Why Beginning Farmers?
by Jack Kittredge

Anyone glancing at graph 1 can see how the age of farmers over the last century or so has changed: there are far fewer young ones now, and the percentage of those 65 and older has almost tripled. Graph 2 shows a detailed analysis of this phenomenon over just the last generation: there are about a third as many farmers aged under 35 now, and almost twice as many aged 65 and up.

This trend has worried many in American agriculture for some time. As a result individuals, organizations, and even the government have developed programs to assist young and new farmers get access to land, learn farming and business skills, and secure financing for the many investments in livestock, equipment, feed and infrastructure needed to get a realistic start in farming.

These programs, along with the robust local food movement, have in turn helped many individuals negotiate the formidable barriers to beginning such a career. In this issue we will detail some of these programs and how readers can access them. In addition, we will introduce you to individual farmers who have successfully launched farm businesses and analyze what circumstances were pivotal for them. We hope these stories and articles inspire more people to consider a career in agriculture. The growth of interest in the value of nutritious food, as well as of food produced on small and local farms, will help to make such careers financially attractive and thus sustainable. We need more people practicing this craft if we want to produce healthy citizens into the future and still maintain the incredibly rich and diverse natural world with which we were initially blessed.

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Vermont Land Access Profile: Tangletown Farm

by Ben Waterman, University of Vermont Extension New Farmer Project
and Lila Bennett and David Robb, Tangletown Farm

The “Own some, lease some” model has been successful for beginning farmers in New England. Leasing land can be part of a continuum that leads to centralized whole farm ownership once operations grow. Tangletown Farm started out four years ago owning 2 acres and leasing 100. Recently they had 170 leased acres under production for their livestock operations. Now Tangletown is in the process of acquiring a 188-acre farm in Northern Vermont!

Lila Bennett, David Robb and their three children, Samuel, Governor, and Willa, own their house on 2 acres in Middlesex, Vermont. Not enough, at first glance, to run a full-time, diversified pasture-based livestock operation? Tangletown Farm actually extends far beyond the homestead.

The farm leases 100 acres in one direction. Five miles in the other direction the farm leases another 30 acres. Tangletown Farm is not only a model for how savvy beginning farmers can make productive use of leased land, but also a story of how leasing can be of benefit to land owners and other community members involved. The farm now supplies hundreds of pounds of wholesome, free-range, and ethically raised beef, duck, rabbit, eggs and poultry to the greater Montpelier area of Vermont. Food from the farm is treasured in local elementary school lunches and cherished by CSA members and retail customers alike.

Tangletown Farm, in its fourth year of establishing, has based its success on the ability to own a small amount of acreage, and lease the rest. Leasing the majority of the farm’s land base keeps capital costs low, allowing the business to expand and scale up. The land access model has proven successful for Bennett and Robb, who are at the time of this writing the process of purchasing a 188-acre farm in West Glover, Vermont. According to Bennett,

“Leasing land has been a great stepping stone for us. We’re now at the point where we can buy our own farm, and being able to put everything in one place is going to be really exciting.”

The tale of how Tangletown Farm first gained access to land beyond their 2-acre homestead started when Lila was a teacher in a local elementary school and David worked as a carpenter. David approached a land owner at one of his jobs about the possibility of also pasturing pigs and chickens on the land. He responded, “Incidentally, I really like bacon…” From there the operation took off. Land access was key, but Lila and David stress the fact that their relationship with the land owner was built upon trust and mutual respect. Tangletown Farm pastured pigs, horses, beef and poultry while respecting the land owners privacy and desire for good land stewardship. The landowner was happy the land was being used and even happier when the partnerships yielded fresh and delicious meats! Lila and David were glad to give the land owner fresh and healthy meats as a form of rent payment. To date, the lease agreement has been strictly verbal.

Two years later Bennett approached the land owner about the possibility of also pasturing pigs and chickens on the land. He responded, “Incidentally, I really like bacon…” “From there the operation took off. Land access was key, but Lila and David stress the fact that their relationship with the land owner was built upon trust and mutual respect. Tangletown Farm pastured pigs, horses, beef and poultry while respecting the land owners privacy and desire for good land stewardship. The landowner was happy the land was being used and even happier when the partnerships yielded fresh and delicious meats! Lila and David were glad to give the land owner fresh and healthy meats as a form of rent payment. To date, the lease agreement has been strictly verbal.

Lila and David remember one time when animal got loose at the same time at each separate location. “We’re definitely spread thin sometimes,” adds David.

While the couple agrees, overall, that their experiences with leasing land have been positive, they have been looking for the past three years for opportunities to purchase land to expand, and have operations more centralized. Still, Lila and David feel that leasing land has brought unique opportunities. Mainly, the arrangements have helped raise Tangletown Farm’s visibility within the community. The simple fact that the farm is spread out in several locations makes Tangletown a well-known community entity. Making trips to the various plots is an opportunity for the farm family to interact with people who have a “stake” in their operation.

This, in turn, has helped community members become more exposed to local agriculture. It won’t be difficult for the farm to find more land to lease if they need it; they are visible and well known enough to have received many offers from non-farming community land owners hoping to transition their land into production. Making trips to their animals has also helped tie the Tangletown Farm family together. “Farming for us has been a whole-family endeavor,” Lila affirms. Samuel, Governor, and Willa have found an added bonus when they visit one of the leased plots: the landowner happens to have kids of similar ages who always welcome the time to play. “Having opportunities to get our kids out, enjoying farming and other kids, is a hugely positive result of leasing land,” Bennett adds.

Whether it leases land or owns it, Tangletown Farm has become a valuable addition to the Central Vermont community. The Farm raises 100% free-range, pasture-fed, and ethically raised meats, and Lila and David often welcome community members to see how their animals are given the happiest lifestyle possible. David exclaims, “It can’t be that bad for the chickens [on our farm] when they are free, for
the most part, to just walk away!"

Tangletown Farm is a strong supporter of local agriculture, striving to have 95% of their animals diets supplemented with Vermont-grown 100% certified organic grain, grown and processed right in Addison, Vermont. Local schools have benefited from Tangletown Farm’s commitment to sustainable agriculture and nutritious foods. Tangletown Farm supplies meats and eggs to two local elementary schools at significantly reduced prices. The farm works with schools on food related education. Lila and David also feel strongly that local food should be made available to people of all socioeconomic backgrounds. They regard these principles as important parts of their business, even if it means diversifying production and marketing to keep operations economically viable.

Full-time farming has been a long-time dream for Bennett and Robb. They believe that “it isn’t always easy to find land, so making positive arrangements that display the obvious benefits to the landowners may help prospective farmers be more successful.” Tangletown Farm runs a 150 member CSA and is expanding to include new members. For more information about the farm, please visit www.tangletownfarm.com, or email ttownfarm.com or call (802) 229-4776.

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Farming Education Opportunities
In Full Bloom!

by Eve Springwood Minson

NOFA – New Jersey, Beginner Farmer Incubator
Program Director

“Agriculture is not a technical profession or merely in the hands of the expert,” wrote Liberty Hyde Bailey, Cornell University.

As the “Good Food” revolution takes root and more people of all ages begin entering the profession of farming, a common question asked of staff at NOFA-New Jersey, and no doubt many other farming organizations, is just how do I get an education to become a farmer? Do I really have to have a bachelor’s degree to farm? Isn’t there an easier and cheaper way to learn farming than going to school? Should I pursue the apprenticeship path? Should I pursue a business degree instead?

The answer is “Yes” to some part of all those questions.

No Farmers No Food

We farmers all have different and interesting stories about how we got bitten by the farming bug and started our journey into the field. Most of us enter the profession from different directions than our colleagues: some inherit the family farm (lucky dogs!), some are inspired by family members at an early age and head off to college to study horticulture or agriculture. Some find their inspiration in midlife as we transition from stressful careers to those which mean so much more to us. Whatever path we take to get there, a vast array of new educational options abound in the 21st century unlike any other time in history, alongside the equally exciting entrepreneurial opportunities of this burgeoning field.

Although some folks in mainstream America may still be in the dark about the farming movement, most of us in the field agree that a “good food” revolution is taking place all around us, a phrase coined by Will Allen, ex-basketball player – turned urban farmer extraordinaire. “It is remarkable to see that this good food revolution has become so mainstream and so inclusive,” he said. “As the message spreads, the demand for better food grows. So when someone as popular and as influential as Oprah Winfrey speaks up to support this movement, it’s a validation of what we’ve been saying to our families, and the public starts to listen.”

For basic guidance, all one must do to find out what’s happening in the world of beginner farmer education is read the excellent book No Farmers, No Food. The book is a concise, and you know what you are getting for your money. If you only have a short period of time to get a quick summary of the path we take to get there, a vast array of new educational options abound in the 21st century unlike any other time in history, alongside the equally exciting entrepreneurial opportunities of this burgeoning field.

Whether fighting against GMO food and for labeling, promoting the benefits of grass-fed livestock, learning the value of growing our own food in our backyard home gardens, or raising bees on our rooftops in cities, we are daily bombarded by the media extolling the healthy virtues of “homemade” food options.

From the New York Times to the standbys Mother Earth News and Organic Gardening Magazine, both in their fifth decade of publication, food is news, nearly everyday. Foodie magazines and phone apps abound, as do food cable TV programs, pop-up restaurants, gourmet organic food trucks and celebrity chef seasons, with something for every price range. It’s about overflowing with healthy food, along with Dr. Oz and Dr. Andrew Weil, so is everyone else. Guess farming has really hit prime-time!

Who Should Do This?

For those new to the field looking for the right path for you. The course is generally offered by different farming non-profits to be done together with a group. If that’s not available in your area or offered by a NOFA chapter near you, the workbook can be purchased and worked on alone, but then of course you won’t have the benefit of the background and stories of the other participants, which can be enlightening and thought-provoking.

University Bachelor’s Degree Education and Student Farms

At the top of the list is your typical four-year bachelor’s degree at a state land-grant university or private college. For a really terrific assessment of what’s out there, check out the new book Fields Of Learning by Laura Sayre and Sean Clark. While not an exhaustive database of all programs, the book highlights over 150 different programs. Fields Of Learning helps us understand not only the history, but also in-depth management issues and challenges of the academic farming setting. Faculty and students share perspectives with the reader who gets an insider’s look at the complex issues that administrators must juggle to ensure the continuation of their programs or to simply justify their existence.

Beginning Farmer Incubators

Beginner Farmer training programs, aka “incubators” using the business term, are starting to flourish in areas of agriculture and related environmental education. An excellent resource for academics hoping to launch farm programs, or for those looking to find people with limited resources who have an interest in learning about farming.

Of Learning helps readers consider that while students are receiving instruction and experience in the nuts and bolts of farming, they are also inheriting decades of social science as these centers of learning have struggled with their own values and what they are passing on to their charges. It is this insider perspective and critical analysis that helps the reader the insider’s scoop one can never get from the college website or catalog. The book is certainly a worthwhile read, and great place to start one’s research.

Who Should Do This?

A four-year college degree obviously comes with considerable costs and time investment, so prepare for both. As the trend is toward shorter, cheaper and quicker ways to learn farming than going to school, more people are looking into education opportunities.

Private Agricultural Colleges and Farm Schools.

While more popular in the last century, there are still some private colleges that specialize in agricultural studies and are getting a boost from farming’s resurgence. Delaware Valley College in Bucks County, Pennsylvania is one such college with an agricultural legacy that still offers farming programs. Tufts University in Massachusetts has launched an exciting farm support program, the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project. Its mission is to, “assist beginning farmers with farmer shortages. With retirement looming in the next few years, the number of older farmers is expected to decrease by 20% over the next decade.”

The Farm School in Athol, Massachusetts is another school with diversified programs for people of all ages. They offer a year-long practical field training program connected to their large C.S.A. In New York City, a non-profit farming organization, Just Food, has recently started a farmer training program, alongside Grow NYC’s New Farmer Development Project, also located in the heart of a very un-farmy New York City. In Putnam Valley, a stone’s throw from New York City, another progressive and exciting program is taking root. "The Jewish Farm School is, “dedicated to teaching about contemporary food and the environmental issues through innovative trainings and skill-based Jewish agricultural education.” Non-academic programs like these are starting to show up across the U.S.

