The land surface of the United States covers 2.3 billion acres. Sixty percent (1.4 billion acres) is privately owned, 29 percent is owned by the Federal Government, 9 percent is owned by State and local governments, and 2 percent is in Tribal reservations. Virtually all cropland is privately owned, as is over half of grassland pasture and range and forestland. Federal, State, and local government holdings consist primarily of forestland, rangeland, and other land.

Historic Land Ownership Patterns

Land ownership patterns changed substantially in the first century after U.S. independence. Between 1781 and 1867, through purchase, cession, and treaty, the Federal Government acquired lands totaling 80 percent of current U.S. area, constituting the original “public domain.”

As of 1998, 1.1 billion acres of the original public domain (about half of the total U.S. area) had been granted or sold by the Federal Government to States, corporations, and individuals. Grants to States totaled 329 million acres, including 65 million acres of wetlands granted on condition that proceeds from their subsequent sale to individuals be used to convert those acres to agricultural production. Another 288 million acres were granted or sold directly to homesteaders on condition that the land be settled and cultivated.

Disposition of Federal lands had slowed by the 1930s, and in 1976 the Federal Land Policy and Management Act explicitly directed that most remaining Federal lands be retained in Federal ownership.

Federal and State Lands Today

Most lands in Federal ownership are managed by four agencies: USDA’s Forest Service, and the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and National Park Service (NPS). Federal lands are concentrated in the West. Alaska alone has about one-third of Federal land. Forest Service and BLM lands are managed for a variety of uses, including grazing, timber harvest, recreation, and wilderness preservation, while FWS and NPS lands are managed primarily for preservation and recreation.

Land Tenure

Leasing land was traditionally viewed as the bottom rung of the tenure ladder. Young farmers would begin their careers by leasing all their land, often from relatives. As they grew older, they would buy some land, but continue to rent. Older farmers would cut back on farming by no longer leasing and concentrate on the land they owned.

Land rental has some advantages over outright ownership. Through land rental, a farmer can access more land without tying up capital in land purchases. The farmer also avoids the risk associated with asset depreciation and maintains flexibility in the size of the operation and the combination of the types of land used.

Facts About Ownership of U.S. Land

The number of farms declined from nearly 7 million in 1935 to about 2 million by 1997, with most of the decline occurring before the 1970s. Although the remaining farms have a higher

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Farming on Public Land
by Jack Kittredge

There was a time in our history when the government gave away land to whomever would farm it. According to the Homestead Act of 1862, if you were 21 or the head of a household and could put down $18, you could claim 160 acres in the West. You had to settle on it and farm it for 5 years, however, before you got final title. The act was not officially repealed until 1976 (ten years later in Alaska), by which time approximately 10% of the country had been given to farmers.

That act, and the political consensus behind it, were based on the belief that a free people, working their own small farms, were fundamental to a free country. Many Americans still feel that way.

Currently, however, our farming numbers have fallen to less than 2% of us, and high land prices bar anyone without significant capital from purchasing farmland. But determined individuals are finding other routes than land ownership to becoming a farmer. One of these is to farm on public land.

Municipal, state, and federal land is increasingly available for lease to farmers. Sometimes this is seen as the highest use of a piece of land. In other cases the primary use is something else, but farming fits as an additional use that provides secondary benefits to the public.

In this issue we explore that option. We look a little at the history of farm land ownership in the United States, analyze the common terms and conditions involved in farming on public land, and meet some of the people involved on both sides of that picture.

Leasing public land for farming has many advantages, including low-cost access and, often, available infrastructure improvements. It also has many constraints, including issues of public perception, lack of needed authority, limited options to expand, and few incentives for investment.

Is this an option for you? Does your community make its land available for farming? Is this a direction you would like to support as a citizen?
average acreage than in the past, most farms today are small, when size is measured in acres or sales. Small family farms currently account for only 32 percent of production, but operate 61 percent of the land used in farming, including large shares of the Nation’s cropland, grazing land, and woodland.

What Is a Farm?

Since 1850, when minimum criteria defining a farm for census purposes were first established, the definition of a farm has changed nine times as the Nation has grown and agricultural production has changed. A farm is currently defined, for statistical purposes, as any place from which $1,000 or more of agricultural products (crops and livestock) were sold or normally would have been sold during the year under consideration.

### Land ownership by farm production region, 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Federal</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Local</th>
<th>Indian</th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td>111.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appalachia</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>111.2</td>
<td>121.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>109.7</td>
<td>123.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta States</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn Belt</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>156.6</td>
<td>164.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake States</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>122.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Plains</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>176.9</td>
<td>194.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Plains</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>199.6</td>
<td>211.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain States</td>
<td>266.6</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>202.3</td>
<td>547.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Coast</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>101.5</td>
<td>203.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total, US</td>
<td>456.0</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>94.2</td>
<td>1,326.5</td>
<td>1,894.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Leased farmland as a percentage of total farmland, 1910-1997

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Access to land is a top challenge for both new and established farmers. Government can play several important roles to address this challenge. One of these roles is as landlord: making public land available for farming.

Farmland is often expensive, tied up by established farms, marginal, or located in more remote areas with less access to markets and farm support services. More and more good land is being converted to non-farming uses. At the same time, more people want to start farming or scale up their operations. Citizens and public officials are engaged in “food systems” as never before. Towns seek to be “farm friendly.” Increasingly, governments recognize the multiple values of farming, including economic development, ecosystem management, community quality of life, and food security.

Why public land for farming?

Greater food self-reliance is a topic of discussion at all levels of government and society. Food Solutions New England, a regional multi-sector food systems network, produced a vision for the future in which 50% of the region’s food would be produced and consumed within the six New England states. In order for our region to achieve this vision—or any that aspires to greater regional food self-reliance—more land must be brought into production.

Who holds the land? Most farmland is in private ownership. This includes individuals, organizations, corporations and institutions. The majority of our farmers are owner-operators, meaning they own the land they farm. But nearly half rent some or all their land from other farmers or from non-farmers. In fact nearly 90% of farm landlords are not farmers. Tenancy is—and has always been—an important tenure option. Nowadays, renting land is often the best or only way for a farmer to start or grow an operation.

What about renting public land? It’s possible! Public land can be federal, state, county or municipal. In this article, the focus is mainly on state and municipal land for farming. But first a word about federal land. Out west, thousands of acres of federal land are leased, mostly for grazing. One of the most creative partnerships between the feds and farmers is at Cuyahoga National Park in Ohio. The Countryside Conservancy manages a farm leasing program by which several farmsteads on parkland are leased long-term. In our region, the federal government is not a big landholder. Closer to home, Minuteman National Historic Park in Concord, MA rents 4 acres of national parkland to First Roots Farm, a CSA.

State land

A study from 1988 showed that at least half of U.S. states make some state-owned land available for agriculture, ranging from a few hundred to many thousands of acres. But not all of this is available to private farmers; some goes to educational and research institutions. Recent research (2015) looked more closely at programs for renting state land in New England. There’s no standard approach. A few states have legislated authority to rent land for agriculture. A few have mandated an inventory of state-owned property, and several have policies and procedures for posting available land, soliciting bids, and selecting farmers; these programs tend to have application forms and lease agreement templates.

For example, Massachusetts has an Executive Order mandating identification of land suitable for farming, mandating inter-agency coordination, and encouraging multi-year uses for agricultural production. The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources manages over 1,300 acres under its state owned farmland licensing program.

New Hampshire commissioned a study to promote leasing state-owned land to beginning farmers. In Connecticut the Agriculture Commissioner is autho-
Benezra developed a program to encourage the use of vacant state-owned land for agricultural purposes. To that end, s/he is mandated to “compile a list” of all vacant state land and to establish a permitting procedure.

Recently, Connecticut’s state legislature conveyed approximately 800 acres of farmland at the Southbury Training School to the Department of Agriculture. The bill protects the land for agricultural use and gives the Commissioner of Agriculture authority to lease parcels ranging between 3 and 70 acres for long-term farming.

In addition to leasing about 500 acres to three farmers, Rhode Island’s Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM, which houses the Division of Agriculture) has long-term leases with two nonprofit organization—one on state parkland—that in turn divide their leased parcel and sub-lease to start-up and other farmers. Several farmers rent land from Southside Community Land Trust which has a master long-term lease from RIDEM for the 50-acre Urban Edge Farm.

State land-renting programs are not without their challenges. Multiple agencies have control over parcels, with different missions and priorities. Coordination among them is difficult. Inventories and assessments are resource-intensive and hard to update. Policy issues abound. Who should manage a land leasing program? What farmers are eligible? What is the application and bid procedure? How are parcels monitored?

**Municipal land**

At the municipal level, towns have a lot of discretion about making town-owned land available for farming. Cities and towns own all kinds of open parcels, from abandoned lots to forests, and there’s often energetic debate over uses—recreation? Water supply? Conservation? Agriculture?

Most often, the agreements are relatively short-term—1-5 years—via a lease or license (see below).

