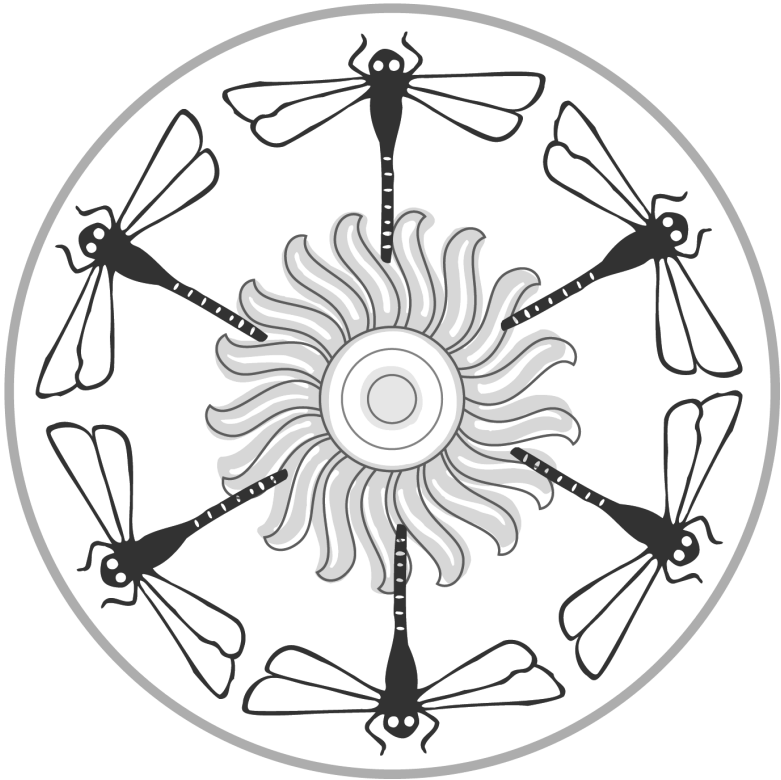


# **Our Community Voices: Food, Health, and Resiliency**



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As a new-comer to the North Quabbin region and Seeds of Solidarity family, I thought the best way to get to know people and this community was through conversations and stories. Stories are one way that people express what is meaningful to them and what has made an impact on their lives, and members of this community certainly have compelling, inspiring, and thought-provoking stories to tell. Through hours of interviewing, emailing, phone calling, editing, and visiting, this booklet is a compilation of voices who are involved with Seeds of Solidarity programs. Despite ever-present rural isolation, health, and economic challenges, members of this community have found a way of pulling together their resources and each other to respond to these issues.

The people who generously gave their time to share their stories are all involved in the programs of Seeds of Solidarity Education Center in Orange, Massachusetts. As a strong community-rooted organization in the North Quabbin region, Seeds of Solidarity envisions, creates and sustains initiatives that foster health, food justice, and energy resiliency. Those interviewed for 'Our Community Voices' participate in the organization's programs including SOL (Seeds of Leadership) Garden for local youth and Grow Food Everywhere for Health and Justice that creates abundant gardens for struggling families and throughout the community.

Never did I imagine that this project, which started as an internship as I work toward a Master of Science degree in environmental education at Antioch University New England, would have an even more profound impact on my own perspectives of community, food justice, and resiliency. Collaboration with Seeds of Solidarity staff and conversations with the many wonderful people who shared their successes, challenges, and visions for a more food resilient community has renewed my faith in people's abilities to genuinely care for others and to find ways of making things happen. I hope that

the following pages help rejuvenate your faith in humanity as well, but perhaps it is really just a matter of getting out in the community and really exploring the good work that people are doing. Thank you for reading, and enjoy the recipes submitted by Seeds of Solidarity and other community members along with the stories!

--Youn Han, Seeds of Solidarity Intern 2012

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## Growth

When she adopted the Grow Food Everywhere garden from a friend, who originally applied to the program but needed to suddenly move from their shared apartment building, Felicia never imagined that her experiences with vegetables would help her grow on a more personal level related to her daughter, creative innovation, and immediate community.