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College profiles are broken down into program descriptions, history, operations and management, education options abound in the 21st century unlike any other time in history, alongside the equally exciting entrepreneurial opportunities of this burgeoning field.

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the northeast and other parts of the country. The USDA is now funding the Beginner Farmer/Rancher Development Program through the National Institute of Food and Agriculture with the hope that their resources will grow enough new farmers so that we can replenish the stock of retirees leaving the field. Due to an infusion of funds for educational support, the USDA BFRDP grants are putting life into new incubator programs all across the U.S.

Intervale Center. One of the oldest incubators still in existence and thriving, though hard hit by last year’s weather extremes in Vermont, is Burlington’s Intervale Center Farm Incubator. A good model for anyone to look at, it is what most incubators model themselves after, or at least start with. Check out their website and you’ll learn a lot about what incubators can be after years of working on the model.

The NOFA-NJ Center for Working Lands Beginner Farmer Incubator is one such program funded through the BFRDP. Located in central New Jersey at Duke Farms, the incubator supports beginner farmers through their innovative program providing low-cost land, irrigation, barn space, deer fencing, mentoring and an educational stipend. The program runs for three years and then farmers are helped to find their own land through a Land Linkage program developed with the New Jersey State Agricultural Development Committee.

At Groundswell in Ithaca, New York, another BFRDP grant funded a similar project just outside of town. With magnificent views of Cornell University and the assistance of a neighboring CSA farm, Groundswell is breaking ground this year for their incubator. Groundswell also hosts a seasonal practicum for college students and wannabes who want a short, but intensive introduction to farming.

The Seed Farm in Vera Cruz, Pennsylvania, is an incubator program that has been funded locally and now nationally. Penn State works closely with the USDA BFRDP grants are putting life into new incubator programs all across the U.S.

Who Should Do This? Incubators are best used by people who have at least a couple of years of experience under their belts, need just a little support, are fairly clear what they are doing, and are highly motivated to try out their business plans, and are willing to put their ideas to the test.

On-Farm Apprenticeship Programs And Internships

Lest we forget good ol’ on-the-farm-in-the-trenches learning, if you really want to learn from the ground up, check out your local NOFA chapter ‘farm and food guide’ and locate organic farms nearby where you might snag a great paid internship or just volunteer a few hours a week to start. Every NOFA chapter has or will soon have a version of an apprentice-matching service. Log on, find a farm, make some phone calls and emails, and schedule a visit to meet the farmer. If you have the right stuff, don’t mind getting dirty and working hard, you might qualify for a beginner job. You probably won’t be well paid, but you’ll be getting your education for free. Work a season or a few and you will understand the ins and outs of farming first hand, and can then make clearer decisions about where you see yourself in the future and what you love best about farming. Is it working with animals? Fruit? Vegetables? Maybe it’s growing flowers and herbs? Or maybe it’s in the processing of food for restaurants or cooking? Maybe it’s value-added, making a delicious condiment or salad dressing? Somewhere in the middle of all the hard work there is a career path for you.

Who Should Do This? If you think farming is the thing for you, go try it on for a day, a week, or a season. Engage in the rigors of day-to-day life in the field, work through a hot, dry or wet season, get dirty, tired, and find out if you are made for this type of life. Get out there and find out who you are and what you’re made of! You’ll know quickly if you love the way your muscles feel the morning after a tough day in the field, or if “backyard gardener” is more suitable for your energy level.

Try It On Your Own...Community Garden, Friend’s Garden, Your Backyard

If this all seems way too intimidating for you, that’s okay too. You can start your journey into food and farming in your own backyard, or even better, a community garden where you can share information, land, and good times while growing beautiful food. So many communities are sprouting gardens that it’s getting easier every day to find one. If not, start one! Gather your friends, find some public land, and become a local leader to make something inspirational happen. It takes time, some money and resources, and a lot of energy, but once you make it happen you feel like you’ve just contributed your life’s work. Community gardens are invaluable resources for people of all ages and backgrounds to get together to grow food and community together. It’s worth every ounce of sweat you put into it. If that’s not an option, encourage a few of your closest friends to start a small garden in someone’s backyard and see the magic that happens. You’ll bond, have a good time together, and be learning more than you can imagine every time you’re out there in the sun working hard. And while that may not feel like a “real” farmer, you are starting your journey and commitment to the land. Congratulations! You’re on your way to becoming a farmer.

Who Should Do This? Just getting started? Thinking about how great it would be to grow your own food? Never put a bean seed into the ground
before except in kindergarten? Maybe you’d benefit from a season or two just simply playing in the dirt or growing a few tomatoes in containers on your deck in your backyard or community garden where you’ll learn a lot fast and find some support and friendship.

Online Beginner Farmer Programs and Support Courses

Land-grant universities that house agricultural programs are engaged in some form of beginner farmer work either through online resources like fact sheets or growing manuals, or in the more advanced cases, offering online courses, hosting webinars, videos, free documents and other downloadable resources. Universities like University of Vermont, Cornell University, Penn State, University of Massachusetts, the University of Maine have beginner farmer web pages with downloadable information pertinent to that state. Lots of practical and valuable information is funneled through each. Some land-grants offer more than others with Cornell University at the forefront of beginner farmer education at this time. Fortunately, most of the resources they offer are usable in other geographical areas in the Northeast besides New York. That said, it appears that not every land-grant in the Northeast has a strong commitment to organic farming support, though more universities and colleges are making strides in this area every day.

In addition, business courses of all kinds are offered by various organizations, including NOFA chapters, and small business administration chapters. One such course offered by NOFA-NJ offers, created by NxLevel, helps you prepare a professional business plan and get your farm business on the right track. The course, Tilling the Soil of Opportunity, is designed to help you test your ideas, explore new marketing opportunities, and develop a business and marketing plan specific to your farm. Participants assess their resources, develop marketing strategies, understand financials, learn how and where to get funding for their businesses, and network with other farmers. This is an intense course that will require at least 45 hours of your time and there is a cost involved. There are other products and classes out there similar to this that don’t require as much investment in time and money, so do your homework and find out what will best fit your wallet and needs. Starting in small digestible bites makes sense for beginners, and makes for a feeling of accomplishment.

Who Should Do This? The benefits of the more informal online format are ease of use, economical cost, and staying in your own backyard. Online courses frequently take place at a specified time, but can generally be reviewed again later. It’s not the same as being there in person, but you get what you want when you are available. Some courses allow you to enjoy these offerings to simply boost your knowledge base over however long you want to take. You can take a specific class and not have to test your ideas out more than you want. So if you’re just trying on farming, start here and see where it takes you. Group-based business courses generally require sign-up and participation in person, though some are offered on an as-you-go basis.

Other Resources: National And Regional Organizations

NOFA and MOFGA. Regionally, the Northeastern collaborative of NOFA organizations has been helping beginner farmers for many decades. MOFGA (Maine Organic Farming and Gardening Association) hosts a Journeyperson Farm Training program at their main site. Please connect with your state’s NOFA chapter or MOFGA for beginner farmer resources and support. Each chapter hosts seasonal field days, educational events and conferences, and classes and each website is powered-packed with helpful information.

PAEA. The Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture is the Pennsylvania equivalent of a regional NOFA.

The following organizations and/or online educational resources are must-have go-to sites for all farmers and especially beginner farmers for fact sheets, informational guides, manuals, and general farming information.

ATTRA (the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service). Provides information and resource packets and other wide variety of topics related to production and marketing. www.attra.org

Beginnerfarmer.org- website. Check off of valuable information online, managed by Taylor Reid from Michigan State University. www.beginnerfarmer.org

The Greenhorns is a non-traditional grassroots non-profit organization made up of young farmers and a diversity of collaborators. Their mission is to create, promote, and support the new generation of young farmers. They do this by producing avant-garde programming, video, audio, web content, publications, events, and art projects that increase the odds for success and enhance the profile and social lives of America’s young farmers. www.thegreenhorns.net

Hawthorne Valley Farm believes in “nurturing the land that nurtures us” and takes this statement seriously. Their goals are: to establish a true Biodynamic Farm; to connect children and adults with the land and the food that nourishes them; and to provide agricultural products of the highest quality. Through the farm’s products, they hope to open an educational dialogue about our agriculture, our environment, our economy, and ourselves. http://hawthornevalleyfarm.org/hudson-valley-farm-beginnings

Local Harvest is an organic and local food website, maintaining a public nationwide directory of small farms, farmers markets, and other local food sources. www.localharvest.org

The New England Small Farm Institute promotes small farm development by providing information and training for aspiring, beginning and transitioning farmers. They maintain an extensive resource collection; produce publications; develop and offer innovative, farmer-guided programs; and advocate for policies that encourage sustainable small-scale agriculture. They also seek collaborative program-delivery partnerships with service providers-associates, on-farm mentors, organizations and agencies throughout the Northeast and nationwide. www.smallfarm.org

The Pfeiffer Center mission is to practice, teach and spread awareness of the biodynamic method of agriculture and land care. Their work takes the form of educational programs for adults and children, agricultural production, work with draft horses, beekeeping, and research. www.pfeiffercenter.org

The Rodale Institute works with people worldwide to achieve a regenerative food system that renews environmental and human health working with the philosophy that “Healthy Soil = Healthy Food = Healthy People®. www.rodaleinstitute.org

SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education). Extensive lists of free downloadable tip sheets, and suggestions for further research for small scale farmers looking to become more sustainable and profitable. www.sare.org

National Young Farmers’ Coalition (NYFC) is a group of young and new farmers organizing for collective success: they’re defining the issues that beginning farmers face, fighting for the policy change that they need, and bringing farmers together in person and online to learn, share and build a stronger community. www.youngfarmers.org

For Book Recommendations, Check Out The Following:

Chelsea Green is a publishing house that is a leader in agriculture and horticultural books for organic gardeners. See their website at www.chelseagreen.com/bookstore/search/gardening_agriculture/

NOFA Farming Guides, Set by Steve Gilman, Elizabeth Henderson, Seth Kroeck, Grace Gershuny, Brian Caldwell, Bryan Connolly, Sarah Flack, Karma Glotz, Karl North. A series of 9 guides originally published by NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Association), on organic principles and practices for both the beginner farmer as well as established farmers looking to convert to organic, or deepen their practices. Each book is 100 pages, but the information is weighty; the guides use a strong whole-systems farming theory behind their practical advice, as well as offer historical information, further resources, detailed appendices, and profiles of various organic farms across the Northeast. See Chelsea Green online bookstore for more details.


Sharing The Harvest, Revised and Expanded, A Citizen’s Guide to Community Supported Agriculture by Elizabeth Henderson, Robyn Van En, 2007, Chelsea Green


You Can Farm: The Entrepreneur’s Guide To Start & Succeed In A Farming Enterprise, by Joel Salatin, Polyface, 1998

Fields Of Learning, The Student Farm Movement in North America, Edited by Laura Syre and Brian Clark, Published by the University Press of Kentucky, 2011


Eve Springwood Minson is the program director for NOFA-NJ’s beginner farmer incubator, and also runs a community garden part-time, teaches gardening and tends a mini-CSA in her spare time.

Many thanks to our customers, friends and NOFA for the great job you all do to promote and provide healthy soils and food for people in New England and beyond.

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Beginning Farmers Start
Benedikt Farm

by Jack Kittredge

Southern New Hampshire, like most of New England, is not prime farmland. Lacking mighty rivers to flood and build up rich bottomland, most of the region’s fertility is spotty -- an occasional field will have a nice loam topsoil, but be surrounded with others less well endowed. Even some of these better fields have been used too hard without rest and badly need replenishment. Such is the land in Bedford, NH that beginning farming couple Max and Melissa Benedikt Blindow are pasturing.

They met in Germany, on a biodynamic farm where Max was the herdsperson and Melissa, an American who had spent many years in the biodynamic tradition, was volunteering.

“We decided to stay together,” Max says, “and had to pick a country. There is opportunity here, there is more land. Germany is so full. Things are subsidized there -- health insurance, education -- but you have to follow the rules. You can’t even be a carpenter without a degree for it.”

The couple came to America in 2009 and tried to figure out what to do. Melissa was from New Hampshire, so they went there, met all the local farmers and talked with them about opportunities. They saved their money and started planning to open a raw milk dairy.