**Urban Edge Farm, Southside Community Land Trust, Cranston, RI**

Farmland rental programs may be administered by various town boards (e.g., conservation commission, parks and recreation, agriculture commission, planning department, select board) with varying degrees of formality.

While there’s no formal database of municipal land for farming, there are a lot of examples. Amherst, MA has been renting land to farmers for over 30 years, and recently created a formal licensing process. Agreements are from 3-10 years on about 60 acres. The conservation commission maintains a website to inform the public on the farmland licensing process. Concord, MA rents 16 properties for farming, mostly under three-year low-fee licenses. Lincoln, MA has a nine-page farm policy for land renting that mandates a farm plan, and conducts a formal RFP process for license selection.

In 2009, Norwell, MA Town Meeting voted to fund the startup of a Community Supported Agriculture program (CSA) on town land. The town selected Southbury Training School CT; farm parcels for rent

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about 7 acres of a town-owned historic farmstead for the CSA farm under a 3-year renewable license. In 2004 Deerfield Farm began renting 60 acres of land and a dairy barn owned by the town of Durham, CT. According to Deerfield Farm, which processes its milk onsite, “without the ability to lease the land from Durham, we would not have been able to buy land and grow this farm business; the land is crucial to our farm’s viability.”

Wallingford, CT leases a total of 385 acres on 35 fields through a Farmland Lease Program Committee, a subcommittee of the Conservation Commission, whose duties include recommendations on land use and evaluation of bids for leasing. Certain farming practices are required. Glastonbury’s Office of Parks and Recreation leases 180 acres on six fields. The town posts an RFP to lease farmland, and a site visit is scheduled for interested parties to inspect the premises prior to submitting a proposal.

The City of Providence, RI merits special recognition for its Lots of Hope urban agriculture initiative which “transforms unused city property into productive urban farms for use by limited resource and socially disadvantaged urban farmers. Lots of Hope seeks to improve access to locally grown produce in Providence markets, expand the City’s portfolio of green space, and contribute to improvements in air quality, public health, and local property values.”

Providence undertook a comprehensive inventory and assessment of vacant city-owned property that might be used for agriculture. City staff and partners developed criteria to identify and evaluate properties, and a process to promote agriculture on suitable parcels. A detailed report shows the results, broken out by neighborhoods. To date, the City has 5-year leases with nonprofits that are required to sublease to urban farmers at a low cost.

Practicalities of farming on public land
Farming on public land is not for everyone. But for farmers who want the flexibility and affordability of renting land, see value in community relations that farming on public land can offer, and have adequate patience and interpersonal skills to navigate more bureaucracy than would be involved with private leasing, public land can be a great deal. What to consider and what to look out for? Here are some tips that generally apply to state, county and municipal properties.

What’s the agreement?
Public land is let out via a lease or a license. A lease is an actual legal interest in land. A license is permission to use the land. The difference is not insignificant. Many public entities use licenses because they do not confer an interest in real estate that is owned by the government. They are easier to revoke, too. The actual provisions in a lease or license are similar.

Who’s the landlord?
Usually, the landlord is a government entity. It could be an agency within state government. Sometimes one agency might have care and control of a property, but another agency has authority to run a leasing program for that parcel. At the local level, the legal party could be a town board, or the Board of Selectmen, or another unit of government.

Sometimes the public entity leases to an organization which in turn sub-leases to private farmers or community gardeners. In Rhode Island, Southside Community Land Trust (above) is an example. The New England Small Farm Institute is a nonprofit organization that has a long-term lease from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for 416 acres of a former institutional farmstead. In turn, it rents parcels and buildings to small-scale farmers. Any sublease from an organization must be consistent with the master lease with the landholding entity. So, for example, if the master lease is for a 5-year term, a sublease could not be for a term longer than that. And if you came onto the property in Year 3, you might only be guaranteed two more years. So it’s crucial to inspect all pertaining legal documents.

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What’s the process? Government entities must be rigorous about uses of public property. Fairness in the selection process is one of the challenges that officials cite. Often, the authority will release a Request for Proposals (or equivalent term). It should spell out what is being offered and the process and basis for selection. Sometimes a site visit is scheduled; it’s always a good idea to see the property and meet the responsible party. The RFP should guide your application. Using government land requires more formality than agreements with private landowners. Transparency is key. There can be snags. An established farmer leasing land for 20 years from the town of Pomfret, CT lost his lease to another farmer when his lease expired. According to the farmer, this was unexpected.

The premises, practices and uses As with all farm leases, both parties need to be very clear about what is being rented. Where are the boundaries? Is there any infrastructure? What is the “baseline condition” of the parcel? What are any use restrictions or requirements? For example, public access is sometimes required, but not typically. Farming on public land does not automatically mean the public can go onto your rented land. Are there historic or conservation values that must be considered? Is visual appearance a factor? Sometimes specific practices or production regimes are specified or preferred. Organic and “sustainable” are most frequently cited; make sure that both parties are clear about what these terms mean. Is signage allowed? Parking? Storing machinery? Does the town or state reserve any rights?

One of the biggest considerations for a farmer on public land is around improvements. But this can be an issue on rented private land, too. Typically, there are few if any structures on rented public land because improvements are clear about what these terms mean. Is signage allowed? Parking? Storing machinery? Does the town or state reserve any rights?

The term Most leases or licenses on public land are short-term—one to five years. Some states have statutory limitations on the length of an agreement, and procedures for renewal. For example, a license can be for five years with the option to renew for another five years. After that it must go out to bid again, but that doesn’t mean that the same farmer is prohibited from re-bidding the parcel. There are instances of long-term agreements on public land where regulations do not prohibit them. Ask to see the rules or guidelines, or check with a legal expert to clarify what’s possible.

Fees Rent and other fees for public farmland range widely from nominal to market rates for comparable parcels. States and towns consider many factors in determining the “consideration.” Governments are rightfully sensitive about fairness. They want to avoid any appearance of favoritism. This can be an issue if it looks like farmers on public land are getting a “better deal” or when the selection process appears to favor certain producers. On the other hand, a few public entities expressly intend to give preferential opportunities to new farmers or immigrant farmers, for example. Sometimes farmers can pay non-cash consideration. For example, providing a service such as maintaining open or riparian areas, or trails. A frequent in kind fee is leaving a portion of the harvest for wildlife. While attracting wildlife onto farmland is not for every circumstance, conservation agency landlords are particularly interested in this kind of exchange.

Liability Everyone is concerned about liability. Farming on public land might seem like an especially risky endeavor. But the risk management strategies are not very different whether you are renting from a public or private entity. Most landlords, including states and municipalities require their farming tenants to carry liability insurance and to name the landlord as additional insured. Public entities will likely require the tenant to indemnify them as landlord. State governments are typically self-insured.

Monitoring and communications When you rent from the government, you can’t knock on your landlord’s back door to check in or ask a question. Communications with government landlords are more formal and time-consuming. Officials cite lack of time to manage leasing programs as a major challenge. There’s staff turnover. Sometimes permissions have to wind their way through multiple entities or levels. Anticipate this in your planning so you won’t get frustrated if the turn-around takes longer than you’d like. You can expect periodic monitoring, but how that monitoring is implemented varies greatly. State-level personnel might not be in touch very often, while at the town level, local officials might drive by frequently. You have a right to “quiet enjoyment” on your rented parcel, but you should also be comfortable with the reality that you are on public land.

Communications are important in any user-owner relationship. Be clear about what needs to be in writing, and what you need to submit as a report or annual plan. In fact, annual plans—whether required or not—are an excellent tool to connect with your government landlord.

Resources To learn more about farming on public land, or about leasing farmland in general, check these resources:

• Minuteman Area Comprehensive Agricultural Planning Program report at: <http://www.mapc.org/sites/default/files/MAGIC_ag_report_1-21-14.pdf> details work with 13 eastern Massachusetts communities to increase the viability of farming. It includes chapters on land tenure and access, farm succession planning, and communications. It includes chapters on land tenure and access, farm succession planning, and communications.

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Growing on City Land in the State’s Poorest City

by Jack Kittredge

Lawrence, Massachusetts, called “The City of the Damned” in a 2012 Boston Magazine feature, has seen some hard times. According to 2014 data the national median number of violent crimes per 1000 residents is 3.8 and the Massachusetts rate is 3.9. Lawrence comes in at 11.1. It is also the state’s poorest city (per capita income less than $17,000 per year), has the highest unemployment rate (over twice the state as a whole) and has been poorly served by the wealth they created, left the region and the country.

In 1999 a group of Lawrence business people, joined by the city administration itself and the National Park Service, initiated a feasibility study. They were anxious to improve the living conditions in Lawrence. The purpose of the study was to see if a model of community organization that had been successful in England for 30 years might work here. The model, called Groundwork, calls for local grassroots efforts to first establish the specific needs of the community. An organizer will go into the community and find out what residents believe are its needs, what organizations are already there, which are not, who is available to them, and if the Groundwork model is the right one.