As a single mother to her young daughter Olivia, Felicia is understandably concerned with how she grows up. One main concern is what Olivia eats. “It makes me angry that healthy food is so expensive,” Felicia



sighs, “but I am very appreciative to Seeds of Solidarity” for providing a means of getting healthy food for her daughter. Nowadays, Olivia loves cucumbers, and “she eats lettuce with everything!” Although Felicia still has to buy some produce at the local grocery store, she loves going out into the garden and picking an organic salad straight from her own backyard, and she enjoys sharing this experience with Olivia. Likewise, Felicia’s neighbor, Leah, also incorporates vegetables from garden into her toddler son’s diet. “He’ll eat anything!” Leah laughs as Bradley even tries to eat a straw as he plays with it. The two moms are extremely grateful for not only having access to fresh vegetables in their backyard, but also for having fresh and healthy foods be a more present figure for their kids as they grow up.

As most parents experience, sometimes introducing a new vegetable to a finicky child can be a challenge. Felicia, however, embraces the challenge and takes the opportunity to exercise her creativity. Having different vegetables in the garden at different times throughout the growing seasons refreshes her sense of originality, novelty, and creativity as she experiments with new ingredients and new ways of cooking. “I probably would have never cooked with kale if it wasn’t in the garden,” Felicia admits, but now kale has a regular spot in the repertoire of ingredients. Recently, she has found sautéing eggplants with spaghetti to be a big hit with the kids and neighbors.

Creativity doesn’t stop in the kitchen. When the garden was first put into their house, it had a spot next to the front door. Since then, they moved the garden into the backyard and even added a “greenhouse” of sorts. Felicia, Leah, and Sheila, Leah’s mother, revamped an old shed by adding recycled windows to enable the garden to grow and stay warm for as long as possible. And the vegetables are thriving! All the materials used to revitalize the shack were found on Freecycle.com or Craig’s List, and some are used in innovative ways. For example, the bottom runners used to slide open the door are old bed frames; a creative way of re-using old materials for new purposes. They share garden responsibilities, new recipes, and even meals together on the little table next to the garden.

The garden as a whole is a testament to how neighbors Felicia, Leah, and Sheila banded together to transform a small garden bed into a beautiful healthy garden with greenhouse that contributes to their families’ health and solidarity. It is Felicia’s hope that more gardens can be made with a similar sense of sharing and community, just as the women in this corner of the neighborhood have.

As North Quabbin residents think and work innovatively with their resources and each other, they achieve growth on various levels. Small family units, such as Felicia's, invest in themselves while gaining the tools and experience to expand their successes to their communities.

### **Community Growth**

To see snap peas trellising and cucumbers sprawling is every gardener's pride and joy in knowing that their garden is growing. For garden enthusiasts and Orange Innovation Center (OIC) founders Noel Vincent and Zita Rasid, growth in the three garden beds at the OIC represents something much more than just healthy and delicious vegetables. Working with Seeds of Solidarity to design and install the gardens at the OIC was just one step in a much larger movement to help the community of the North Quabbin region grow in a sustainable way.

Through efforts of various passionate people and non-profit and private organizations, the North Quabbin region has extreme potential to grow into what Noel and Zita call a place for a "better life." It is their (and others like them) vision to make Orange and the surrounding towns a destination place of green jobs, a revitalized downtown area, and economic development – all while growing in a sustainable and environmentally-friendly way. Noel was inspired by a little country store in Harrisville, NH, that best resembled a community's ability to take back their economic and political future, and he strongly believes that the people of Orange are



fully capable of using what resources are available locally to fulfill this vision. Even the OIC itself is an example of creative solutions. The building, initially the Minute Tapioca Factory and later The Bedroom Factory that produced handcrafted furniture, is now being re-used as working space for entrepreneurs and social service agencies. The OIC is an incubator and center of talent and innovation: in it one can find local artists, the North Quabbin Community Co-op, a delicious café, yoga space, and even a gym.

Outside groups like the national Sustainable Design Assessment Team (SDAT), led a process of which the OIC, Seeds of Solidarity, and other dedicated community members were a part. The SDAT historians, architects and engineers recognized the potential of these old factories and the historic and natural features of the region, including the river and trains that run through it as well as the wealth of skills among the residents.

In addition to the gardens, another collaboration between Seeds of Solidarity and the OIC, the annual North Quabbin Food Forum, demonstrates a way to highlight the community and cultural knowledge.