“We figured we would do it part time,” Max recalls, “to show there was potential, and then we could get the loans needed to do it right. We worked along with the extension and got help from many programs.

Melissa works at Land For Good, the non-profit in Keene that helps agricultural land stay active. She is a field staffer and works with non-farming land owners to help them find farmers, and works with farmers who are seeking land to help transfer farms from one generation to another.

“It’s a great job she has for networking,” Max offers. “She knows all the farmers and all the issues. She talks about what she does there and so I end up knowing what is going on elsewhere. It will probably end up that I farm full time and she farms part time and works part time.”

“My goal was 100% to be a farmer,” agrees Melissa, “but now that I work at Land For Good I meet and am inspired by so many people that it’s hard to imagine staying here on the farm all the time.”

By May, 2011 the couple was ready to buy some cows and start farming in Alexandria, NH as Benedikt Dairy, LLC. In December of that year they moved to their current location in Bedford, NH.

Max is still amazed that it has been possible for them to be running their own farm so quickly.

“In Germany,” he says, “you work as an apprentice and learn from a master. It comes from the old Guild tradition. And public policy demands that agricultural land be farmed to its optimum production. We don’t have a vast prairie. If Bedford was in Germany, you would put all of these houses on one little street with their little back yards and the rest would all be pasture. With our population density, we can’t afford taking our pasture and letting 20 people live on it.

“Land is privately owned in Germany,” he continues, “but if you wanted to develop a farm for housing you would have trouble. Private property rights are not as strong as they are here. Land is the commons. Once the land is full and you need to feed people, the government will say no to destroying a farm. The zoning laws are very strong.”

The land Max and Melissa use for pasture is owned by the Town of Bedford and run by the non-profit Joppa Hill Community Farm. There are 50 acres on the farm, of which 35 are open. The couple have a 3-year management agreement with the educational farm that allows them to use their pastures, their barn, and their milking set-up.

Bedford is the fourth highest income town in the state. It is a bedroom community near Manchester and people come there to have families and enjoy the quality of life. They don’t have a problem paying reasonable prices for food.

“Most people,” says Max, “are here and comfortable in their developments, sending their kids to soccer school on a big parcel of farmland that was converted to recreational use. But somehow in 2006 the town bought this land, an old farm which was slated for development, for $3,500,000 and put a conservation restriction on it. The people of Bedford bought this land to preserve it as a farm. It is great, because it is a Community Farm. That is better than private ownership, because if I’m a private owner I can do all this crap!”

Max and Melissa have 20 acres of pasture which they manage. Twelve are leased from the educational farm, and they have 8 acres distributed in 2 fields that they lease directly from the town of Amherst, right next door to Bedford. They don’t own any land themselves.

“There is no way to own a farm here,” Max sighs. “It is totally out of the question. There is a 40 acre place for sale for $800,000! The only way it can work is with conservation easements so you don’t compete with development.

Part of the lease payment the couple makes each month is based on a profit-sharing on the milk they
sell. They end up paying about $300 a month, but there is a cap so it doesn’t go too high. So we pay about $3600 a year. They must also maintain a $2 million insurance policy including raw milk liability. The town of Bedford requires that. It costs us $1600 a year, with a thousand of that just for the raw milk.

The main pasture that the Blindows rent is a fine sandy loam. It is excellent grazing soil, but it has been overused and was never given a chance to recover. Toward the end of its use as a private farm it was used to graze horses for a while and got very compacted. Now Max has broken it up into sections, each with its own water piped from a tank they fill, to try using a management-intensive grazing style to get maximum nutrition out of the field.

“We should be able to stock 10 to 20 cows on this with bought-in hay” he feels.

In NH you can produce up to 20 gallons a day of raw milk on a weekly average without regulation. You can sell it direct to consumers at the farm or at a farmers market or by delivering it to their door. The 20 gallon rule has been in place at least 5 years. Before that, it was a 5 gallon rule.

Beyond that, a farmer can set up a Grade A licensed raw milk dairy and produce as much as he or she wants. It can be sold in retail stores anywhere in the state. A Grade A dairy is inspected and has to meet the same guidelines as a dairy producing for the commercial pasteurized milk business. It is tested once a month. Max is tested anyway, despite being exempt, because he wants to see how they are doing.

“These New Hampshire rules,” Max stresses, “enable us to have the stepping stone to start something, get to a small scale, and then it is easier to grow than having all of the capital necessary for the whole infrastructure up front. If there is a huge production chain and thousands of people are involved, then it is a different thing than people selling a little milk to their neighbors.

“That is how we can get started in the business,” he continues. “We monitor the quality of our milk through the inspector who comes once a month. We follow the standard practices of milking into stainless steel, bottling in glass. But we can wash our bottles by hand here. There might be some things that are not essential to produce safe milk that might be an obstacle to people beginning. I don’t really have a washable floor with a floor drain, or an NRCS approved septic system. Those might cost me $10,000 to put in, so in the beginning I would find that hard to do. But in our situation we can start and build the business up to where we can do those things. Once you are a recognized farmer, you qualify for little infrastructure grants, for instance, from the state. That is the next step we will take.”

There is a lot of demand for raw milk around Bedford. Max and Melissa don’t yet even produce 20 gallons, but if they would they feel they could easily sell them. Right now they have a wait list.

“What is really significant,” says Melissa, “is the demographics of our customers. It is mostly women from 30 to 50. They all have children and when the child has the first health problem they switch to raw milk. We get the mother with a little child in the car. They pick up the milk, pour some in a sippy cup, and hand it to the child. They had a child with problems, say allergies, and Googled and found raw milk.

Max and Melissa finally selected Jerseys and their breed of choice. They use a modern Jersey variety that has been bred for larger frames, and use New Zealand semen for the offspring to get more grass genetics in them.

“We initially considered Milking Devons as a breed,” Melissa relates. “But we decided starting out we wanted a higher production cow. It has worked out well. We’re still learning what it means to have less quality forage and keeping the balance between keeping them healthy and giving them just grass. We do supplement with grain at certain times of the year. It is very hard to get a healthy body condition back when they are quite skinny. We do want to fortify our pastures to get a higher quality forage. But we don’t have the cash flow to buy a lot of minerals to dump on there, and with a 3-year lease agreement it is always a balancing act.”

Max milks their three cows by hand, but hopes to milk with a machine as soon as they grow to having more cows. With just a few it makes more sense to milk by hand, he believes, because you don’t have to wash out a machine, too.

The couple also keep goats. They originally planned to milk them but found it was too much trouble. Now they just experiment with them to clear brush on the pastures and keep it down. They haven’t yet sold goat meat, but think they can get $10 or $12 a pound with the right marketing. People in Arabian clothes have been to the farm and asked what the goats cost. The biggest mosque in New England is right around the corner in Manchester.

They keep chickens as well, for eggs. Their birds are Golden Comets and Highline Bronze – the varieties they could get certified organic and ready to lay. For a house they use a design similar to Joel Salatin’s eggmobile.

“We tried a different structure,” says Max, “but it was too heavy. Sixty chickens fit in there. One person can pull this. The egg boxes are 5 gallon pails screwed into boards with the tops cut to leave lips. The bucket works better than a flat bottomed box because the hay falls back to the bottom rather than being scratched away. It cushions the egg better that way.

“For water,” he continues, “we have just a pipe and a few troughs. It comes from the well. We have close to 2 miles of ¾” poly pipe on this property. I can drain it for winter just by walking the whole system with it riding on my shoulder.

Max and Melissa’s whole operation is certified organic, which they believe distinguishes them in the market, giving them more credibility. They have nothing but praise for Vicky Smith, the New Hampshire state official who does all the certification there. When they moved there and needed the whole place certified right away, she came and did it quickly.

One downside to being organic in a place like New Hampshire is the lack of other organic farms. There are a lot of positive aspects to being in NH due to their being so little agriculture.

Me. It makes it hard because you can’t go to your neighbor and ask for something. Your neighbor is not a farmer.

“With the certified organic infrastructure,” says Max, “we have to go far to buy hay, to buy grain. I have to go to Vermont to buy organic cows or chickens. We have to go where the infrastructure is more developed. But we are just going to accept that. As we each get established there will be more and more of us!”

Although Max was trained on a Biodynamic farm in Germany, and Melissa’s first husband was a biodynamic farmer, the couple does not do any biodynamic practices in their operation in Bedford. The aspects of biodynamic that Max wants to do are just organic anyway.
One of the ideas that Max and Melissa picked up when talking to farmers on first coming to NH as a couple and wanting to farm was to use the CSA model to sell raw milk. The nearby Temple-Wilton farm does this, and has found that it keeps the milk going out fresh all the time.

“The Natural Farmer” says, “and the CSA model allows us to have people pick it up on a specific day. People sign up for a pick-up day when they join. They pick one that fits their schedule. That has worked great. Also, the CSA model is more stable throughout the year. A lot of residents here are seasonal. If we were selling to customers directly we would see a big increase in the summertime. But that might not be where our lactation was delivering the most milk. Once school starts you see a dramatic decrease in the farmers market attendance.”

They do allow members to take vacations, however! People just tell Max or Melissa beforehand for vacations and they skip those weeks and attach them at the end of the term. Experience shows that people need that flexibility or they won’t sign up. Max has gotten really good at Excel designing schedules to take account of vacations. Without good record-keeping, like Excel, he predicts you are going to get very confused!

Benedikt Farm sells raw milk in glass half gallons. A 20 week share goes for $100, or $5 per half gallon. Perhaps broilers and even yogurt and cheese can also be sold on a weekly pre-order basis.

They do not make compost, he says, “but I don’t use any preparations. They don’t make sense to me on a scientific level. I like horns on cows, and the full cycle of the food and thus they do well, financially. They are more highly capitalized, they get an influx of free labor from the Waldorf school students. Their success has nothing to do with preparations. They do allow members to take vacations, however! They have their name on post-it notes on the jar. They bring their empty and full ones.

The CSA currently serves 50 people and Max and Melissa are getting their costs covered from that income. To pay Max a salary, much less Melissa, they will have to grow. They calculate that if they can get to 500 customers, or 100 bottles a day, they can have a sustainable business.

“We worried about attrition after the first season,” Max admits, “but our renewal rate was 90%. The CSA model to sell raw milk. The nearby Temple-Wilton farm does this, and has found that it keeps the milk going out fresh all the time.

“Raw milk is optimally sold the day it is produced,” explains Melissa, “and the CSA model allows us to have people pick it up on a specific day. People sign up for a pick-up day when they join. They pick one that fits their schedule. That has worked great. Also, the CSA model is more stable throughout the year. A lot of residents here are seasonal. If we were selling to customers directly we would see a big increase in the summertime. But that might not be where our lactation was delivering the most milk. Once school starts you see a dramatic decrease in the farmers market attendance.”

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“We worried about attrition after the first season,” Max admits, “but our renewal rate was 90%. The only ones who didn’t renew were those who moved away. We have been doing this since December 2011. We just send out a renewal notice when they expire. There are a couple customers who I have never seen!”

Already the couple is experimenting with other products that fit well with raw milk. In a CSA model. Eggs are a natural, and they are selling them for $6 a dozen. Ground beef from a culled cow goes for $9 a pound. Perhaps broilers and even yogurt and cheese can also be sold on a weekly pre-order basis.

“But we already have a system that works,” Max said.
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MORE ECO-AG WINTER READING
says, “and can show people the numbers and get some capital. We need to grow and get more equipment. We need 4-wheel equipment to move things, a tractor, a mower, a subsoiler. Sometimes, like in the spring, the grass grows fast and I don’t have enough animals to graze it down. So we need to move it to keep the grass in the right growth stage. I need to spread minerals, spread manure, move round bales around. I’m hoping to get them starting next year. It is just a matter of writing them down and budgeting for them. We might get loans from investors.”

Soon the couple hope to take their business plan to a lender to ask for a small business loan to finance the operation and its expansion into the next phase. Because they are leasing land from municipalities, they will not be seeking traditional land/home loans, but rather operating loans to grow the business itself.

Possible lenders they will pursue are:
- Farm Credit East
- Farm Service Agency
- New Hampshire Community Loan fund
- Action (specializes in funding higher risk individuals). Since one of us just immigrated, we have little credit history and may need to take on a higher interest loan until we’re more established.