The community votes on whether the model makes sense. If they vote yes, that decision goes up to the national Groundwork organization. The board will review it and if it seems like a good fit makes sense. If they vote yes, that decision goes up to the national Groundwork organization. The board will review it and if it seems like a good fit, they will accept that community into the national network. Then the local community goes through a launching strategy to kick off activities, moves into incorporating and builds a non-profit 501(c)3.

Currently there are 22 local Groundwork organizations throughout the US. Many work...
on programs like cleaning up brownfield areas, establishing green zones or corridors in a city, or working with urban youth to raise fresh and healthy food.

Groundwork Lawrence has done most of those. I visited them in January of 2016 to find out what they were doing and what sort of success they were having getting people to raise food on municipal land.

“We started with our first community garden,” says community engagement director Lesly Medina, “which was in an alleyway that the city allowed us to develop. The Alleyway is a passageway between a number of the three-decker houses in one of the densest parts of the city. It was dirt and hadn’t been paved. It was used for access to the back of homes. We created a garden there.”

Another project they are proud of is the Greenway, a long pathway that follows the Spicket River as it flows into the city from Methuen. Some is really green with plantings, some has sidewalks connecting these green areas — the whole thing is three and a half miles connecting 6 parks with little league fields, gardens and walkways. Educational signage exists in many of the parks, and eventually they hope to have it designed for people so they can put their phone up to a spot and get linked to web pages with information appropriate videos, etc.

“Food and farming are central to our work here,” executive director Heather McMann says, “as of the end of 2015 we have 8 local community gardens, over 60,000 square feet of gardening space, and over 150 active gardeners in the network. We also have a half-acre urban farm over at Costello Park, which is a city park. The farm is used by our local Green Team of youth who plan, plant, harvest, sell and donate the produce over the summer months. We have three farmers markets, one on Wednesdays, one on Saturdays, and one in Methuen on Fridays. Of course our farm is completely no-spray and we don’t use any pesticides. We teach the use of natural processes and methods in growing.”

Five community gardens that are not part of the park system came through the city taking tax title to the land.

Besides the actual farming and growing experiences, Groundwork Lawrence teaches about food through a “pipeline” that reaches kids as young as Kindergarden.

“We have tours of the Greenway and the Urban Farm,” explains McMann, “they are digging in the soil and learning about this all the way up through high school. Then we have cooking classes and nutrition classes. We do a lot of things at the adult level as well. The pipeline means getting the kids started on this path early, understanding the importance of clean water and air, and fresh food.”

Over the summer the program involves three teams of ten young people each. One focuses on park stewardship doing such things as trail maintenance, invasive species removal, and historical site maintenance at the Saugus Ironworks Park.

Another track does more community engagement and outreach, sponsoring a 5K trail through the Greenway, and another focuses on the farming.

Part of farming requires clean soil, of course, but the soil in Lawrence is all urban fill with high levels of lead. Groundwork Lawrence tests every soil they grow in and often bring in clean healthy soil to the garden sites, using it or compost or both on top of a barrier in raised beds. There are a lot of ideas of...
how to amend soils and how you can build them up, but for Groundwork Lawrence it is easier to bring in safe soil rather than wait ten years or longer to rebuild them.

“One of our food access programs,” says community food manager Heather Conley, “is getting the bodegas or corner stores to offer healthier food options. We partner with the city and the mayor’s task force on a program called ‘Healthy on the Block’. We target corner stores in the most densely populated areas of the city. They are called Bodegas. We help them offer healthier options – usually more around product placement so healthy food isn’t in the back with junk food in the front. They sign a memorandum of agreement to have a healthy shelf and do more product placement of healthy stuff in the front. We agree to help them with marketing and have small amounts of money to be able to purchase shelving or building credit lines or anything they need. One Bodega wanted a lead on an accountant who spoke Spanish!

“Inherent in everything we do,” she continues, “is the social justice piece. With the Green Team we focus on the inequities in the food system. All the way from wages in fast food restaurants to access to fresh and affordable food – the Bodega work and our farmers market EBT benefits, matching dollars for fresh food with money from state funding and our share program. People will use their cards and get twice as much food as is billed to their card. We pay the farmer directly the difference. We include the greening of the city by cleaning the water and the air and improving places for playing. We don’t specifically deal with GMOs, but will present that information to our Green Team members. We introduce them to those ideas without pushing them on any issue. We took them to see a militant vegan activist, then we introduced them to ideas on the other side. Right now they are reading ‘The Omnivore’s Dilemma’.

The Green Team kids have to be Lawrence residents, fit the age requirements (14 to 21 years old), and go through a full process of applying, getting letters of recommendation, and being selected. At this point the entire city of Lawrence is considered low income so almost any kid fits that criterion! Seventy-six percent of the population in Lawrence is Hispanic, with large groups of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. During the school year 10 kids are hired, and during the summer they hire an additional 20 to make 30 total. They all get paid.

“At the beginning of the school year,” says outreach and events manager Rose Gonzalez, “they are able to work out on the farm on weekends. But our farmers markets fall during the school day through October so the kids are in school and can’t help with that. But they do a lot of jobs in school. They went to the NOFA conference in Worcester last weekend. We brought 9 kids with 2 staff members. They were excited because they will be taking what they have learned and incorporating it into the farm over
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the summer. They are learning about soil health, composting, food access, inequities in the food system -- we have many program areas.

“We are building our environmental improvement program,” she adds, “by planting trees, building parks, and planting gardens. Our education programs have grown. We are in 12 public schools with about 2000 students. We do science and nutritional education during the school day. The kids have a choice block and go to whatever program they want. Some places have a rotation for all the kids, especially for the pre-K age.”

Groundwork Lawrence takes the Green Team kids camping, skiing and exposing them to things they would never experience otherwise. As a result, the staff have a lot of exposure to team member families, who understand what the program means to their kids. The Groundwork relationship thus goes beyond the youth to their families and homes.

As a result, quite a few people who have been through both Green Team and the summer youth program have come back to be leaders. One alum is on the board of directors now, others are teachers in the school system who are teaching science and are referring students back.

Part of the support network the group has flows from relationships with other non-profits.

“When we did rapid ecological assessments,” explains Lesly, “we worked with Mass Audubon, the Appalachian Mountain Club, other city agencies and the Greater Lawrence Community Action Council – they all increase our capacity to be effective. We find the groups with the skill sets and the knowledge to make something happen. For example the WIC program – we partnered with them by organizing the farmers market. In another case we knew we had this beautiful wild area – Den Rock, a 120 acre wooded preserve – and we wanted to maintain it. We worked with the AMC, which has the expertise to do that and teach our kids.

“We are a key program with the city,” adds McMann. “We pride ourselves with our relationship building. Ever since 1998 when the feasibility study started we have worked hard to make sure we have good relationships with the mayor’s office and the 9 city councilors. Having those personal relationships helps us get to where we are today.

“We have been through 4 mayors since we started,” she concludes. “All were very supportive and enthusiastic about us because we are building capacity for the city in areas where they aren’t strong.

But where our model is extremely powerful is this: Municipalities have two-year or four-year terms. I’m talking about city councils, about mayors. They have to show results quickly. We want to show results but we have a much longer horizon. None of us is going to go out of office.”

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The town of Andover, Massachusetts, a half an hour due north of Boston and home of the Phillips Academy, is generally considered one of the state’s classier places to live. It ranks 36th out of the 351 municipalities in the state when rated by its per capita income, which is $52,275. For some resident’s however, it has a fatal flaw.

“They don’t seem to want farms here,” says Lucy McKain. “Lexington and Concord are more forward thinking that way.”

Lucy has a small goat dairy at her home on High Plains Road in Andover and has had to put considerable effort into first getting the right to raise goats there, then to finding enough land to give them a healthy space to browse. She finally has worked out an arrangement to lease a couple of nearby acres of town conservation land, however, and feels her goats are slowly warming the hearts of town residents to the idea of living near livestock.

McCain grew up in the city, as did her husband Jim, but he at least spent his summers working on his uncle’s large Kansas farm. It was an important experience for him.

“They had a huge farm with multiple trucks and cattle,” she says. “Jim had his own truck when he was 12! He didn’t want to get into farming himself, but when we were married I suggested we buy some land where we could have animals. I wanted our kids to learn about life and the ups and downs and how things work, and there is no better teacher than having an animal.”

Because of his business, however, they ended up buying a place in Andover and Lucy had to scramble to enable the kids to have a farm experience.

“We ended up having 7 kids,” she recounts, “and we all joined 4H. There was one family from Lynnfield, one from Tewksbury, one from somewhere else. But the kids got to know those kids and they all enjoyed it. Those were their fun friends that they went to fairs and shows with. They learned, by taking care of animals, how to take care of themselves.

“The 4H teaches excellent communication and leadership skills,” Lucy continues. “The kids all
They have a program in the winter that has the kids do visual presentations in front of a group. They encourage that from the time the kids are six. By the time they have done that a few years they have no fear of going before groups for presentations.”