Held in the spacious community meeting room at the OIC, residents unite each February to share food, agriculture and land-use knowledge, and create a stronger,

more food resilient region through sharing resources, bartering and strategizing for real needs. A Grow Food Everywhere workshop at the 2012 Food Forum, which was co-taught by

some of the low income families involved in the project, helped launch enthusiasm for the three garden beds later implemented on Earth Day with over 25 community members helping to haul compost and plant peas and broccoli. Noel embraces these gardens for their piece in “creating a better life for people.” Three of the tenants at the OIC—members of the North Quabbin Community Co-op, CHD (a social service agency), and Pat Conrad (an avid gardener employed in her daughter’s business that rents a space in the building) -- serve as garden stewards who each tend to one of the beds and share watering, caring for, and observations of the garden. In addition to creating a welcome and vibrant entry to the converted factory building, each week they harvest fresh vegetables from the garden for donation to the Orange Food Pantry. The vegetables add fresh food to the boxes that families rely on, reports Food Pantry director, Amy Clarke.

Caring business people, like Noel and Zita, and community rooted organizations that work closely together, combined with meaningful businesses, jobs, and creative use of the natural and human resources of the region are interlocking pieces to creating a stronger and revitalized community.



## Squash Fritters

### Ingredients

3 medium zucchini      6 sprigs of Italian parsley, chopped  
3 eggs      Salt and pepper      Vegetable Oil  
Pancake mix      ¼ cup of Parmesan cheese, grated

### Directions

Wash and scrape the zucchini or squash and grate into a bowl.  
Sprinkle with salt and let stand 15 minutes.

Squeeze out the water and drain.

Add enough pancake flour to absorb any remaining moisture.

Beat the eggs and add chopped parsley, cheese, and pepper.

Add egg mixture to zucchini mixture.

Stir until well-mixed.

Add oil to frying pan, about ¼ inches in depth.

Spoon batter into pan.

Cook until golden brown on both sides, adding oil as needed.

Remove each fritter with a slotted spoon and drain on paper  
towel.

## Access, Health, and Education

Along the entrance to the Desmond Callan Community Health Center, five Seeds of Solidarity Grow Food Everywhere wellness garden beds greet visitors with splashes of color as the vegetables and flowers develop throughout the growing season. Some of the vegetables are unfamiliar and somewhat intimidating while others are well-known and are harvested with vigor and enthusiasm. All that grows in the garden, however, offer visitors to the community health center benefits

that may help with whatever ails them. It starts with educating people about the way they eat and opening access to foods that are beneficial to their health.



Mary Sieruta, the registered dietitian at the health center, has such a goal in mind. She and other practitioners promote the gardens as a resource for visitors to explore with different vegetables at no-cost and no-risk. Everything growing in the garden is free to the public and there are even harvest kits available at the front lobby to make access to healthy vegetables easier. Diverse vegetables, herbs, and flowers flourish at various points throughout the growing season, and there is always something growing and thriving in the garden that can meet a patient's need. To model four season growing, some of the beds are covered with a mini-hoophouse during fall, winter and early spring to keep fresh greens growing year round.

Through Mary's practice as a registered dietician, she educates clients about the benefits of eating certain vegetables as not only a prevention method to disease and illness, but also as a healing factor. It is her hope that people will be more aware of the benefits of eating healthy and the high versatility of what foods are actually out there. However, "education only goes so far," Mary acknowledges, and



"sometimes the challenge is just trying [new vegetables]," which some people are reluctant to do. True, a purple vegetable can be daunting for people who aren't familiar with it, but with education about the health benefits combined with easy access to it, can make the benefits of trying new vegetables outweigh the anxiety. Some of Mary's most rewarding moments have been introducing a new vegetable to a patient and seeing the patient love it; "I was happy at the prospect of our patients eating more vegetables and perhaps less Pop Tarts." Mary and other practitioners sometimes bring patients out to the gardens and guide them through the bountiful healthy options that the vegetables provide, "[taking] them out to the gardens with a bag, and off they'd go."