As beginning farmers starting a new venture, Max and Melissa have gained a lot of experience in a short time. I asked them what they could tell other beginning farmers that might help them get off to a good start.

Melissa laughed and offered this: “When we first thought of buying this, we had a very romantic notion of farming, even with our hard working experience. In the end a farm is a business and you are either going to treat it like that or you are going to fail. I’d tell people to get their books in order, keep records. We weren’t efficient with our time because we didn’t keep good records at the start. I would emphasize asking current operators how they actually plan, how they keep records. The numbers.”

“Are you spending time dealing with unplanned activities during the day,” she continued, “you need more records and planning. Another important thing is to separate each enterprise and make sure each one is sustaining itself. Being certified organic and doing that is a lot of work. We’ve been doing that for seven years. We just started the dairy this year. We pushed us towards being more organized. I did a holistic whole farm planning class last winter. It was just for women, all about business planning and figuring out your holistic goals and planning for profit. That was very valuable.”

Max stressed many of the same themes: “Working on a farm is different from running your own operation, very different. There were projections we made that were just wrong because we didn’t see all the factors. I need good records of all my expenses to be accurate and not forget something. You don’t want to end up buying chicken feed with your dairy income. There was a time when our lactation cycles didn’t match our demand. We should have bought another cow but didn’t see it coming. We had to tell some people we didn’t have milk for them.

“We could have been more realistic looking at all the numbers,” he continues. “You want to know what is profitable and the only way to do that is to collect data and analyze it. I keep my financial records with Quickbooks but do my production records in Excel. The hardest part was we had no business training. We got business training from the Extension and that was a big help.

In fact Max and Melissa quite actively engaged others to help them during the beginning phase:
- Chuck Metcalfe of the NH Dept. of Health and Human Services, Dairy Sanitation section, helped us understand regulations regarding raw milk sales, sanitation, cooling, and sales restrictions. He also picks up and inspects milk samples monthly, and helps us analyze the results.
- Victoria Smith of the NH Department of Agriculture, Markets and Food section, is the US Department of Agriculture Organic Certification Inspector/Certifier. Vicky directed us to rules and helped us interpret and file paperwork for certification. She also inspected our leased land and facility for organic USDA/NHADAMP certification of milk and eggs, and serves as an ongoing advisor for New Hampshire labeling requirements for retail sales of milk, meat and eggs.
- Heather Bryant is an Agricultural Resources Educator at the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. She coordinated multiple site visits of other UNHCE educators and Natural Resources Conservation Service staff.
- Michal Lunak is a University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Assistant Professor/Dairy Specialist. He conducted multiple site visits, helped us understand a variety of milking systems from production to product conversion to marketing, and advised us on business planning and financial projections.
- John Porter is a University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Professor/Dairy Specialist Emeritus. He did a site visit to evaluate existing structures for suitability for our dairy operation.
- Dr. Stan Weeks is an independent agricultural engineering consultant, and a former Cornell University professor. He conducted a site visit to evaluate and make recommendations on an existing structure for dairy operations. Since New Hampshire does not have a staff Agricultural Engineer, this service is available to N.H. farmers through the support of the Andrew C. and Margaret R. Sigler Foundation of Norwich, Vermont. This grant covers the cost of an on-site visit to NH farms to deal with agricultural engineering issues.
- Seth Wilner, a University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Field Specialist and a Community & Economic Development and County Office Administrator, helped us with multiple site visits to train us in pasture monitoring, introduction to Holistic Management International, and principles of rotational grazing and whole farm planning.
- Donna Doel is a US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service Soil Conservationist who conducted a site visit to evaluate property for NRCS related grant program eligibility.
- George Hamilton, a University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Agricultural Resource Educator, helped us with multiple site visits for land evaluation, soil amendment recommendations, and introductions to other farmers in the community. He served as an ongoing advisor for all aspects of our operation.
- Mike Sciarabassi, a University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Professor/Agicultural Business Management Specialist, conducted a site visit to help with business planning and financial projections.
- Bob Bernstein is the Executive Director of Land For Good. He provided us with technical assistance during the lease drafting and signing process for land owned by the Town of Bedford, New Hampshire, under the agricultural conservation easement. He also helped with developing crowd fundraising strategies, advised us on different loan, grant, and continuing education options available to beginning farmers, and helped with goal setting, planning, and marketing strategy.

Prestov Towlse is an insurance agent with Davis and Towlse Insurance, Franklin, New Hampshire. He managed several site visits and ongoing phone consultations to advise on infrastructure improvements needed to run a raw milk dairy and meet insurance requirements in the state of New Hampshire on town-owned land.

Jack Gleason of the Conservation Commission of the Town of Amherst, New Hampshire, as well as multiple members of the Conservation Commission of the Town of Bedford, New Hampshire, represent the town for parcels leased by Benedikt Dairy. They provide general and periodic feedback for management of town-owned land under conservation easement, guidance for the priorities of land remediation based on easement, and interpretation of easement standards and definitions.

Now Max and Melissa see themselves in a different phase – the phase of planning for growth. They expect to be asking some of these people for slightly different services in the future. Specifically, they will ask:
- Mike Sciarabassi to help with financial statements for their business plan.
- Michal Lunak to help with an evaluation of their buildings to meet insurance requirements, and to help them network with others doing similar operations to create more accurate projections in their business plan.
- George Hamilton to be an ongoing advisor for all aspects of the operation.
- Chuck Metcalfe to provide feedback on pasture-based milking systems as they fit within the guidelines of New Hampshire’s dairy sanitation regulations, and
- Donald Sienkiewicz, Esq. to help with renewed or updated lease agreements and legal issues.

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Those First Year CSA Blues

by Kim Peavey, Westmoreland, New Hampshire

Beginnings

We were ready. We had spent five years apprentic-
ing at farms and CSA gardens. We had worked a lot, read a lot, questioned a lot, and in the process, learned everything we needed to know about CSA farming, or so we thought. Why, we could even explain in twenty-five words (or more) to puzzled family, friends, and neighbors just what a CSA farm was:

“Ahem,” one of us would begin, “CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture, a mutually beneficial relationship between farmers, members, and land.”

The other, without a pause, would jump right in: “A CSA farm is similar to a co-op. Members pay a fee at the beginning of the growing season. Then they pick up their share of the harvest once a week at the farm from June until late November. It’s a great system!”

Then, simultaneously taking the arms and walking along with the politely-nodding, wondering-if-they-should-have-asked person, we would continue, “CSA members are assured of a variety of high quality, nutritious produce, grown without any chemical fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides. Farmers have consistent financial support and appreciation, and the land benefits from sustainable farming practices.”

“Oh?” the person would reply.

“Yes!” we’d respond enthusiastically, happy for the politely-nodding, wondering-if-they-should-have-asked person.

“Oh?” the person would reply.

“Now how is it again that we’re going to get all the plastic?” mutters the Formerly Most Optimistic Neighbor.

“Like a kite,” our Most Generous, Most Humorous Neighbor says. “We can do it,” and, “We don’t have to measure, you know, line things up?” suggests Older and Wiser.

“Oh, no, not really,” Young and Eager answers breezily.

Soon we are ready to bolt the ridgepole to the hoops. The first two bolts are easy. The third one gives us a little trouble. It seems that things aren’t quite lined up.

“Hmm,” says Older and Wiser.

“Hmmm,” says Young and Eager.

“We consider re-drilling all the holes. Instead, we keep it from flying all the way across.”

“You think?” says Young and Eager.

“Don’t we have to measure, you know, line things up?” suggests Older and Wiser.

“There’s three of us,” he says.

Fortunately, the ground has thawed enough that both of us can proceed: Young and Eager sets the anchor posts; Older and Wiser sets a chair firmly onto the ground, and sets her eight months pregnant self firmly on it.

Next we insert the hoops, a two-farmer job, which means Older and Wiser’s brief respite is ended. The hoops slip in easily.

This isn’t so hard, we think. “I’ve done this several times,” says Young and Eager confidently.

“Don’t we have to measure, you know, line things up?” suggests Older and Wiser.

“Yes, and that propane heater, how is that supposed to get hooked up?” the farmers say, glaring at it. “And the fans – they run on electricity? Which comes from where exactly?”

Happily, we are delivered, first by a late lunch, and then in the person of a Most Generous Neighbor, who Knows All: heaters, electric work, how to convince a bolt to go where it doesn’t want to go. Not only does he Know All, he has the tools, too, and makes time for his benighted neighbors, who thought they would be struggling on by flashlight into the wee hours. Instead, after several hours with our neighbor’s help, we stand back and admire our almost-greenhouse, just as dusk turns to dark.

On the day we are ready to put the plastic over the hoops, we call everyone we know. Unfortunately, we have just moved to the area, so it is a short list. Our Most Generous Neighbor appears. “Looks like there’s three of us,” he says.

We nod and giggle, a trifle nervously. We discuss the weather.

“It’s a little windy,” Older and Wiser remarks.

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“Yes, and that propane heater, how is that supposed to get hooked up?” the farmers say, glaring at it. “And the fans – they run on electricity? Which comes from where exactly?”

Happily, we are delivered, first by a late lunch, and then in the person of a Most Generous Neighbor, who Knows All: heaters, electric work, how to convince a bolt to go where it doesn’t want to go. Not only does he Know All, he has the tools, too, and makes time for his benighted neighbors, who thought they would be struggling on by flashlight into the wee hours. Instead, after several hours with our neighbor’s help, we stand back and admire our almost-greenhouse, just as dusk turns to dark.

On the day we are ready to put the plastic over the hoops, we call everyone we know. Unfortunately, we have just moved to the area, so it is a short list. Our Most Generous Neighbor appears. “Looks like there’s three of us,” he says.

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The Natural Farmer

Winter, 2012-13

Brown, with our kite stuck right here on the ground. Finally we sober up. We haul out the ladders. The farmer of the ninth month pregnancy acts as ballast. The other farmer congratulates her on her impressive weight. The Most Generous, Most Humorous Neighbor suggests finding more pregnant farmers, as the wind is picking up.

The pregnant farmer begins to feel as if she is picking up. “Help! Help!” she cries, “I can’t hold it!”

“We’ve almost got it, we’ve almost got it!” the other two shout.

The CSA spirits can hardly breathe for laughing.

The wind dies down. The plastic is up.

Baby and Horses Arrive

In April, we welcome our daughter to the world, at 5:46 a.m. “What a fine time for a farmer’s child to be born!” exclaims Young and Eager, who likes to get up early.

“Hmmm,” says Older and Wiser, who doesn’t.

Four days later, Young and Eager phones from the road. “I’ve bought a team of horses!” he says, thrilled.

“A team of what?” says the other farmer, somewhat puzzled by anything that doesn’t relate directly to diapers, breastfeeding, and uninterrupted hours of sleep.

The horses arrive: May and Bess, big, blond, and Belgian. They are good-tempered, easy to handle, and steady, a good first team for us. Soon we take our first drive, in the spring sunshine.

“Is that tire all right?” says the Baby-Holding Farmer.

“Sure,” says the Driving Farmer, “Sure, it is. See, the baby doesn’t mind. The horses don’t mind. And I can see our house, too. See that little speck over there? We’re almost home. Isn’t that great?”

The Baby-Holding farmer, definitely feeling Older and Wiser, declines to answer this question. The baby sleeps, all the racket away home. The Driving Farmer picks up a new title: Fixer of Falling Apart Horse Machinery, a title that seems to be almost constantly in use over the coming year.

The next day, it becomes clear that Bess, despite her tractable nature, seems to think an electric fence in only a minor deterrent. And May, despite her usual position as lead horse, is perfectly happy to follow Bess right out of the pasture, as we discover when our phone rings every morning at 5:30 a.m.

“Hey, are you the people with big horses?” a grumpy voice says.

“Hmmm” says Young and Eager, pretty grumpy himself, “maybe we’d better spend a little more time on fencing around here.”

Older and Wiser finds this remark riotously funny. Young and Eager is not quite so amused.

Plowing and Rain

In April and May it rains. It rains and rains. Rains and rains and rains and rains.

“The greenhouse seems to be full of water,” mentions Young and Eager.

“Oh dear,” says Older and Wiser, handing him a little child that also seems to be full of water.