The agricultural activities Lucy chose were raising chickens for eggs and meat, and goats for milk. “We found a spot with a couple of acres on it,” she recalls. “We had trouble with the town, though. There is no agriculture left in Andover. We went through hearings and all in order to just have the goats. Finally they decided we could have some, as long as we kept it under control – make sure the kids locked the gates so the goats didn’t get out! I didn’t sell milk from there. I worked another job and the kids took care of them.”

As the family got bigger they needed to move to a larger house. The one they found, however, did not have a yard suitable for keeping animals at all. McKain was not prepared to give up the family’s livestock though! She said: ‘if the horse people can do it, we can too.’ So she boarded the goats in sort of a stable.

“We built a small structure at this other place,” she explains. “The woman would feed them in the morning and I would take the kids after school for the nighttime feeding. All they ate was hay – there was no pasture or browse. We would milk them and take care of them, so of course we wanted to be right there when it came time for the births.”

When it was time for the kidding, the family brought the goats home and turned the garage into a hospital. Doctors living on the street would come down and watch the births. But afterwards they had to move the goats back to the other place, where they were boarding.

In 2007 four of the McCain children were all leaving home at once – for grad school, college, etc. -- so Lucy figured they didn’t need a big house anymore. They found a smaller home just being built, and moved to the High Plains location where they are now.

“I knew it was private enough to have goats without bothering anyone,” McCain recalls. “And because of all the hearings I went through before they gave me a license. It is from the town – a permit to keep animals.”

The animal officer comes once a year and checks out the barn, a small 12’ by 20’ structure they built as a barn/farmstand.

Lucy McCain beams as she shows off the town conservation land where her goats browse. She has a key to the locked gate so she can get her vehicle down to the pastures that are fenced off on both sides of the central aisle.

LUCY ACTUALLY HAS TWO HERDS OF GOATS NOW – THE OLD GOATS AND THE YOUNGER GIRLS. THE REASON SHE DOES THAT IS THAT SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE SOMEONE SOLD HER A GOAT WITH CAPRINE ARTHRITIS AND ENCEPHALITIS AND Didn’T TELL HER. CA&E COMPROMISES A GOAT’S IMMUNE SYSTEM. IT IS TRANSMITTED FROM ONE TO ANOTHER THROUGH THEIR SALIVA, WHEN THEY DRINK OUT OF THE SAME BUCKET. SO THE OLDER GOATS NOW ALL HAVE IT BUT SHE HAS KEPT THE YOUNGER GIRLS IN A DIFFERENT HERD SO THEY DON’T GET IT.

“I even have to take the kids away right at birth,” she sighs, “so they don’t get infected. I bottle feed the babies and I can even give them the colostrum,
LaMancha goats (a breed which originated fairly recently in Oregon) like this one have small ears and give milk very high in butterfat. This one is in Lucy’s older herd.

but it has to be pasteurized! It is much more labor intensive, but I’ve been doing that for 7 years.”

McCain credits NOFA for a lot of knowledge about how to properly take care of her goats. When she first started, everyone said goats needed to eat hay. So she fed hay year-round.

“All they talked about in 4H was feeding them hay,” she laughs. “My first NOFA Conference was in 2009. It was a total brainshift for me to learn about browse! They are supposed to be on that? I could save some money that way!”

She learned that pasture was better for the goats, the world, and her own financial state. She also learned at a NOFA conference about getting a license from the state for selling raw milk. She first received hers in July, 2009, and has renewed it every year since.

“I sell the milk for $19 per gallon and $12 for a half gallon,” Lucy says. “A lot of people are using it to make kefir, some are lactose intolerant, some want it for babies or younger kids. Here is my refrigerator, my log of customers, my cash boxes. It is all self service. I haven’t had any trouble with people stealing cash. They might steal the milk, but not the cash!”

At peak production she can do up to 4 gallons a day. One doe gives about a gallon at peak production and she staggers the lactations when possible. The last three years she has been able to milk right through the year. This year she didn’t do it because she is planning on moving again and wants to have them on the same schedule. She brought a buck in who bred them all, so they are due the end of March.

“I never have had to market my milk,” McCain grins. “I’ve been on the NOFA/Mass website, but that is all. People hear about me from that and the Weston A Price Foundation.”

Whether her assessment of the town’s cool attitude toward farmers is faulty, or she has an inexhaustible amount of energy to plead her case, shortly after she learned that goats should be on pasture, Lucy managed to secure a lease from the town for her goats to browse on 2 – 3 acres of town conservation land.

“She said: ‘I’m so glad you said that. I was going to reach out to you.’ So we talked. His goal was to eradicate some invasive species. My goal was to get browse for the goats. We laughed at it. There was a lot of sumac, poison ivy, different things. There are about 3 acres of open land, altogether, but I don’t have goats on all that. It used to be a town community garden area, but they stopped that because they didn’t have water out there.”

The man she spoke with was a volunteer and had to go to the Conservation Commission to get their okay for the goats. He reported back that: ‘Some are happy to support this and some are not. So you have to be really good with this and make sure the goats don’t get out. Nobody else in town is asking to do this, it is unusual, so be careful!’

“I got them up there in the fall of 2009,” she continues. “I brought the older ones, who could learn to browse better than the young ones. The goats went right for the sumac, as soon as they got there. They left nothing but the stumps. Now they come back full and don’t give them any hay. They come back exhausted and just want to be milked and go to bed!”

Moving the goats each day Spring, Summer and Fall, and getting them water have been challenges for McKain. The conservation land is only 500 feet from her driveway, so the distance is not great. But she does not want to mix up the two herds, and needs help walking them to the browse each morning after milking, and carrying their water.

“We transport it up there with the goats,” she explains. “We haul water up in gallon jugs, and can drive up four jugs in a milk crate without spilling. Then we pour it in a drinking bucket that we hook to the fence. At first we were walking the older ones up with two people, and sometimes customers would come and help walk them. I have found people love to come and help walk them. I have found people love...
to help, once they are here. One day a blind woman came with a group and she was quite intent on walking a goat. She did, with a friend!

Fencing was also a major challenge. Lucy bought some fence to surround an area up there, but soon realized they eat fast! So she had to expand the fenced area. She got an EQIP grant to supply the fencing materials and got a state grant to cover her portion of the expense. Her son helped her put up the posts and install it. She also got some boy scouts to give her a hand, too. I called them up and asked: ‘Do you have any scouts who need community service? Can they come help me put up a fence?’

“A lot of kids don’t want to do that kind of physical work,” she says, “but one kid helped me over and over until it was done. He would come in 90 degree weather with long pants on. He said ‘My mother doesn’t want me to get any ticks on me.’ I just went to his Eagle Scout ceremony!”

The area she has fenced is small for both groups of goats, 8 in total, and McCain has made rotation plans to figure out how best to use it. She has broken it into several paddocks, but is amazed at how fast the animals eat! She asked last year if she could extend the fencing to take in more of the rest of the cleared 5 acres, but they said ‘no, that is as far as you can go.’ Some people on the commission are apparently still not happy that she is the only resident doing this.

That town conservation area has a lot of biking and walking trails through the woods, but to get here they go through the open part and Lucy has left a lane open for people between the goat pastures.

“People have been walking through,” she says, “and seem to enjoy watching the goats. They stop when I’m bringing water up, or something, and tell me how much they enjoy watching them. At the beginning there was no parking area, but the town cleared a spot and put in parking by the road. I’m sure the goats helped bring people out.

“We’ve never had any complaints from residents,” she continues. “There is one guy who plays the bagpipes. His wife kicks him out of the house when he wants to practice so he goes up there and plays for the goats.”

During my visit a couple came up and told McCain how much they enjoy the goats and asked what they might feed them. They asked: “Crackers?” She answered: “How about organic fruits and vegetables, instead.” They thanked her.

Lucy had Andover’s senator, Barbara L’Italien, to the property recently. The senator wanted to see her raw milk operation and the goats.

“She was impressed at how clean it was,” McCain says. “She asked me about what issues I had. I told her it was land. There is no land here you can buy to farm. You can’t afford it.

“When the Senator came,” she continues, “I invited the director of the Conservation Commission here too. We had 10 or 12 people here. It looked like a NOFA event! Of course he promoted the goats being on town land!”

Lucy has taken soil tests on the town land where the goats are. After the first year of browsing, in 2011, it showed a surprisingly high 6.3% organic matter. But

This Toggenburg goat (the breed originated in the Toggenburg Valley of Switzerland) has the traditional erect ears. She seems to prefer her hay eaten from a wheelbarrow on the other side of the fence. Perhaps she thinks she is getting away with something?

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a test she just took shows an incredible 8.1%. She figures it must be the manure and the hoof action!

“You can see here,” she points out as we tour the site, “where the raised beds were for the community gardens. When the senator was here she stirred up things a bit and now the town has given the go ahead for the community gardens to be here again. Apparently they found a way to tap into the town water up here!”