Likewise, at Ralph C. Mahar Regional School, Sandy Vorce, a middle school English



teacher, finds that exposing her students to the garden and the process of growing their own food encourages them to eat healthier. “Some of the students wouldn’t touch a vegetable unless it was doused in ranch dressing, but once they were cutting it and harvesting it, they were more willing to try it.” Also, once students were exposed to the garden through curriculum work during class, they became more invested in the garden’s well-being as they progressed through high school. In Sandy’s classes, she tries to integrate time in the garden with writing, such as compare and contrast exercises (comparing the actual steps they took to plant seeds versus what they wanted to do) and reflections on team-building. Other staff members at Mahar also attempt to integrate the garden into class work, and Sandy often hears feedback from parents and bus drivers about “how nice the garden is!” Though the garden is pleasing to look at and encourages healthier eating, Sandy has also noted that work in the garden helps bring out the talents of students who usually do not thrive in the classroom. “Kids who didn’t always excel in the classroom were able to get out there and really excel at building and growing... It gave them the opportunity to teach and help others.” It is Sandy’s hope that more community gardens will find a place in community spaces, as it affords opportunities for kids to get outside more and start a ripple effect of change with their friends, family, and neighbors.



For an economically challenged community, having access to healthy foods is very beneficial to the community’s health and income choices. Eating healthy and stretching the food budget can be in conflict

for low-income families challenged to feed hungry mouths. The gardens that grow from Seeds of Solidarity’s Grow Food

Everywhere program seek to remedy this unjust dilemma and demonstrate that fresh food can be available throughout all of our communities and available to all as part of local food resiliency and community health. Gardens in public and community spaces like the one at the Desmond Callan Health Center, Ralph C. Mahar Regional School, libraries, childcare and parenting centers, and businesses such as the Orange Innovation Center that provides food to the local food pantry, nourish those in need in a community, teach skills for growing and enjoying fresh food, and create beauty and a healthier, more-informed community. As Mary sums, the gardens “show the community that we care about them... [that] we’re in it together.”

## **Kale Soup**

### Ingredients

3 garlic cloves, minced   1 large onion, chopped   3 tablespoons olive oil   6 cups vegetable or chicken stock   2 cups finely chopped or pureed tomatoes   1 bunch shredded kale  
1 cup cannellini (white kidney) beans   Parmesan cheese  
Salt, pepper, and herbs, to taste

### Directions

Saute garlic and onion in oil until translucent.  
Add stock and tomatoes.  
Heat to boiling.  
Add kale and cook on medium heat for about 20 minutes.  
Add cooked beans and heat.  
Sprinkle Parmesan on top when serving.

## Support and Appreciation

Even though senior citizen, Roberta “Polly” Muglia, enjoys the half hour “country ride” from her neighboring town of Athol to Seeds of Solidarity in Orange every Thursday, she does not do it for the scenic farmland landscapes or even for the joy of seeing the SOL Garden youth program ending their day on the farm. She mainly does it for her fellow senior citizens; picking up their donated bags of fresh vegetables in an effort to cut down on the financial burden that buying gas creates and to support other low income seniors in adding fresh food to their diets. Polly recognizes a need for the seniors at the Athol Senior Center to “work together as a community so not all people have to drive all the way” to Seeds of Solidarity every week. It is her way of supporting others’ needs and creating a greater sense of community and aid. In turn, the seniors are greatly appreciative to both Polly and Seeds of Solidarity for their contributions and considerations.

Every Thursday, Athol Senior Center senior citizens along with others from the region who meet certain financial requirements, receive a share of fresh vegetables from the Seeds of Solidarity gardens. The ‘Senior FarmShare’ program is funded through a partner organization known as CISA (Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture) that subsidizes farmers to provide fresh food to elders throughout Western Massachusetts. At Seeds of Solidarity, the farm contributes some, as do the youth in SOL Garden who then pack 24 bags a week brimming with kale, tomatoes, fresh herbs and more, plus recipes to inspire use and provide nutritional information. The vegetables vary from week to week, and Polly says that the recipients are very thankful and get very excited to see what vegetables have been included in each week’s share. “The people do appreciate it!” Polly laughs. Though Polly also joins in the thrill of peeking into the farm share bags, she begets greater delight from knowing that she is doing her part.





Though she jokes that she inherited the “doing something good” gene from her religious background, Polly’s giving nature is infectious among others in the community. People have found means to support one another in other charitable

ways. “Sometimes the bags are too much for just one person,” Polly recalls, “but I haven’t heard of anything go to waste.” Seniors will trade vegetables among each other for more favored crops in an effort to cut down on what eventually ends up in the trash or compost. Dorothy Forster, another elder and a neighbor of Seeds of Solidarity, has taken on a similar role of transporting weekly Senior Farmshare bags to elders in need, and notes that they enjoy the visit, a break from the alienation that elders living alone can experience, and opportunity to chat while receiving their weekly vegetables. Through healthy foods, people in the community are showing each other that they care, and economic, health, and social needs will not go unrecognized for as long as others are able to help care for their neighbors while adding a spark of service and socializing to their own day.