The farmers peer out the window, trying to see through the downpour.

“How much water is it?” says Older and Wiser. “Let’s dig a ditch, and make a little dam right there. That’ll help.”

“Actually,” says Young and Slightly Less Eager, “I was thinking of buying a submersible pump.”

Still it rains. The little seedlings in their flats begin to look sad. The little farmers in their house begin to look sad.

Finally there is a tiny bit of sunshine. Since we have horses, but no plow, we call the only person we know who has one, hoping he might take pity on us and come over with his plow, handily hooked up to his tractor. We phone him, without success, all day. Apparently he is helping everyone else who has horses, but no plow.

The rain resumes the next morning.

A few days later, Young and Eager phones again from the road. “I bought a plow,” he says, thrilled.

“Awhat?” says the other farmer, still a bit confused by technical farming terms these rainy, baby-filled nights and days.

“A plow!” the first farmer repeats.

“But we don’t know how to plow,” Older and Wiser ventures.

“I’ll be home soon!” the first bubbles.
During a dryish stretch, the Plowing Farmer harnesses the horses for their first big job. He hooks up the plow, waves cheerily to the Greenhouse-Weeding, Baby-Feeding Farmer. She smiles back, in a hopeful manner. The horses start right in. But they don’t get far.

The farmer adjusts the plow. The horses heave. They go a few more yards. The farmer stops, readjusts. Plow a little, readjust, plow a little, bang on another likely looking piece of plow. Still it does not go well. Is it the soil, in sod for thirty years? Is it the plow? Is it the horses? Is it the farmer?

Young and Eager takes a look around: are there any old-time teamsters strolling by? Taking a walk in the spring air perhaps? Looking for a young farmer to help out?

But the road is empty. The farmer is all alone, in a huge field of sod, with a plow, two unhappy horses, and a big headache.

By the end of the morning Young and Eager Farmer is feeling more like Weary and Discouraged Farmer. His voice is nearly gone from urging the horses on. He is plowing only a few inches deep, but the horses are jumping in their collars. Their muscles quiver.

It is more difficult than any of us thought. In fact, it seems rather awful. We despair for our horses, our garden, ourselves. We feel like giving up farming.

Finally, in the afternoon, there is barely a quarter acre plowed, not even half of what we hoped to have ready. It will have to be enough.

It is not until the second plowing, two months later, for the fall crops, that we find out the plow was set too deep. Not quite the fine seedbed. But, hey, we’ve got something in the ground.

Next we bring out our fancy-dancy seeder to direct-sow carrots and beets. Young and Eager wrestles it across our lumpy seed-beds. Older and Wiser walks in the next pathway, watching the seed and the gears to make sure it’s really working. The baby happily nurses, enjoying the outdoor, in-motion meal.

“Look,” we say, “isn’t it clever? It’s covering up every seed!”

Then we uncover a few seeds, to see if it’s actually putting seeds in the bed.

“Well, they’re going somewhere,” Young and Eager finally points out, “because our seed bag is almost empty. Maybe we ought to quit uncovering them all and then covering them back up again.”

Older and Wiser giggles. “But it’s so clever!” she says, checking a few more, and pointing them out to the Equally Amazed Baby.

Soon the seed bag is entirely empty, and we realize our thinning work will be cut out for us. It seems we had the fancy-dancy seeder set at the wrong fancy-dancy setting.

Distribution

At the end of May, nearly recovered from the frantic field preparation and planting, as well as increasingly more alert with every night of a Sleeping-Slightly-Longer Baby, we suddenly realize we have no place to distribute vegetables, should we ever get any to distribute. We look pathetically in our kind landlords’ direction, who, filled with the CSA spirit, so we guess, or else filled with the desire to be rid of our pathetic looks, allow us to use an old chicken-coop-turned-hardware-store-turned-distribution shed.

We clean out boxes of junk, sweep the floor, put plastic over what used to be windows. It’s not exactly high-class, but it has a certain decrepit-old-falling-down-farm-building charm. It’s dry. It has a door. It has a resident bat. What more could one ask for?

We are thrilled to have twelve CSA members by the beginning of June. Our signs, posted in February, featuring beautiful and delicious vegetables, and smiling members picking lovely flowers, did not produce the deluge of phone calls we had anticipated. But the recent good weather combined with the local folks’ big-garden-of-our-own dreams gone under have driven hordes of eager vegetable eaters to our door. We are happy to accept them.

“Even though it is so late in the season already,” we say, graciously, magnanimously.

One of these fine members donates an enormous chalkboard for our distribution shed. “Probably been trying to get this out of the house for years,” we giggle to each other, as we prepare to write harvest shares out on the board.

Another fine daughter-of-a-member, six years old, donates chalk: four quarter inch long stubs in the bottom of a grubby chalk box. We giggle again, and write small.

“Maybe next year, when we’re making lots of money farming,” Young and Eager says, “we can buy some long chalk at the store.”

“Colored chalk even!” says Older and Eager This Time Too.

Harvest

Then suddenly it is upon us.

The first harvest day approaches; looms, rather; menaces, actually. Our promising crops look less promising divided by twelve. Harvesting doesn’t take long. We go from a little cross to quite cross to downright grumpy. It is a pathetic harvest. One arugula leaf per member. We get so far down in the dumps we start to laugh.

“Come on in, everybody,” we joke, “get your leaf, oops careful now, don’t drop it, that’s your salad for this week! What’s that again? The name of this fine CSA? Yes, yes, it’s Slim Pickins’ CSA! Slim Pickins’ CSA, where you don’t get much of anything! Not much arugula, not much tatsoi, not much food to all! Join up! Tell all your friends! Slim Pickins’ CSA!”

The CSA spirits take pity on us. They introduce us to a friendly Local Farmer, who has lots of garden (organic even), and not enough hands. We trade a little work and a little cash for snowpeas and lettuce to “round out,” as we say brightly, our members’ shares.

“At least we’re supporting local small farms,” Young and Eager chirps.

“I suppose,” sighs Older and Wiser, as she enters yet another minus in the checkbook.
Amazingly, the members seem thrilled with whatever we have to offer. We begin to think of the advantages of CSAs being little known entities: nobody knows quite what to expect, and nobody seems to expect much. “Well, that’s perfect for us,” we say, “old Slim Pickins’ CSA.”

But finally, in August, we have enough vegetables that we don’t need to bargain for more from our friendly Local Farmer. We have good amounts of eggplant and tomatoes, all from the greenhouse. The sweet peppers, also in the greenhouse, are turning red. We have zucchini and yellow squash, endive and escarole, lettuce and carrots. The broccoli is red. We have them every night for dinner, and so healthy, too. Of course, we do have them every night for dinner, and at lunchtime as well. And we are considering how mmmm, mmmm delicious they might be at breakfast. We can’t bear to waste any.

“What a great way to learn how much we should sow next year!” says Young and Eager.

“Hmmmm,” says Older and Wiser, surveying a kitchen heaped up with soybeans to pick, soybeans to cook, soybeans to freeze.

In the distribution shed, the members edge away from us and our towering piles of soybeans, preferring the tomatoes, the green beans, the broccoli, even the peculiar skinny Asian eggplant we grow.

Gamely, the member picks up a head of lettuce, remarking on its lovely color, nice size, and fresh appearance. Then she notices a slug clinging to one of the leaves. We consider remarking on the slug’s lovely color, nice size, and fresh appearance, but decide it would be wiser to remove the critter without fanfare, and divert our beleaguered member’s attention to the bounty.

“Oh, the bounty of August!” says Young and Eager. “Have you seen the glorious sweet red peppers? They’re right over here, and you get three this week!”

“Hmmmm,” says Older and Wiser, setting up a wire hoop, dangles beet greens and gets stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must bend and get stuck, and we don’t know what to do about it. We know the well is hand-dug, but it must
be deeper than four feet.

We consider calling Our Lovely, Tolerant, and Helpful Landlords. We consider calling Our Most Generous Neighbor. We consider calling the Friendly Loc al Farmer. We consider calling all our CSA members, hoping there might be a well-digger among them.

We consider a more fervent rain-prayer effort. We consider going in the house for a nap. We consider lying right down by the well for a nap, as all our considering has worn us out mightily.

"I know!" says Young and Eager excitedly, sitting up.

"What?" says Older and Wiser, deciding to stay prone until she hears the well-fixing/hose-fixing idea.

"It must be time for lunch!" exclaims the first farmer.

"Yes!" says the second, rolling over, gathering up the baby, and fairly leaping towards the house.

Over lunch, we get an idea. We think our idea would best be conducted in the presence of at least one of the Lovely Landlord/Well-owners. He thinks our idea isn’t so bad, so we tie an iron bar to the twisting hose. The Lovely Landlord/Well-owners. He thinks our best be conducted in the presence of at least one of the baby, and fairly leaping towards the house.

"Yes!" says Older and Wiser, deciding to stay up.

"What did you do today?" inquires Older and Wiser.

"Oh, nothin’," he answers.

"Who did you do today?" inquires Older and Wiser.

"Heck," says one farmer.

"Somebody must have sneaked in and stolen it, it is still gone," says Older and Wiser.

"I don’t think so," says Older and Wiser, "It must be the horses snorting."

We harvest still from the greenhouse, as well as cold tolerant crops from outside, such as spinach. In fact, we harvest mountains of spinach. The members begin sidling away from us, not quite meeting us in the eyes: acting downright edgy-skeambash around our mountains of spinach. We think of changing our name again: Nothing But Spinach CSA. "It’s a step up from "Slim Pickins’ CSA," we giggle.

We begin cleaning up the garden, putting it to bed for the winter. We pull up stalks, roll up hoses, take down tomato fences. We return jumbled up tools to their proper pegboard places. We tidy up the distribution shed.

At our last distribution, we feel sentimental: our nice first-time-ever members! How will they get along for six months without our beautiful and delicious vegetables to keep them nourished? We send them away with twenty pound bags of carrots, potatoes, and zucchini. They seem a bit taken aback by all this nourishment. Nevertheless, they thank us for the season. They say, “See you in the spring!”

We can hardly believe it! They want to sign up again for next year!

After a brief foray into nostalgia, including a few hours spent thinking of the passing of first things – first year with our own garden, our own team of horses, our own members, and of course, our own baby’s first spring, summer, fall – we find ourselves dreaming once again.

An exquisitely organized garden. Fine particked, smooth and tender seed beds. Harmonious, enjoyable, and excellent plowing. Early and abundant harvests. Copious members, who sign up early. An inch of gentle rain a week. A toddler, happily playing in the shade, while we are busy and cheerful in our CSA garden.

We do one final tidying of the distribution shed, and find our harvest notes – remarkably complete, compared to our planting notes. “Maybe that’s because the harvest was remarkably small!” says one farmer, giggling. It seems we’re a bit more funnier at this end of the season. Everything seems much funnier. Especially the way we kept saying in January, “We know a lot! We’re ready!”

But, now, we agree, we do know a lot, probably everything we’ll ever need to know about CSA farming. Now we are really Ready.

The CSA spirits giggle.

Set in 2000 in Poplar Ridge, NY, this was originally published in the Winter 2004 Small Farmer’s Journal. Kim and spouse Frank Hunter are now celebrating their 10-year location with a 100-member CSA and a 12-year old daughter. See www.hillsidespringsfarm.com for more information about the farm or Kim’s publications.
Incubating Farmers at the
Community Farm of Simsbury

by Kristiane Huber

Since the first community farm in Connecticut was established in 1990, the list has grown to twenty-seven non-profit or town owned farms in the state. This farming model puts Connecticut’s preserved farms to work while providing food, education and farm access for communities. As CT NOFA has developed its Beginning Farmer program with the regional “Cultivating a New Crop of Farmers” project, many of the participating farmers have benefited from volunteer and managerial support. The program provides education around the state, community farms are providing beginning farmers with opportunities for personal development from planting their first seeds to managing their first farm.

Community farms are broadly defined as any farm that has an educational or outreach mission in addition to producing agricultural products. CT NOFA further defines a community farm as a not-for-profit, publicly accessible farm that conducts educational programming and provides opportunities for meaningful work, learning, service and self-development. These programs are valuable to educate the public about sustainable agriculture, but in Connecticut they have become a vital resource for beginning farmers.