Now that the kids are gone (the oldest is 36 and the youngest 24) Lucy and her husband have decided to move again. This time they are really looking for a site close enough to his business for him to commute, but with some land for her farming as well. They are considering anything reasonable. But first they have to sell the Andover property. And the realtor tells them to move the goats out of the back yard if they ever want to house to sell. So Lucy is in the process of finding another temporary home for them.

“After the senator’s visit,” she relates, “I was in the newspaper again. From that article I heard from this woman who has some land and a barn we could rent. So we are renting space from her. The younger groups of does is there now. We have to sell the house this time! We’re taking down the fencing and can’t bring them back here!”

I expect we will hear more from Lucy wherever she lands!

by Jack Kittredge

It is not surprising, to anyone who reflects on the matter, that the Ocean State should have the most expensive land prices in the country. Averaging $13,800 per acre, Rhode Island is comfortably ahead of New Jersey’s $13,000 average price.

Much of the state is either on or within sight of the ocean, driving up prices. Urbanization is also strong there. It shares with only one state, again New Jersey, the distinction of having more than 1000 residents per square mile. And only New Jersey and the District of Columbia equal its percentage of area in metropolitan districts -- 100%.

Incubating Farmers at Urban Edge

Pat McNiff, who raises cattle, pigs, layers, ducks and has a small garden on leased Ocean State land in East Greenwich under the name Pat’s Pastured, puts it succinctly: “There is no affordable private land in this state anymore. What there is of new farmers is either in the city on public land, or on a land trust piece.”

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In Rhode Island the purchase of development rights, a measure designed to prevent land from being developed and keeping prices affordable for farming, may have met its limit. Pat lost the leased 50 acre “development protected” farm he was on when it was offered for sale at 7.5 million dollars. “There are people,” he asserts, “who will buy that and put a couple horses on it. It is a nice coastal property. Real pretty. They’ll mow it, sell the hay and just look at it. There are no crops that I can raise which are legal that will let me write a note for 7.5 million dollars!”

It was this inflation of land prices, and the inability of a development rights purchase mechanism alone to counter that inflation’s impact on farming, which initially motivated a couple of prescient and strategically placed state administrators to take action.

Key players gather at Urban Edge Farm (UEF). From left to right: John Kenney (long term Urban Edge farmer who is just now buying his own land and planning a transition away from the farm), Rob Booz (Community Gardens Coordinator for the Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT) which leases the farm from the state and subleases it to the farmers), Choua Xiong (long term farmer who, along with his brother and sister-in-law were among the founding UEF tenants), Christina Dedora (long term UEF farmer who has developed an herb and flower business there), Ken Ayars (chief of the state’s Division of Agriculture), Pat McNiff (SCLT program director at the time of the purchase and now a private farmer on rented land), and Ben Torpey, (UEF farmer and host of gathering).

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In 2002 Ken Ayars, chief of the RI Division of Agriculture and Bob Sutton, Division of Development and Planning chief, bought Rhode Island a 50 acre farm on the outskirts of Cranston, a 30 square mile city with over 80,000 residents – the 3rd largest in the state.

“We bought it to own,” stressed Ken, “not just to protect. For awhile we had felt the need for better land access for farmers at DEM (Department of Environmental Management). The idea was to buy a farm with the idea of making space there for farmers to farm it who didn’t have access to land. The DEM had existing programs to buy land for state management in all sorts of areas, and we determined that we had the authority at our level to try this out.

“We sensed,” he continues, “that this was where we needed to go in terms of finding space for farmers in Rhode Island, based on the significant population in Rhode Island, many of whom have agricultural backgrounds, as well as the young farmers you see right here who are starting to come up through the system and are having trouble accessing land. The thought was it would be an incubator space and you, as a farmer, would eventually move on.”

Incubators are places where farmers can get experience with running proprietary farms without having lots of money to invest. The land is owned by a larger mission-based body, as well as many infrastructure pieces – greenhouses, walk-in coolers, sheds, irrigation and washing systems, heavy equipment – which are rented to the farmers on an as-used basis. In the 1980s forward-looking Vermonters had established the Intervale, one of the first farm incubators in the country.

There was not a lot of viable infrastructure at the Rhode Island farm, however, and the state was not in a good position to provide it. What was needed was a non-profit group that could lease the farm from the state, fix it up with money put together from foundations and other donors, and lease it to farmers, staffing the operation to make sure the farmers didn’t encounter huge barriers.

“We decided,” explains Ayars, “that the Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT) was the best choice. We came to an agreement and rented it to them for $1 a year, with a 20 year lease. It was a big experiment for both of us. I think it has turned out for both of us. I think it has turned out as good as we hoped it would. But there was a heck of a lot of evolution!”

McNiff, SCLT program director at the time of the purchase, was actively involve in that evolution.

“This was part of my masters thesis while I was at SCLT,” he says. “The division came to us with this and I visited the Intervale and other sites that were trying out these ideas. We had people at our community gardens wanting to get bigger and bigger, and we had the idea that we could create market garden spaces where they could move. So when we heard about this it was a good fit.”

McNiff recalls that NOFA/RI’s Mike and Polly Hutchison did an assessment of the land at the time of the purchase. According to him they said “Only folks from an urban organic farming organization could look at the place and see the potential in it. They can see the potential in an urban vacant lot!”

“This place,” he goes on, “was in really rough shape. It was a dairy farm, but was all in brush the size of trees and boulders the size of cars. They also killed turkeys here and slaughtered beef cattle for the Hmong community (a Southeast Asian group which has settled in Rhode Island).”

SCLT started raising money to clean the place up and build the needed infrastructure. During the first ten years of the program the land trust wrote about a million dollars in grants to make the farm suitable, estimates Christina Dedora, a farmer at UEF who worked for SCLT at the time.

“All the money for rock removal, greenhouses, equipment and farm renovation at Urban Edge,” recalls McNiff, “was all a grant by a private foundation that gives grants for capital improvements. That was a big chunk of change. Two other big sources for programming at the beginning were Rhode Island Foundation and some USDA grants we got. All those programs combined helped a lot. Over the years the place has grown up a lot. We had a lot of help from the Americorps, too. They would come our here and cut brush. I think we took out 30 dumpsters full of trash. The first year and a half was about brush-clearing!”

Having seven businesses on one property means there is a lot of activity at Urban Edge Farm, often seven days a week, often after dark. I met with some of the farmers running those businesses in January.

Choua Xiong, along with his brother George and sister-in-law Chang, were among the initial farmers selected for Urban Edge. They work in the evening, after they get off their regular jobs.

“I have been here from 2003”, he says, “I am Hmong and I grow vegetables which are popular for them –Asian vegetables grow well here if we grow the short season ones, not the long season ones. We have a small rice paddy up on our land, just for us. My wife says she enjoys that we are growing our own vegetables -- she doesn’t care if we make money or not!”

Christina Dedora operates Blue Sky Farm, which leases two fields for a small CSA and an herbal and flower business. Originally there was a collective CSA at Urban Edge, but that broke into individual ones. Currently there are 4 CSAs on the property.

“I’ve been here for ten years,” she confides. “I had farmed in Massachusetts for a number of years, got into debt, gave it up and got out of debt, came back home, and saw this blurb in the paper asking ‘do you want to be a farmer?’ My full time job was working in Boston. But the commute was too much. So I got a job at the land trust as the director of operations. Because I was also a farmer here I had a little bit easier time.”

“When I came here,” she continues, “it was amazing. You have access to land, deer fencing, irrigation, tractors, a community that was working together. I don’t think I would do things differently if I owned the land. I turned 50 this year and my energy is for this farm now. I don’t think I would like to start a new one, even if I owned the land. I’ll probably stay here until I stop farming.”

John Kenney, who runs Big Train Farm, has been a certified organic grower since 2012. Some of his produce is sold to restaurants, grocers, and private
Ben Torpey in front of his greenhouse

Customers as far away as Massachusetts and he finds they care whether or not it is certified. Even members of his CSA prefer certification, he says. John will be leaving Urban Edge shortly and buying his own 11 acre parcel with a line of credit from the Farm Services Agency.

“I have worked out a business plan with them,” he says, “that shows I can pay off the loan farming. That shows I can pay off the loan farming. I have worked out a business plan with them,” he admits. “But the idea of changing our markets was doing adult education and not making all that much money. So going back to farming wasn’t too bad. Right now we gross $100,000 on two acres. Ben Torpey runs Scratch Farm on two acres at Urban Edge. This is his fifth season there.

“I had a job in the city,” he relates, “but this opportunity came up and I quit my job to farm. I was doing adult education and not making all that much money. So going back to farming wasn’t too bad. Right now we gross $100,000 on two acres. You can make a living on that.”

In 2016 Ben is hiring on two workers at $10 per hour who had apprenticed for him in 2015. He figures his labor bill will go up, but he has grown over 40 species in pastures and fields. The rest is wet, not accessible or needs work.