Though these examples of goodwill and charity are subtle, they do not go undetected and unrecognized. Polly makes sure to thank the Deb, Ricky, and the staff and youth of Seeds of Solidarity each week on behalf of the seniors and others who may benefit from the Senior Farmshare program. Be it through a senior farm share recipient, Grow Food Everywhere family or community participant, appreciation goes beyond just receiving a freshly picked cherry tomato or plump summer squash. People are grateful that others care about their needs and are ready to help.

## Spinach Basil Quiche

### Ingredients

1 - 1½ cups chopped spinach	1 tablespoon herb butter
1/3 cup chopped onion	1 – 1½ whole milk
3 eggs	1/8 teaspoon black pepper
1 cup ricotta cheese	¼ cup Parmesan cheese
1 tablespoon fresh basil	2 cups cooked brown rice

### Directions

Press rice in greased 8 x 8 pan.  
Saute spinach, herb butter, and onion.  
Add remaining ingredients and heat to near boil.  
Pour over rice and bake at 425 degrees for 35 minutes.

## SAFETY AND KINSHIP

It is an unusually sweltering summer afternoon in Orange, Massachusetts, and Seeds of Solidarity is teeming with teens weeding, watering, and working on other garden-related projects. There appears to be no immediate pay-out to sweating away in the hot sun, and some of the projects, like bug-squishing, can hardly be called fun – so why are these teens dutifully spending their Thursdays here?



For many of the 25 local youth that join each April and participate in the weekly program, coming to SOL (Seeds of Leadership) Garden at Seeds at Solidarity provides many skills and values that aren't easily found elsewhere.



Phil, a graphic designer and former SOL Gardener, calls the program “the class that should be taught at school but isn’t.” While the youth participants gain technical gardening skills by working on the farm, SOL Garden staff facilitates ample activities and discussions related to food justice issues, health and environmental awareness. Many of the teens come away from the program having a greater appreciation for food and health as a result of growing their own food and being more mindful of where their food came from. Chris, for example, thinks more about how his food tastes, its origins, and the role that corporations may have had in putting the food on his plate.

Though some of the facilitated discussions and informal conversations in the garden can touch on controversial topics at times, the SOL Gardeners express feeling comfortable speaking their mind and do not fear that they will be judged or suffer repercussions. Despite the great amount of diversity of thought, ethnicity, and experience on the farm, the teens know that SOL Garden is a safe, open, and positive environment to grow, learn, build skills, and most important of all, be themselves. It is through this environment that many SOL Gardeners have been able to overcome their own personal challenges and reach new levels in their abilities.



When Zabien first started coming to Sol Garden in 2008, he was extremely shy. Once he realized that SOL Garden is a place of “no judgment,” he got more comfortable. Now Zabien is always one of the first to volunteer to give new visitors a tour of the farm and speak his mind about an issue. Megan as well has found her voice at SOL Garden and now she proudly reflects that she “speaks up more” and “reaches out more.”

Cody finds a change in societal attitude while in the garden. Negativity in the outside world affected Cody’s patterns of thought regarding other people’s intentions and being. At SOL Garden, a place that he describes as a medium of love and acceptance, Cody has learned to think more positively.

By respecting each other and the open environment of SOL Garden, young people are able to enjoy spending time with each other while doing new and different projects. “It’s amazingly fun!” Zabien declares.

As well, the teens are strongly supported by the staff members and encouraged to take more leadership with projects and in their community as a whole. In turn, they feel more empowered that they have an ability to create real change in their community, and to turn an idea into reality. Zabien feels more empowered to take on challenges and has high ambitions for his future. After



college, he wants to “come back as a doctor” and help change the way people regard Orange. “By the time I’m a doctor, I believe [my high school] will be run-down, and I will donate lots of money to fixing things.” He wants Orange to be a town well-known for peace and caring – the same values and aspirations he finds at SOL Garden.

As the youth grow and become influential members of the community, they know that when the going gets tough and they need a place to rejuvenate their inspirations, SOL Garden will always be there. Now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year, SOL Garden continues to help young people develop into strong, well-informed, and competent members of society, who used their time at SOL to heal and grow with the garden.