Many of Connecticut’s privately-owned farms, especially those which are CT NOFA members, are dedicated to the education of new farmers with limited financial and management experience. This might be the case for first-time farmers or for students who wish to integrate farming into their curricula. The farm or school might recognize a need for a farm manager. This educational mission of community farms that provides a comprehensive set of new opportunities and support for beginning farmers, especially with the establishment of Connecticut’s only incubator farmer program at the Community Farm of Simsbury.

Learning on a Community Farm

Community farms draw in beginners with volunteer opportunities and mission-driven educational support. Joe Listro shared, “There is an opportunity for a field trip for school students, intern opportunities for college students, or educational programs for enthusiastic gardeners and food lovers.”

Joe Listro is the manager at Sullivan Farm, a community farm in New Milford, CT. He is also a Connecticut farmer program, and a business and marketing plan in a Community Farm of Simsbury Young Farmers program, and a business and marketing plan in a New Entry Sustainable Farming Project. He provided some perspective on the role of community farms by explaining his training from interning to becoming a farm manager. While pursuing a college degree in Environmental Science Listro had a summer internship at Rippling Waters Farm, a community farm in Standish, Maine. The executive director there was a college professor and the farm fulfilled part of his educational mission with weekly classes for internships on the farm. This classroom and volunteer experience framed sustainable farming as an application of Listro’s environmental education. He returned the following year as an AmeriCorps member. After his term was over, Listro returned to his home state of Connecticut to work as an after school educator at Urban Oaks Organic Farm in New Britain, Connecticut.

Mark Rutkowski, currently an incubator farmer at the Community Farm of Simsbury and a farmer at Urban Oaks gained his first agricultural experience in his last semester of college, volunteering with Urban Oaks. Rutkowski explained that he gradually took on greater responsibilities through the semester. After graduation, Rutkowski began to work full time at Urban Oaks, taking on more responsibilities from starting seedlings, planting and harvesting to record keeping, selling wholesale, operating a CSA and running a farm stand.

Rutkowski has learned a number of essential skills including farming management of expenses, creating budgets and marketing, CSA management and farmers’ market sales. The incubator farmer program at CFS not only provides guidance and support for farmers through the application and inspection process.

When asked about the benefits and challenges of working on a community farm for a beginning farmer, Bill Duesing identified three necessary qualities for community farm managers and employees: agricultural knowledge and skills, being approachable and communicative about agricultural issues and the farm’s operation, and the ability to cooperate with a non-profit board which might not have previous knowledge of farming management. When asked about these requirements, Listro agreed “it takes a special kind of person.”

Community farm managers have the added responsibility of furthering their organization and farm’s educational mission. Community farm managers must understand the mission and be able to lead or support educational programming. This requires a familiarity with environmental education and passion for sharing that knowledge. The location of a community farm is the destination of classes or field trips from nearby schools, or visits from high school interns and volunteers throughout the week. Rutkowski explained that “Community Farm of Simsbury is in the bedrock of Urban Oaks.” Staff members must spend time directing new and seasoned volunteers and the 10 or 20 students that visit at a time with Urban Oaks’ agricultural education program. When asked if this can be a distraction for farmers, Rutkowski responded, “Some . . . might see these community engagement programs as a bureaucratic distraction. But in Connecticut they have become a vital resource for beginning farmers. The Community Farm of Simsbury is supported and directed by a town government or non-profit organization related to sustainable food, conservation, historic preservation or a related cause. This non-profit or municipality can generate public support, has the ability to fundraise and has the organizational capacity to oversee the farm. In Connecticut, purchasing or leasing land for an independent farming business can be cost prohibitive or impeded by land-use regulations. Farmers who do not have start-up capital or have not built equity are able to bypass these obstacles by working in non-profit owned farms.

Many community farms share a mission of sustainable farming and environmental stewardship, creating an ideal learning environment for organic agriculture. The Community Farm of Simsbury supports organic farmers and growing methods because of their mission and commitment to remain certified. Each farmer, upon acceptance to the program, must sign a contract that they will use organic standards with specific protocols about cover crops and rotation, soil amendments, record keeping, and weed, insect and disease management. Each farmer that wishes to sell produce as “Certified Organic” must go through the certification process independently for their own farming business. CFS provides guidance and support for farmers through the application and inspection process.

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But the truth is all farmers benefit when more people become interested in a wider variety of locally-produced fruits and vegetables.”

Because a community farm is managed by a non-profit, farm managers have some support and oversight from a non-profit board, and sometimes from staff. On most community farms, the farm manager must have all major decisions about farm operations approved by the board. The board considers proposals with the criteria that the farm remain economically viable and continue to further its mission. The board must carefully select a farm manager whose personal values and mission in farming line up with that of the organization and farm. When asked about this, Listro explained that the board of the Friends of Sullivan Farm specifically selected an organic farmer with his background to carry out their mission because of his goals and values.

He offered the example that the Friends of Sullivan Farm Board had to approve the organic certification process. The proposal was approved, but if certification was rejected, this would conflict with Listro’s goals and training as an organic farmer.

Urban Oaks is primarily directed by a dedicated board of volunteers always prioritizing the farm’s mission to make healthy, organic foods available to the New Britain community. Dueing pointed out that this process of decision-making by a board requires an intimate community involvement with the farm, and is a valuable form of farm education that is often overlooked. When a non-profit board comes together to start up and run a farm, this process creates a specialized group of volunteers who have become knowledgeable about the realities of farm management.

Employment on a community farm is often more stable than on a private farm in terms of work demands, salary and administrative support. Community farm manager positions are often year round, with a consistent salary, regardless of how successful their season is. Listro explained that he found this guaranteed year round income to be a great benefit that allowed him peace of mind. For beginning farmers seeking paid positions on farms, employment on a community farm is also often more attractive than on a private farm. A new farmer working on a commercial farm often has to make arrangements for employment in the off season to supplement wages. While this happens on community farms as well, they generally have a little more capacity to withstand the ups and downs of cash flows.

Community farms seeking employees or new managers can benefit from hiring beginning farmers (ten or fewer years of farming experience according to the USDA definition). Many of these farmers have some community farming background and will benefit from the guidance of a board and non-profit organization. The considerable support offered by extension services, state NOFA chapters, and federal programs funded by the Beginning Farmer Rancher and Development Program are additional resources for farm and business management that benefits the operation as a whole.

This article only covers community farms and farmers in Connecticut, but the community farming model is being applied widely throughout the northeast. Community farms that give beginning farmers an opportunity to develop skills as agricultural producers make an important investment in tomorrow’s farmers and the future of sustainable food production.

Interning at Kingbird Farm

by Jack Kittredge

The agriculturally rich central part of New York state -- which hosts so many NOFA farms -- is home to one of the best examples of what can be done when a non-profit organization is able to invest in tomorrow’s farmers and the future of sustainable food production.

They met at Washington’s Evergreen State College, having transferred there for the eco-agriculture program. It was full, however, and they didn’t get in. But they stayed on to graduate in the early 1990s. After interning for a year or two at other farms and working for the Forest Service in Olympia, they began the search for their own place. This was assisted by Michael’s grandmother who had some farmland in Illinois she sold to help them get a start.

Karma was reluctant to actually farm as, during her Oregon intern experience, she was used primarily as agricultural labor and prohibited from doing many of the higher-level tasks on the farm. But Michael wanted to farm so they moved in that direction.

“At first we looked for land out in the northwest,” Michael recalls, “but it was highly priced. To buy anything affordable we would be two hours from a market, on poor land, and still paying a lot. But back in the depressed northeast, if you weren’t looking for prime agricultural land, land was cheap and available. We didn’t know exactly what we wanted, but knew we wanted to raise animals and more vegetables. So we bought this place -- a one room house, septic, water, a few sheds around the house but no outbuildings, an overgrown pasture, a logged out woods for $60,000. The land was valued at $300 per acre.”

Since that time they have built up their farm even as Mike has worked from full to half time off-farm for Cornell or NOFA-NY. His specialty is seed breeding. He attributes one other benefit to his involvement with NOFA.

“We decided to have a kid,” he says, “because of the NOFA Summer Conference. My dad had gotten remarried, had kids and they had a garage sale in Yuppieville. It took every single parent to control those kids. They were all hyped up on sugar. But at the time I just thought ‘this is not what I want to do!’

“But then,” he continues, “I took care of kids one time at the Summer Conference to offset the cost of going. Here I was, one of two adults in charge of 20 kids. They were all hyped up on sugar. But at the time I just thought ‘this is not what I want to do!’

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kids of all different ages. But they were all getting along, some were playing with each other, some were working independently, and I left the conference saying: ‘Oh, I want to have one of these kids!’ Karma got pregnant three days later.”

Kingbird Farm is a mixed animal/vegetable operation. Mike estimates that they get about 10% of their gross income from animals and animal products, but because they spend so much on feed their profit on animals is far below their net on plants. Of the 100 acres they own, they manage 25 agriculturally, including raising plants in a greenhouse, high tunnel and propagation house. They do all their tillage and cultivation with horses. Although they have acres of pasture, they make no hay and instead buy it in from a neighbor.

Mike and Karma sell beef, pork and poultry at the Ithaca Farmers Market as well as at the farm. They slaughter the poultry on farm and the large animals go to a USDA-inspected slaughterhouse in Pennsylvania. “We still all sell our eggs. We sell like onions, potatoes and garlic, which will not spoil, so they can bring them back to the market again if they don’t sell the first time.”

For years the couple was active presenting workshops at NOFA conferences. They still do some of that, but are a little more protective of their time now, and avoid growth for it’s own sake.

“For awhile February and March were pretty busy,” Mike says. “But we do a little less speaking at conferences. We do a lot of education during the year now. These videos we do (the Cornell Small Farm Program has videotaped them teaching a number of skills and put them on YouTube) help with our outreach. People think we are a much bigger farm than we are because we talk so much. They expect we have thousands of chickens, not 300. But we’re still just a family farm. And starting two years ago we stopped growing, for purpose. Financially that’s challenging. But we don’t believe growth is sustainable. There are some homestead aspect to our farm. We want to have time to put up our food – make tomato sauce, can our beans. The surplus stuff from market doesn’t just get fed to animals. We can eat it. Part of our economy here is based on our use of surplus.”

Besides prizing their time, the couple have been trying to have more control over their operations. They used to buy-in pigeons, beefers and day-old poultry. Now they have their own breeding herd for sows and cows, and are working on breeding their own chicks.

“We raise all of our own pigeons and sell some,” says Michael. “We bring in a bull every year for our mother cows. We have a flock of ducks and Austrolorp hens and an incubator. We are in our third or fourth year of dehydrolizing Freedom Ranger chickens. They are a double hybrid – a hybrid crossed with a hybrid. That is the reason they don’t appear uniform. We like them, but we’re trying to figure out how to raise our own variety of pigeon. So we now have a flock of 50 breeding birds. They’re doing great.”

Kingbird is a very public farm – buyers are stopping there all the time for self-service purchase of meats, vegetables, grain and other products. So the Gloses are careful to be aware of all the regulations and laws governing what they do. They may not follow them all, says Mike, but he wants to know which ones he is breaking so he can gauge his risk.

“I have so many licenses you wouldn’t believe it,” he states. “We sell grain, slaughter poultry, get certified, free range, heritage, maybe one more. But we do the others that you don’t get paid for because we believe in them.”

The current stress on local is putting a lot of pressure on organic farmers, he feels. He knows some who are getting out of poultry because of a few producers have undercut them by going the free range, local route, but not feeding organic feed. He figures all their feed is probably GMO. So they can sell chicken for $1.50 less a pound than the organic birds.

The same thing is true with eggs. The Gloses sell them for $5.00 a dozen, but other local producers who don’t use organic feed are getting $4.25. So the local food movement has helped with the market, but made it harder to get the organic premium.

“I don’t mind if consumers know that this is a different product,” he says. “But often they don’t. They don’t realize that these birds are fed GMO feed, that all the females of the breed are slaughtered and only the cockerels are raised for meat, that they have high mortality because the birds are not designed for pasture, that they may use antibiotics or medicated feed. We have to work hard to educate people that not everyone who is local is organic. We don’t do that negatively, but just by saying positively what we are and what we do.”