Although Urban Edge Farm is 50 acres in size, only about 35 of those are open and in sandy loam fields. The wealth of infrastructure. The farmers share a large propagation hoophouse, a barn with walk-in cooler, an irrigation pond with diesel pump and lines piped to hydrants in all the fields, a large tractor, an irrigation pond with diesel pump and lines piped to hydrants in all the fields, a large tractor, with bucket and many implements, and a tall fence protecting the fields from deer. The farmers do the simpler maintenance and repairs cooperatively, and pay for these services on an as-used basis.

“We sell on a sliding scale,” he says, “with a mid range of $500 for a half share and $750 for a full. But people can pay whatever they can afford within the range. It goes 25 weeks. We can do that because the soil has gotten better. We have been investing in the soil, putting down lots of compost each year. We work 40 to 42 hours a week, even at the peak of the season. That is a value we have kept important.”

Over the last 2 years Torpey has also started to sell seeds. The business grew out of saving his best adapted seeds for farm reasons, as well as being a passion for him.

“It has been a one-farm operation so far,” he says, “but we are thinking of collaborating with other farms on it. Different locations could help by isolating pollination. The brand is Small State Seeds -- we can get seeds that are better adapted for our location. There is a strong winter market and people want to buy local here. I think people would like to buy local seeds for their gardens.”

Ben dropped organic certification a few years ago because his markets were all personal and he didn’t need to be certified. But now he is thinking of picking it back up because it would help with selling the seeds.

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Although Urban Edge Farm is 50 acres in size, only about 35 of those are open and in sandy loam fields. The rest is wet, not accessible or needs work. All farming at Urban Edge needs to follow organic practices. One of the primary attractions there is the wealth of infrastructure. The farmers share a large propagation hoophouse, a barn with walk-in cooler, an irrigation pond with diesel pump and lines piped to hydrants in all the fields, a large tractor, with bucket and many implements, and a tall fence protecting the fields from deer. The farmers do the simpler maintenance and repairs cooperatively, and pay for these services on an as-used basis.
“I pay about $1500 per year for everything,” explains Christina, “the hours I use the tractor, the square footage I use in the greenhouse, and the land fee. There is also an irrigation fee, and a rental fee for the barn. We all record our usage in a log. We have worked it out so that those who don’t drive tractors can be taught to do so by people who drive them. We got a grant to pay them. Or if I drive tractor for Chang for an hour, I get a free hour. That is comparable for us all.

“John has chickens so he uses a tractor more,” she continues. I’m trying to do a field no-till, so I use it less. I do cut flowers and herbs, so I don’t use the tractor for those, either. A few years ago there was a five thousand dollar expense for tractor repair, but this year we had minimal costs. We try to make sure that our fees are high enough so the money is there to get the repairs we need.”

For a while the land trust went through a lean period and cut back on staff at the farm. So the fees were less, based on the farmers doing a lot of the work rather than hired staff. But now SCLT is reaching out more and getting more involved, so they may be bringing more people out to the farm.

One other benefit of the collegial nature of Urban Edge Farm is the capacity of farmers to learn from each other. Ben, for instance, has learned from other farmers there to prepare his beds with a heavy mulch of leaves -- but no tillage.

“We do a lot of use of agricultural tarps,” he says, “to cover the land for primary tillage. That way we’re not inverting the soil. We add compost and use a cultivator in the top two inches after that to finish the bed. We also use cover crops, and the tarps kill them. Our weed pressure has gone way down. We have also done broadcasting of spring carrots. I did a broadcast bed and a regular one. The broadcast one was wonderful. I’ve been very skeptical of this but I get it and I want to go there. The fungi are doing it because we’re not doing the wrong thing!”

The tarps Torpey uses are made of woven black landscape fabric. He hates to use so much plastic, but reasons it lasts maybe 8 years and much of it is already recycled. He gets leaves from landscapers for free.

“The leaf guy comes to dump,” Ben laughs, “and I just feel he is dumping a big pile of money on my land. He’s my favorite guy to see! And he say’s “thank you”. He has a big truck with high sides and a big blower. There is a shredder in his truck, so he can compress them. These are dense loads. We’re in the suburbs and people don’t want their leaves. It’s great!

“The no till thing has gotten easier for us,” he concludes. “We see a lot more aggregation in our soil now. I don’t need to use as much water as I used to. That is another advantage of being here, among other farmers. I learn faster.”

For the state of Rhode Island, Urban Edge Farm is a success.

“For us, this is a phenomenal result,” says Ken Ayars. “It is what we wanted to happen. We need more of it. If we had it to do over again I would do it, and get more land! But back when we started there were not a lot of farmers coming through who were trained and ready to start out on their own. A lot of programs have come onboard to make that happen.”

To protect the state there is a carefully worded lease agreement to give farmers the leeway to do what they need to do while keeping the land in agriculture. But the arrangement has some problems for the farmers.

For one, there is no potable water supply there, which means efforts to do most food processing are limited. Christina has developed a drying room in the barn for her herbs, but without the possibility of a commercial kitchen, most value-added products are not feasible.

For another, the state is sensitive to charges that they are competing with private agriculture.
One of Scratch Farm’s three 72’ x 30’ hoophouses planted with fall greens.

When I was first coming out here,” Pat recalls, “there were complaints from other farmers that: ‘Oh, you are going to subsidize these people and we are going to have to compete with them. You are building them greenhouses...’ Our point was that ‘Yes, but they are paying for them. They are not getting them for free.’ The underlying part of this is that everyone gets a leg up in agriculture in some way. Very few people come from absolutely nothing. This is a way to get them a leg up and see how they can do then. No one is making millions out here.”

“The thing that was important for us,” adds Ken, “is that this needs to be real life. You may be only farming 2 acres, but the costs associated with those 2 acres have to be proper. You have to pay market value for what you are getting – the land, the equipment, the greenhouse space. The land trust gets grants but they in turn charge rents and fees for the use of the improvements. It is meant to be replicating a real life environment. It has to be that way so the transition can be workable.”

Another worry about competition centered around the fact that RI Central landfill is just 2 miles down the road. They collect leaves from all the landscapers and charge $20 a load as a tipping fee. But the farmers want the leaves for leaf mulch. Several people at the land trust got the idea that if they could put the word out to collect the leaves and charge just $10 a load, they could build a business that would make money and support more programming.

“But,” cautions Ayars, “we are trying to find the line to draw for what are green activities. The land trust is thinking about revenue streams and the farmers are thinking about getting access to compost. There is a great culture in RI about farming and local food. That often keeps people from leaving and serving as the anchors of that community. And if we are talking about building soil, I think it is a challenge, all the things we do to build soil -- building the infrastructure, to ask someone to invest in soil for 5 years and then walk away. Transitioning farms from one location to another can be very destabilizing. I think John and Michele are very wise to be taking it slow.”

“It is an interesting question,” he continues, “whether this is the most efficient use of state money. Is it better to use the development funds on land parcels so I can buy a scrubby field and gradually be making it my own, or is it better to set up something like this on one piece of land and bring the funding to it?”

“That is exactly what we think about,” Ken answers. “We did the bond issue for purchasing development rights, but after 30 years of land protection not a lot of people at the Intervale have not left, are not going to leave, and serve as the anchors of that community. And if we are talking about building soil, I think it is a challenge, all the things we do to build soil -- building the infrastructure, to ask someone to invest in soil for 5 years and then walk away. Transitioning farms from one location to another can be very destabilizing. I think John and Michele are very wise to be taking it slow.”

As agricultural programs go, Urban Edge Farm -- and even the idea of farm incubators -- is relatively new. Both parties to the lease, the state and the land trust, want to help farmers and are continuing to move in new directions. Some, to circumvent the land price issue, may encourage farming on smaller plots, raising more intensive crops.

“Right now,” says Rob Booz, SCLT staffer, “we are working to identify recent refugees who want to be farmers. That has a lot to do with USDA funds and who they want to target -- there is money in their pot for training people for farming. I don’t think that will involve giving people two acres right off the bat, but maybe quarter acre plots. A lot of our growers are coming from urban plots. You can have pest pressure and soil fertility issues you don’t have in the city when you move out here.”

Ben agrees that perhaps doing more on less is an answer to Rhode Island’s farm access problem: “Some people leave here because they feel it is not enough land to make a living on. But when you are land limited you start thinking of how to do a better job on what you have. It is inspiring!”
First Root Farm: Growing on National Park Land

by Jack Kittredge

If you were raised as I was, to the bedtime sounds of galloping anapestic feet as Paul Revere rode to alert the countryside about the redcoats, or to Emerson waxing eloquent at North Bridge on the shot heard round the world, you also might undertake a visit to Concord and Lexington’s Minuteman National Park with a somewhat reverent mien.

It turns out, of course, that on closer inspection it is just another park (although sitting on some pretty good farmland!) I visited it on the trail of Laura Sackton, proprietor of First Root Farm, which occupies four and a half acres of that park’s farmland.