## **Cucumber Raita**

### Ingredients

2 cucumbers      2 cups plain yogurt      1 tablespoon finely  
chopped mint or dill  
Dash of lemon juice      Salt and pepper, to taste

### Directions

Peel and chop cucumbers.  
Mix with yogurt, mint or dill, and lemon juice.  
Add salt and pepper to taste.

## Legacy

Thousands of miles away from her familiar SOL (Seeds of Leadership) Garden, Michelle Bezio entered into a brand new world in 2009 after graduating from high school: college. At Unity College, she is confronted with a whole new set of life-changing choices that many newly matriculated college students must face – what should I major in? Should I take on unsubsidized loans? Do I really want to take calculus at 8:00 am?

However, Michelle, in addition, has another very different set of questions to face that many college students do not – how will I implement what I have learned during my experience at SOL Garden? Though Unity College shares many of the same qualities that Michelle had valued at SOL Garden, Seeds of Solidarity's flagship program for North Quabbin youth, she still faces tests to living a completely healthy, sustainable, and environmentally-friendly life. Sometimes “real life makes it difficult to make healthy choices... [and] being at school you don't have much choice in food,” Michelle concedes. Fried and processed foods are the norm in many college kitchens, and even for a now health-conscious person like Michelle, McDonalds is tempting. “[It's] is a guilty pleasure of mine,” Michelle abashedly admits.



For what food follies Michelle may admit, however, she counterbalances them with her achievements and goals. Michelle and her fiancée, Phil LaLonde say that one of the things they enjoyed most out of SOL Garden are the lessons

they can take away and use afterwards: leadership skills, tolerance and understanding, community, and hard work. Both of these former SOL Gardeners have found ways to take these lessons into their communities and work.

Michelle, a regular recycler, takes recycling a step further and finds it very difficult to get rid of cardboard. “I want to use it in the garden!” she laughs, referring to co-founder of Seeds of Solidarity, Rick Baruc’s, innovative no-till, cardboard method of gardening. Both Michelle and Phil volunteer at the North Quabbin Garlic and Arts Festival every year, and help recruit and spread the word about the SOL Garden program to new participants. They have also helped their friends and families start their own gardens at home and serve as a sounding board to provide them with logistical gardening solutions.

Beyond gardens at home, Michelle has worked toward making gardens and healthy food a more public presence within the community. Michelle and Candy Cross, the children’s librarian at Orange Public Library, started a garden at the public library for people to visit and children to learn more about growing food. Several raised beds host an array of kid-friendly crops like peas and cherry tomatoes tended by the weekly pre-school story group. Chairs nested under towering sunflowers encourage outdoor reading too! Every year, the first seedlings are planted on Earth Day, and as the seedlings grow and produce fruits and vegetables, Candy runs children’s programs, such as Rise and Read and Mother Goose, throughout the spring and summer using the garden as a learning tool. Nearby, two abundant raised beds planted as part of Seeds of Solidarity’s Grow Food Everywhere project provide adults with benches adorned with words from poets Cicero and HaLevi for a more contemplative experience. When Michelle is in Orange, she helps maintain the gardens by weeding, water, and providing general maintenance. Both Candy and Michelle, however, have found their work with the children to be the most satisfying part of their hard work.

Michelle recounts a time when she “once showed a five-year-old a cherry tomato picked from the garden... He couldn’t believe that tomato came from the ground and was amazed!” Candy as well remembers a time when she connected with a young child by picking fresh kale and eating it straight from the garden!

Now engaged to be married and preparing for the rest of what life may bring them, Michelle and Phil have high hopes for their community and their future together as SOL Garden graduates. They hope that people will learn to grow their own food, and in the process, cultivate a desire to learn, and care for the community, family and other loved ones. In Michelle and Phil the legacy of SOL Garden lives on, and though “life gets in the way,” Michelle and other SOL Gardeners alike find ways to share their knowledge with the rest of the world as they live and grow.

## **SOL Pesto**

### Ingredients

2 cups of fresh basil leaves    1/3 cup walnuts or pine nuts  
2 peeled cloves of garlic  
½ cup grated parmesan or romano cheese  
½ cup extra virgin olive oil    Salt and pepper to taste

### Directions

Add all ingredients to a food processor.  
Process to a rough paste.  
Toss with cooked pasta or serve as a dipping sauce.