The Farmer’s Pledge is another marketing approach that Mike doesn’t trust. It requires non-GMO feed, he admits, but then adds that there is no policing of it at all. He says that he and Karma know people who feed GMO but sign the Farmer’s Pledge.

“It isn’t really equivalent to organic,” he states. “We get frustrated with NOFA-NY and the Summer Conference for blurring that line. They have speakers or field days featuring folks who are not only not certified, but not even using organic practices. They’ll have livestock farms that are feeding conventional feed and using all these practices that would not be allowed in organic operations. I asked about using organic feed and they said: ‘we don’t use organic feed because of the price’. I almost walked out. I want to be able to come to an organic conference and if people are showing an economic model or a practice, I want it to be organic. They don’t have to be certified, but they should follow the standards.”

Customers are too ready to be deceived, Mike feels. They want to believe that an animal has been treated well. The big companies play to that by putting the image of a red family farm barn on their logos.

Mike and Karma are in somewhat of a bind, they feel. In concert with the goal of farm independence, they would like to be producing a lot more of their own feed, whether it be hay or grain. But their land is not suitable for that. Not that much is open and there are plenty of rocks to make such production difficult. If they limited their livestock to what they could support on their own feed, their production would drop below the commercial threshold to that of a homestead. So to keep it as a productive farm
they have to run it in ways contrary to their principles.

"Ideally we should be raising animals that don’t need grain," Mike concludes. "Inherently it’s silly to be raising grain and feeding it to animals. The energy put into producing grain could be going right to feeding humans. I think there is an efficiency loss there in feeding animals and eating the meat. Our land is secondary land, so we shouldn’t even be raising crops here. We should be raising grass and grazing cows!

One effort the couple makes to raise their own feed is to produce mangles, a large beet which used to be raised centuries ago livestock feed. The tops are good in the fall for cows, and the roots are good for both pigs and cattle. The tops are not fed to the pigs because of high levels of oxalic acid. As a root crop they are fed with a lot of dirt, for vitamins. Other root crops – like carrots – would be a lot more efficient to grow and weed.

Practical realities govern their vegetable operation as well.

“There are some really good vegetable growers around Ithaca,” Mike states. “It makes no sense for us to try to compete on quality or freshness with them. The vegetables we grow we do well with because of our soil, our marketing strategy, and the fact that we don’t have to sell them right away. We can bring them all home and sell it next week.”

The couple do only one market a week – the Ithaca one on Saturday. They don’t raise lettuce and cucumbers, preferring things like onions, garlic, potatoes, fresh herbs and plants which don’t require a harvest 4 times a week. They harvest on Friday and all the herbs that don’t get sold come back, get dried in the attic, and get sold in the fall. The potatoes go into the root cellar until next week.

The Kingbird rotation for production is an eighth of an acre of onions, an eighth of an acre of garlic, an eighth of an acre of potatoes, an eighth of an acre of mangles for the pigs, an eighth of an acre of mixed culinary herbs, and an eighth of an acre of vegetables.

Mike and Karma found that turkeys did not work out for them. They raised heritage turkeys for about 6 years and finally just gave up on the birds. The heritage breed 'Kingbird Reds'!

"This way," he points out, "we’re getting a certified organic bird. You can’t buy certified organic chicks anywhere. Just because the regulations say you can buy a conventional day old chick, raise it organically, and sell it as organic doesn’t mean we want to do it. It’s crazy that I can buy my chicken from a poultry operation that has fed GMO feed to the breeding stock, kept them indoors, killed all the female chicks, and then I can raise organic birds that way. I think if a lot of organic chicken raisers saw how their chicks are produced they would be shocked. Most of the hatcheries don’t even have birds. They just buy eggs themselves. With our chicks, they’re right here and we know how they were produced.

The couple rent an Angus bull for about 2 and a half months and breed all their own cows that way. They used to do halves and wholes with pigs, but found it was a hassle to go thru all the separate cut sheets for how people wanted them slaughtered. Invariably it would not all get done right, so some customers would be upset. Now they just sell them pre-cut from a chest freezer on the back of their truck. They plug it in at the farmers market and sell out of that 9 months of the year. They have 7 cows, a boar and 16 feeder piglets right now.

Mike and Karma have been educating others about their farm practices and personal skills almost since the beginning.

“We started doing educating very early,” Mike recalls. “I’m not sure why anyone took a gamble on this special day, has to be the right size, will be fed to all their family and friends. Nothing can go wrong with them! We used to have our meat pre-ordered, but we got a walk-in freezer and now everything goes in there and nothing is pre-ordered. That was a conscious decision.”

The Freedom Ranger chickens they are breeding, however, are a different story. Their growth is much more variable so the Gloses decide a few days ahead of time when to slaughter them. They don’t have to call any pre-order buyers and reschedule. The chickens are in the open and are muscular enough to make it to their hoop houses if they see a hawk swooping down, so mortalities are few.

The couple got a grant from Animal Welfare Approved to help fund their work and initially saved a male and a female Freedom Ranger. For four years now they have bred and selected males and females from the resulting birds. They look mostly for rapid growth and free ranging behavior. They just culled out last year’s breeding stock and will breed next year’s broilers from the selected survivors. The females make a smaller bird but Mike says they have a market for a 3 and a half pound birds. The males dress out as a 5 pound bird. The couple hope never to buy any more chicks. Mike laughingly calls the breed ‘Kingbird Reds’!

“We outgrew the French interns,” as Mike put it. “Then we started with domestics. By that time we had a reputation, in part because of the speaking engagements we did, and we had people who wanted to come and learn specific skills but ‘come and learn general things’ was no longer the way we wanted to go because we were starting to specialize in feed for other animals.

Mike and Karma found that turkeys did not work out for them. They raised heritage turkeys for about 6 years and finally just gave up on the birds. The heritage breed 'Kingbird Reds'!

The freedom range chickens are some of the slower birds, which was a blessing for Mike and Karma because of their soil. They didn’t want people to come and work at the farm because they needed more help. But they did want to train people to work at the farm because they needed more help.

So for 5 years they had interns from France, coming from an agricultural college there had really had females come, because it was harder to place women than men. That worked well at first, but eventually it didn’t. The interns would only be there for 10 weeks, which was not long enough for many other things, too. By the time they would arrive, Mike and Karma would be insanely busy.

"We outgrow the French interns," as Mike put it. "Then we started with domestics. By that time we had a reputation, in part because of the speaking engagements we did. People would hear us and want to be interns here. We started putting ads out for someone May thru November. We wanted only one intern. We would take a couple, but only one would be an intern. We didn’t have enough space for more, and didn’t want to be pressed."

Kingbird Farm lines up internships in the fall now. They bill the internship experience they offer not as ’come and learn specific skills’ but ‘come and learn how a small farm fits together all these activities’. They probably 100 people who want to come at the end of May and have the second week of August. Another group who won’t get picked is those who really want to focus on one thing, like using horses. They will get some work with horses, but not too much because they are also needed to run the farm. The couple talk to some 15 of the applicants, and have maybe 3 visit the farm before making a final choice. It’s a fair amount of work for them for one part time helper, but they don’t want more.
Mid November with some flexibility
Length of employment is from end of March-
Having an employee on a (our) Farm

by Michael Glos, Kingbird Farm

- Personnel Records must be kept on employees
  - Includes Federal Form I-9
  - US Form W-4 (filled out annually)
  - Signed work agreement to comply with NY Minimum Wage requirement
  - Employer must keep payroll records
    including records of hours worked. For NYS rules must pay weekly or in full
    after 2 weeks
  - Employer must have Federal Employer Identification Number (EIN)

- For new hires and if new employer NYS
  1-877-698-2910
  - NYS 50 publication and NYS-1, NYS 45, Pub 20.
  - Register with NYS Department of Finance (over the phone if you are exempt from Unemployment and after the first quarter (April 1) if you only have a seasonal employee.
    (https://uiereg.labor.state.ny.us/eRegWeb/eRegInitialPart1.html)

- Wages-
  If total farm wages paid annually are under $3000 then we are exempt from paying the state minimum wage ($7.25) but must pay the Federal min. wage ($7.25 hr currently). As far as I can see in no way are we exempt from Fed min wage- there is no NYS lower farm wage (and we would not qualify because our employee does non-ag work (see below). This means we still have to pay overtime. If the employee is doing ag-work only (ie greenhouse worker) then we probably qualify for the 500 man day exemption from the FLSA and as a small farm don’t have to pay fed min wage or overtime (NYS Part 190 of title 12 of official compilation of codes, rules and regulations (http://www.labor.state.ny.us/formsdocs/wp/P ART190s.pdf)). As a general rule “agricultural work” is a very narrow definition but can vary from state and federal definitions. Ie. Milking a cow is ag work but making cheese is not. Limiting an employee to only ag work then permits many exemptions but would be hard for us to comply with since we want our employee to process herbs, process chicken, do market, sell on farm, etc.- all non-ag work.

- state tax withholding - depends on how many exemptions employee declares on W-4 and comes out of the paycheck and is reported quarterly on NYS-45

- Fed tax withholding - depends on how many exemptions employee declares and come out of the paycheck and is reported quarterly on IRS form 941

- Soc. Security withholding - 6.2 percent withheld from employee and then we have to match that. Non-ag is reported quarterly on IRS form 941. Ag wages are reported annually on IRS Form 943 (for 2012 the rate withheld is only 4.2%) Medicare withholding - depends on how many exemptions employee declares and reported quarterly on IRS form 941. Ag wages are reported annually on IRS Form 943

- Reporting of Wages and Withholding - An Annual W-2 has to be completed by January 30th each year

- NYS Unemployment insurance (4.1%) must be paid by employer. Generally if the employee is doing “ag work” then UI only has to be paid if there is over $20,000 payroll per quarter (http://www. labor.state.ny.us/ua/PDFs/i31811.pdf). If employee is doing non-ag work then UI has to be paid if payroll is over $300 per quarter. From letters back and forth with NYS we have determined we should split the non-ag and ag wages for a single employee. Quarterly we submit NYS-45 with UI only paid on the non-ag wages.

- Federal unemployment - we annually file IRS Form 940 and only pay Fed UI on the non-ag wages. The same state regulations apply.

- Workers Compensation - Farm laborers are covered (meaning you need it) by the Workers’ Compensation Law if the employer paid farm workers cash wages of $1,200 or more in the preceding calendar year (http://www.labor.state.ny.us/workerprotection/ laborstandards/workport/workcomp. shtm) see also (http://www.wcb.state.ny.us/content/main/Small_Business/employer_manualbook.pdf). If your employee does any non-ag work you have to have workers compensation (there are no exceptions). Workers compensation is available privately and from NY State. NYS Farm Bureau gives the best deal for Farmers.

- Disability Insurance - Small Farms programs and Farm Bureau say farm laborers do not have to carry disability insurance but if employees are doing any non-ag work then they have to have it. (http://www.wcb.state.ny.us/content/main/DisabilityBenefits/ Employer/introToLawInclude.jsp) Disability insurance is available with your workers compensation insurance.

- Posting -
  - Notice of workers comp insurance - provided once we get WC
  - Notice of Disability insurance - provided once we get DI
  - Unemployment Insurance (if covered/ required)
  - Notice of Fed and State Min. wage
  - OSHA poster and OSHA Log
  - Equal Employment Opportunity poster
  - NYS Human Rights poster
  - Employee Polygraph Protection
  - Right to Know - NYS Department of Health
  - Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act

The Strawbale House

by Michael Glos, Kingbird Farm

Benefits

- Use of the strawbale house and its contents
- Use of gardens and yard within the fence
  (and one plot outside of fence)
- Parking at the farmhouse
- Access to the strawbale house (usually walking, occasionally vehicle)
- Access to the farmhouse outside spigot for drinking water

Responsibilities

- General maintenance and up-keep of strawbale house and its gardens
  - NO SMOKING
  - NO DRUGS
  - NO DOGS (let us know if you have any pets)
Winning Together

Stonyfield is grateful for organic farmers like you. Without your passion for organic farming, we couldn't be passionate about crafting delicious, nutritious, organic yogurt. Thanks!