Laura, who grew up in Lexington, worked at Lands Sake Farm in Weston throughout high school and decided it was the life for her.

“I went to college for a year,” she explains, “but quit because I wanted to do farming. I found I couldn’t stay interested in reading and research. I can’t focus in a classroom. It has to be practical – here is a problem, how can we solve it!”

She went to Vermont for a while, then worked at the Farm School in Orange, Massachusetts. While she was there she learned that Minuteman National Park, back home in Lexington, was looking for a farmer!

“The idea was,” she relates, “that they would make the park land available to farmers. The park had some sort of partnership with a non-profit organization to handle the details. Since I was there and I grew up in Lexington, I volunteered to be one of the farmers.

“They gave me four fields,” she continues, “as well as free housing. This was in 2010. But the non-profit lasted only about 2 years and then disappeared. It was supposed to do educational programming, but they just had one staff person for a year. I think the idea was to be an incubator, with each farmer having a three year period to get up and running.”

Since then Laura has dealt directly with the park, renewing her year-to-year license, or special agricultural use permit – for which she pays $25 per acre each year. At first they started charging rent for Laura’s housing, then discontinued it altogether. The Park owns several houses on the land that they use for housing interns and other purposes.
Established by eminent domain in 1959, the park has rented to conventional farmers for some time. One raises sweet corn which he sells wholesale; another flowers, also for wholesale markets. “They don’t use the farm quite the way I do,” Sackton observes, “with a staff, customers coming here, etc. They are more traditional, just using a tractor and having one crop. They don’t need the infrastructure we do. Neither are they required to be chemical free.”

When she has to deal with the park administration, Laura deals with the superintendent of the park. She thinks perhaps when the non-profit disappeared and the park didn’t really have a person or program to support her, the park might not have expected First Root Farm to stay on as long as it has. She thinks the park may be trying to hire someone to deal with Laura and the whole issue of farming on park land. First Root raises mixed vegetables using organic practices, but is not certified. Laura has a total of six full time staff during the season, including a year-round co-manager. They have a Kubota they use for primary tillage and bed-making, but don’t do much tractor cultivation. That is mostly done by hand, although they are at the point of looking to buy a cultivating tractor. The farm has grown relatively slowly — starting out growing on just an acre, then two, and now using all four and a half.

Two of the fields are reasonable soil, and two are only so-so — heavily clay and not easy to grow in. A park trail passes right behind one of the farm fields and is open to the public, so activities are the farm are quite visible. The farm stand is on a busy road, but park regulations prevent any signage, making it hard to attract drive by customers.

“We do a weekly CSA,” says Laura, “that had about 225 members. It starts in June and goes through October. Then we do smaller Fall pick ups in November and December — just twice a month — which are not quite so intensive. The Fall CSA is 100 or 120. We also have a couple of restaurant accounts in town, but that is only about 5% of our business.”

The farm also has a farm stand where they do the CSA distribution. But they can’t technically sell there. Her license with the National Park forbids selling anything on the property, so she has made up a prepaid farm card which allows people to stop by, browse, and ‘pick up’ stuff they have already paid for.

“They can choose to pick up a certain number of units of food,” she says, “with each unit predefined as a bunch or a pound or a bag. They get a small discount of about $10 if they put $200 on the card. People who go away a lot or don’t like a regular CSA prefer this system. They get some freedom to choose what they like.”

Besides the farm stand (a converted garage), the park lets Laura use a barn to store things, and provides a walk-in cooler to keep harvested crops fresh. Water, however, is only available from the town at the farm stand, for which she pays about $600 a year. One field can be reached from there with a hose, but the others are too far away. Sackton carries water to them in a big tank with a pump, when necessary.

Although she recognizes that she is fortunate to have access to land in the Concord area, leasing it from the National Park Service has presented Laura with several problems.

First, she has no long term guarantee of her tenancy. “I don’t think I will be here forever anyway,” she says, “but I would like to know how long I have. We don’t do any fruit. I thought about strawberries, but...
In order to resolve these problems Sackton is putting together a proposal to the park superintendent, who has been generally supportive of her. She will ask for a more secure lease and the ability to put up a structure. She hopes that once the park has hired a person to deal with the farming issue, things can go more smoothly there.

Laura thinks she would still have taken this path even if she knew how it would turn out.

“I have been farming for many years,” she says, “and started this farm when I was 23. I’ve learned a lot here. Overall it has been a great experience for me. I don’t know if I would have learned the same skills if I had just been working on someone else’s farm. And I didn’t have money to buy land. I wouldn’t have been able to start my own farm without this public land opportunity. On the other hand, now I’m at the point where I have a thriving business but I’m not able to grow it. If I’d gotten a manager’s job and done that for the past 7 years I might be in a better place to farm on my own. I don’t know. I think I would do it again, but there is a caution there now. When I started I was just so excited to do it I didn’t worry about what would happen down the line. Now I’m in the place to start thinking long term. If I had it to do over I might put more thought into how this might work!”
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Farming on National Park Service land is a time-honored practice. Ranching in the west is probably the best known example, but increasingly there are crop farmers who raise produce on fields owned by the NPS, which is you and me. After interviewing Laura Paxton of First Root Farm, I wanted to talk with someone from the park to get their point of view about farming on their land.

Nancy Nelson, superintendent of Minuteman National Historical Park, was kind enough to spend some of her time educating me about the Park Service and farming.

“Farming operations are going on all over the country in national parks”, she explains. “The benefit to the park is we get to keep a historic landscape. At the Minuteman Park we see the landscape as it was in 1775. We don’t grow the same crops now as they did then -- it is not like Old Sturbridge Village -- but we do keep the landscape open with agriculture. It is a lot easier for visitors to imagine how events unfolded that fateful April day if the fields are still there. And what better way to keep them open than with farmers?”

The Park Service does have guidelines and regulations that apply to farming on their land. Leasing relationships have a set of rules, special use permits another set, and cooperative agreements a third. There are guidelines about the use of pesticides and rules for dealing with for-profit farms -- requiring open procedures for bidding for leases, for example. But the Service gives individual parks a surprising amount of independence on how they want to manage these relationships.

“We’re not operating under a big mandate to do this”, says Nelson. “It is more at the park level to find ways to manage everyone’s safety and protect our resources as well as the public and the farmers. We have restrictions in terms of adding modern structures -- like greenhouses –- which are essential for farmers. But we have no hard and fast rules. We have to take into account what the impact of a structure on the park will be. Will it be temporary? Will it be remote from most park functions?”

Right now Minuteman Park has a herd of heritage cattle on the park, as well as a beekeeper and corn and vegetable farms. They have had requests to raise pigs, chickens and goats, as well as allow high-tech experimental growing systems, and a family camp. Nancy says First Root Farm has done a great job, both farming and creating positive relationships in the community. But she is aware that the park’s limited space and facilities cannot accommodate everything it might want -- a larger agricultural operation and a greenhouse being two examples.

“Also, some of our other farmers,” she says, “live nearby and take their machinery and equipment back with them when they go home at the end of the day. First Root can’t really do that, but we don’t have a place here to accommodate their equipment very well. Our barn is already used for many diverse purposes and we don’t have much other infrastructure.

“We originally had a concept of providing an incubator,” she continues, “where a farmer could have a place to perfect their skills and then move on. We had one farmer who was very focused on animals. He rotated out and that made a space for First Root. I forgot how long ago that was, but First Root has been here much longer than the incubator farm model calls for. I think their aspirations are to stay longer. We need to set up a framework to manage better.”

The Park is open to proposals for more farming, but first wants to hire a resource manager who will focus on agriculture in the park. The task of exploring this needs care and thought to work though how best to do it, Nelson asserts.

“Our aspirations for farming have expanded,” she says, “and we need to develop a way to do that in a planned fashion. We are fully open to discussion about how to do it, and want to talk with agricultural commissions, farmers, town officials, and the park service itself to explore this potential. It has been a long time since parks and agricultural operations began cooperating and perhaps it needs to be looked at again. It is up to us to come up with a better process. There are so many people who are interested in it.”
Farming on Municipal Land in the Most Densely Populated City in New England: South Street Farm

by Jack Kittredge

Boynton Yards is a largely industrial neighborhood tucked away between the Fitchburg Railroad tracks and the Somerville/Cambridge border in Somerville, Massachusetts—a city of 80,000 people crammed into four square miles of space. According to a history by Union Square Neighbors, a local neighborhood association:

“Much of the neighborhood was originally part of the Miller’s River, a winding tidal stream that once extended inland to Union Square. The Miller’s River was used as an open water sewer and dumping ground for local industry. In 1874, Somerville decided to fill in the polluted river by removing the top of nearby Prospect Hill to use as filler. Over time, residential streets were laid to the east of Prospect Street and near the border with Cambridge. The central part of the area, however, was occupied by railroad sidings and surrounded by industrial buildings, including several meatpacking facilities. Consistent with the growth of the automobile industry in the 20th century, many businesses opened to serve auto-related uses including repair shops and parts dealers, some of which continue to operate today.

In the early 1980s, the City approved an urban revitalization plan for Boynton Yards resulting in the demolition of buildings, remediation of industrial wastes, construction of three light-industry buildings, and construction of South Street to support truck traffic…In 2012, Somerville passed a new revitalization plan that included an updated vision for
Boynton Yards as a transit-oriented mixed-use district. Today, Boynton Yards is a neighborhood on the cusp of transition, due in part to its strategic location near the future Union Square Green Line MBTA station."

But the MBTA’s Green Line subway extension is a huge project, mired in so many political and financial issues that construction could be a generation away. Meanwhile, the neighborhood endures.

Enter Groundwork USA, a group focusing on post-industrial cities with ‘brownfield’ problems like Somerville. It was founded by the National Park Service and the Brownfields Program of the EPA and sets up local nonprofit associations to work with youth to promote urban cleanups and urban agriculture. For the first five years the local group usually gets funding from the National Park Service, and then is weaned and supports itself with what it can raise in donations and grants from public and private bodies.

I met with Clay Larsen and Chris Mancini, respectively project manager and executive director of Groundwork Somerville, who showed me around the ‘farm’ they have created out of two trash-filled lots awaiting their fate in the Boynton Yards neighborhood.

“These are owned by the Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA),” they tell me. “The SRA has a big vision for this area, as a part of the metropolitan Boston transit plan, but there are so many factors affecting that plan that it could take a while before anything really happens. It could be another 30 years!

“We knew the land would change someday,” they continue, “but when we took it over we wanted to make a statement and make a farm part of the community, so it becomes another political fact. And now it is. Whatever version of the planned street grid you look at, there is a farm here somewhere!”

The lots are small. One is about 4000 square feet, and the larger is only a quarter of an acre.

“When I came on as Executive Director,” says Chris, “we went to the mayor with the idea of using these lots for farms. They were wide open and full of trash. We said no one is going to be using them for years. Eventually the Green Line is going to come in here, but that is many years away. Right now the SRA owns the land and has the authority to grant us permission to use it.”

The SRA was enthusiastic about the Groundwork vision and encouraged them to use the sites for now. A license agreement was signed giving the group use of the land “as is” for no fee on a month to month basis. In return, Groundwork Somerville agreed to use the land for an urban farm, bring no oil or hazardous materials onto it, assume all expenses in connection with the property, keep it in good order, and indemnify and hold the city harmless against all losses and name it as an insured in a one million dollar liability policy.

“They don’t give us any instructions about how to use it,” says Clay. “They rely on us for that kind of advice and guidance. We sometimes have to go to a meeting and give them an update on what is happening. When we wanted to put up the beehives we had to go and ask permission to do that. But they were excited to have us do it!”

As might be supposed, the lots were not initially very suitable for farming. Besides being filled with trash, there was no water available, they were not fenced off from the street, much of their surface was paved, and no sanitary amenities existed for farmers.

These were not, however, unusual conditions for the sort of sites Groundwork USA has seen before.

The first site approached was the smaller one. To deal with the lack of water the group initially approached neighboring businesses, which offered use of their own water at no cost. Hoses crossing the street, however, did not last long when driven over by trucks and heavy vehicles all day. So the farm commissioned a shed with a roof that would collect rainwater and channel it to plastic holding tanks. The city helped fund the materials, and a vocational school crew designed and constructed it. To bring the water back out of the tanks when needed for irrigation, a bicycle-powered pump was installed.

For the larger site, the city actually tied into a supply line and brought water to an on-site hydrant, where irrigation hoses are attached.

Fencing and gates were fabricated and installed by a combination of vocational school help and funds raised by Groundwork Somerville. The paved soil was a little more of a problem.

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We are limited to sort of container farming here,” says Larsen, “and are realistic about that. I wonder about earthworms and critters in the soil. That is what we need more of. But we don’t want to take jackhammers to the pavement. That might open us up to toxic soil issues. So we grow in raised beds.

“This is all fresh soil brought in,” he continues, pointing to the beds, “and put on top of 6 inches of gravel. We are using it up fast, however, and are thinking of making the soil deeper. The beds drain water through the gravel well, and it runs on top of the pavement to a catch basin over there in the low spot, which becomes a big mud hole. I’m interested in storm water management and hope we can capture more of that.”

The group has thought about reclaiming the native soil on the farm, but a lot of work would be involved to remediate it, and it would be expensive. They have not tested the soil and don’t know exactly what problems they would encounter, but don’t want to make such a commitment without a more permanent lease.

Some areas around the edge of the sites are unpaved, and there the state Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) planted Serviceberry trees -- which the farm is trying to use as a part of Permaculture-style layered plantings.

For crew toilet stops, nearby businesses have again generously made their facilities available.

Groundwork Somerville was founded in 2000 and started with small planning projects and designing vegetable gardens at schools or empty lots. By 2010 every elementary school in the city had a garden and a seasonal curriculum. After school classes would maintain the gardens.

“Now we have a school year program,” says Chris, “that involves about 10 youth, and a summer program for 20 at the farm. We have three fulltime staff and two and a half Americorps interns. We start seeds in March in the office 10 minutes from the farm, and have a seeding operation in a school in a fourth floor stairwell with south-facing windows. No one goes there because it is so hot even in January! We put some plants in the ground in April, more in May, and by June we are going full tilt. We went from raising 300 pounds of food in 2014 to over a ton in 2015!

“We have a Green Team,” he continues, “of young people here who work on the farm. The kids make youth minimum wage for their work, which is $10 an hour. We get some jobs funding and various grants to help us out on that. Most of the produce we raise is directed to a mobile farmers market delivery van that buys the produce from us. The money goes back into the program.”

The Mobile Farmers Market was created by Groundwork Somerville in collaboration with other local food access groups. It sells in the city’s underserved neighborhoods, which might not otherwise have high-quality fresh fruit and vegetables. Marketing through the van is also a way for the farm to minimize pushback from private farmers who sell at the nearby thriving Union Square Market and might be upset at competition from “subsidized” farms.

Somerville has large Brazilian and Haitian populations. The farm raises certain vegetables that are popular with those communities, like Jamaican spinach, or Callaloo, and Jilo, a Brazilian eggplant. People were asking for those and saying they couldn’t get them anywhere, so the Green Team started growing them at the South Street Farm.

“Besides the farming work, there is a whole “soft skills” portion of the youth program,” explains Mancini. “We show them how to get basic skills such as showing up on time, writing a resume, etc. For a lot of these kids it is their first job. We also try to connect them to other opportunities for employment. “Driving is difficult in Somerville,” he continues, “and parking is nearly impossible. So we have 15 bikes for the kids to ride to work. Some have never ridden a bike before. Next year the kids will be working with NOFA/Massachusetts researching soil issues. We will have three test plots to study compost-based soils, testing them for toxicity and nutrients, and start a program of cover cropping.”

Green Team kids are mostly 15 to 19 years old. Most do not have to live in Somerville, but a few of the slots do require residency. Some of the kids...
are college bound, and others are going to be in the trades.

“The program is targeted to vulnerable populations,” Chris says, “recent immigrants, people of color, etc. That is part of our selection criteria, based on our funding. We try to get the families involved as well, but we are working with teenagers and it is a paid job for them, so they tend to feel it is their thing. They are grown up now and don’t want anything to do with their parents. We try to do something with the families at the beginning and end of each season, like a celebration.”

Clay, whose background is landscape design, construction and contracting, works with the students on how to measure a site and do scale drawings or teaches about OSHA or how to prune a big tree limb. Youth who have done a year with the program might go on to working with a small landscaping company or a construction company, he says.

In 2012 the Somerville Board of Aldermen approved Massachusetts’ first urban agriculture ordinance, codifying the municipality’s health and zoning ordinances, subtracting the legalese, and putting “The ABCs of Urban Agriculture” onto their website as a downloadable pdf. Modern Farmer magazine has gone so far as to call Somerville one of the five most urban-livestock-friendly areas in the nation, offering as it does permits to raise chickens or keep bees.

“The powers that be really want us to be here,” agrees Mancini. “The mayor is a huge supporter of this farm. He wants to innovate, be the first to do this kind of stuff. A lot of city hall staff are very forward looking and really into this. You don’t get naysayers there. The head of the parks department is very enthusiastic about what we are doing.

“Somerville is all about community development,” he continues. “We get some grants from the city, through the Community Preservation Act or other funding. We have to do our part but it is not like we are fighting for this land. Somerville has among the lowest rate of open space of any city in the country. We want to add at least 100 acres of open space here. The city is looking for any little postage stamp lot to use, and creative ways to use it.”
Farmers at First Root Farm’s display show the produce grown on public land at Minuteman National Historical Park in Concord.

This newspaper contains news and features about organic food and farming in the Northeastern US as well as a Special Supplement on Farming on Public Land.