-The folks at Stonyfield

Hodge Farm, NH
One of the Organic Valley family farms that supply milk for our yogurt
Crystal Clear at Mud Creek: the First Four Years of Erin Bullock’s Farm

by Elizabeth Henderson

Erin Bullock, founder of Mud Creek Farm, says, “Dollars don’t make sense to me. I think in terms of.” But by any standard of measurement I can think of, Erin’s farming is a success story. Although she was very tired when I interviewed her towards the end of her fourth season, Erin has a lot to feel good about and her short path serves as an inspiring example for other young farmers.

In 2012, Mud Creek CSA was full to capacity at 260 full share equivalents and over 300 households. The farm met Erin’s financial goals for year four of her 5-year plan. She has gathered loyal customers as members of the CSA and despite the pressures of heading up a crew of four and cultivating 15 acres of land, has still found time to contribute to the broader effort to build a more sustainable food system in Western NY by teaching workshops, speaking at public events and opening her farm for tours and work sessions for school groups of all ages. Two nights a week members bring meals to the farm and eat with Erin and the crew. “I have created a community,” she explains. “During the three hours of pick-ups twice a week – people meet and socialize. There is such warm community feeling among the members, especially those who come for the 1-acre u-pick, which includes heirloom and paste tomatoes, spending hours out there – it is their garden! This is the best part of my week! It feels like such a good thing. How could I ever leave this?”

Erin does not come from a farming family and her decision to switch from landscape architecture to organic farming took her family by surprise. It was a big thing to have a Cornell educated daughter become a farmer. She was on a more elite path. But once her parents understood the level of her commitment, they were very supportive. For starters, they recruited many friends and neighbors to join her CSA, including some long-time members of my farm’s CSA! Her dad threw himself into helping, especially with his business skills. When he figured out how many local organic farmers earn, he contacted me to check on whether his understanding was accurate. He was indignant when he realized he was right!

To find land to farm on, Erin talked to realtors, family friends and the Genesee Land Trust. A lucky coincidence, an old NOFA friend of mine, retired landscape company in the Bay Area of California who was converting her Allis Chalmers G to electric. In the fall, she sold it to Erin. She had several years of experience running a small family owned landscape company and was looking for a new start. Erin saw this as a really good deal. She has also invested a lot in creating a small place for Erin and her crew to relax. But this has not stopped her from holding some of the coolest parties in the Rochester area – with only a canopy for shelter. Erin has invested in equipment: “I feel strongly that farmers and farm workers should be paid fairly because they work very hard and deserve pay comparably to other careers.”

Erin also participates in the NOFA-NY pilot of an Agroecological Insurability Assessment (AIA) program that is a great way for farmers to instantly become financially sustainable growing practices. But I have a waiting list every year without certification, so why would I need it? I have a trust-based relationship with members. They understand it’s organically grown without me jumping through hoops. I would do it if it were important to members. Instead I do the NOFA-NY Farmers Pledge. It is easy and I do not even use it prominently in my marketing.”

Erin does not have a core group to help with administration. “Organic certification is just one more thing to think about and the market in Rochester for CSA does not require it. I am totally committed to sustainable growing practices. But I have a waiting list every year without certification, so why would I need it? I have a trust-based relationship with members. They understand it’s organically grown without me jumping through hoops. I would do it if it were important to members. Instead I do the NOFA-NY Farmers Pledge. It is easy and I do not even use it prominently in my marketing.”

Erin started by leasing 5 acres, expanding to 15. “Leasing is a good way to instantly become financially successful,” Erin explains. “You invest in equipment and labor.”

This year Erin is paying less for land than for water – a really good deal. She has also invested a lot in building up the soil, planting cover crops and putting fallow fields into production. On the other hand, her farm does not have a well, a barn or any shelter except hoop houses and a camper. During the sweltering days of this past summer, there was no cool place for Erin and her crew to relax. But this has not stopped her from holding some of the coolest parties in the Rochester area – with only a canopy for shelter. DJ friends blast out music in the fields while the party crowd dances around a bonfire.

Following advice from one of the members, an accountant, the farm incorporated this year. Mud Creek is now an S-corporation that pays Erin a salary of $19,000, and allows her to save money through an IRA for her future retirement 30-plus years hence. Erin says she is living off her own savings and that she will reinvest any profits in the farm. Incorporating limits liability and the accountant believes it will save Erin money in taxes. Erin has health insurance through Healthy NY. The farm does not provide health insurance yet for the 4 interns/employees. Erin gave them the option to start IRAs with the farm paying a small percentage, but none of them took it. The four get minimum wage, $7.25 an hour for 35 – 40 hours a week. Erin herself works 55 hours. For her own records, she keeps time charts, including time spent in office jobs and organizing. Business-wise Mud Creek is doing well. There is money in the bank and Erin just made the final payment on a new Kubota tractor, paying off all her four years and thereby establishing a good credit rating. Her next purchase on time will be a pick-up truck that allows ergonomic loading.

I asked her why the farm is not certified organic. Erin replied: “Organic certification is just one more thing to think about and the market in Rochester for CSA does not require it. I am totally committed to sustainable growing practices. But I have a waiting list every year without certification, so why would I need it? I have a trust-based relationship with members. They understand it’s organically grown without me jumping through hoops. I would do it if it were important to members. Instead I do the NOFA-NY Farmers Pledge. It is easy and I do not even use it prominently in my marketing.”

The only way organic farms will survive is by being thankful and successful. If you are not making money, you are just a homesteader. Small organic farms play an important role and should be valued equal to the most important: massage therapists and doctors. The domestic fair trade movement will create more awareness for financial struggles that farmers have. We need to plant the seeds for the future. My clientele could afford to pay more – they want clean food for their families.

Erin has several years of experience running a small landscape company in the Bay Area of California and has learned the meaning of organic practices from apprenticeships and from attending conferences and workshops. She uses no chemicals at all, except tractor fuel and grease, and all products are OMRI approved. For fertility, she uses cover crops and rotations. She buys organic seed if it is available. Books that have helped include Eliot Coleman’s Sharing the Harvest.

Over 90% of Mud Creek’s produce goes to the members of the CSA. Erin sells from 7 to 10% through the Good Food Collective, a Rochester area multi-farm weekly food delivery enterprise that has grown to over 500 weekly boxes in only 3 years. She also provides some vegetables to Small World Bakery to make into kimchi. Since Mud Creek does not have a core group to help with administrative tasks, Erin tries to streamline the CSA sign-up and payment process. It is all on-line and members can start signing up in October for the next year’s shares. She allows a few local people to pay in installments, but most members pay the entire amount up front. She does her own books, writes a weekly blog and handles all member contacts. For a few essential services, Erin exchanges shares for two shares go to a member who does payroll, one share for a massage every two or three weeks, and two shares for yoga instructors. She also barter with a third generation mechanic who fixes her pump and is converting her Allis Chalmers G to electric. In the four years, she has had only one or two people drop off after four years and thereby establishing a good credit rating. Her next purchase on time will be a pick-up truck that allows ergonomic loading.
out and gave them a refund. She admits the farm is a little bigger than she can manage alone.

One of Erin’s most valued helpers is an older farmer who lives nearby. She says — “I could not do the farm without him.” Her landlord introduced her to Jack, a fourth generation conventional farmer who grows about 100 acres of corn, soy, wheat, oats, and hay, and drives a truck and bigger tractor for a neighbor with thousands of acres. Jack did the first plowing at Mud Creek, and then lent Erin a plow and other tools. He gets a kick out of Erin and her work. It means a lot to Erin that he treats her like a young farmer – not a “young woman” farmer. He enjoys teaching what he knows, even to a woman. Like other women farmers, Erin has experienced the funny looks you get from male farmers at auctions. Jack takes her seriously and she takes seriously the wisdom he has to offer. He remembers his grandparents and how they did things, and likes antiques like Erin’s Farmall Cub and Ontario grain drill. Erin has learned a lot from him about “traditional” farming. When a chain breaks, they take it to his 200-year-old anvil. “I never would have known these things from my life in suburbs and college. Jack is teaching me like his own daughter.”

Erin’s emphatic advice to others is to plan: “If you need to work for yourself, you need a business plan!” Next year is year 5 of Erin’s plan and she has met her budget goals each year – paying employees and herself and even paying for her own health insurance. She says she is counting on her customers for the next step. She would like to own her own land and have a family. The big questions for Erin are how to balance physically, emotionally, ethically. Her biggest challenge has been “accepting my role as boss – learning how to take care of workers, myself, the farm’s members and the land.”

Erin’s Whole Farm Planning Goals

The purpose of Mud Creek Farm is to grow a diverse array of quality (fresh, nutritious, chemical-free, beautiful) vegetables, in an organic & sustainable way, and provide them to the local community through a Community Supported Agriculture structure.

The health and biodiversity of the land ecosystem in which I am growing will be the most important value, as well as the education and involvement of members, towards their awareness of the connection between their food and the land it grows on. Human health is another important value—the farm will try to increase awareness of diet choices as they relate to overall wellbeing and the prevention of disease.

The farm will strive to play its part in addressing global climate change by being an example of a carbon-neutral business, educating the community about sustainable lifestyles, and by reducing the larger fuel consumption of industrially-grown non-local food.

The farm will provide a forum for community building through events, celebrations, work parties, workshops, potlucks, etc.

The farm will provide Erin with a decent full-time livelihood, the workload being personally sustainable and rewarding. The farm will pay a living wage to its other workers as well. The produce shares will be affordable and competitive with organic food at grocery stores.

Erin shares her ideas about the NOFA Agricultural Justice Project Pledge at a meeting with other farmers and NOFA staff, summer 2011.
Aspiring and beginning farmers face a unique challenge as they consider starting their own farm. A would-be beginning farmer does not always see a clear, organized way to go about achieving their career goal, though they understand that there are resources available for a wide range of starting to farm and becoming-a-farmer needs. Instead of being comforted by such a roster of resources, this aspiring or beginning farmer may feel overwhelmed without a clear guide to explain what should be the most useful available resource depending on their experience level and training needs. Thus, time and effort needs to be made to recognize that there are sub-stages (phases) of becoming and establishing oneself as a farmer with a viable business; farmers and service providers can benefit from an examination of each defined phase, considering which are the most relevant resources to target training gaps and farmer needs during each level of competency and experience. Once aspiring and beginning farmers, service providers and the general community all understand the linear progression to becoming a farmer, there is an ability to focus attention on the appropriate use of training and networking resources, from the formerly chaotic mix of available options and choices. As one beginning farmer suggested to service providers, they could help significantly by leading the beginning farmer to "know what level and what kind of education would be recommended for beginning farmers, based on the experience of my own and previous generations."

To further justify this examination of beginning to farm as a linear progression through a series of phases, compare farming to being a self-employed carpenter or a doctor at a private practice—all trained professionals and business owners. Carpenters and doctors benefit from knowing the resources, training and professional networks that will lead them to success—they must simply choose which to utilize at points in their career. There is also general knowledge of the expected challenging points in establishing oneself in these industries—aspiring doctors or carpenters know they will encounter specific struggles, and plan for ways to overcome these challenges. An aspiring farmer should be as any other aspiring professional, assisted in their goals with a knowledge of the distinct pathway to establish themselves in that line of work.

Fortunately, the work of identification of the common training steps and competency levels has been done. Sue Ellen Johnson and the Northeast New Farmer Network (NENFN) identify six phases of starting a farm in their 2001 article, “Gaps in New Farmer Programs and Services.” The graphic accompanying this article shows the linear progression through these six phases and the services and programs linked to the needs of the beginning farmer at each level. Service providers, families and farmers have a better chance to support those entering the profession after examining these phases and needs during each phase. A family can understand a young adult’s need to spend two years with low pay working on a farm, if they realize that this is an essential component of farmer training at the explorer or planner phase. A non-farming spouse will allow their significant other the means to commit taking a farm-planning course during the re-strategizing phase, since it’s a way to enhance the farm business’s success, and a widely-used resource during that phase of beginning a farm.

In the graphic, the second row provides a broad sub-division: “prospective” farmers (not yet owners or managers of a farm business) from “beginning” farmers (those with their own farm business or farm to manage). The phases that correspond to levels of technical and business knowledge, skills and behaviors (the farming core competencies) are listed below “prospective” and “beginning” categories. The “prospective farmer” phases are recruit, explorer, planner and the “beginning farmer” phases are start-up, re-strategizing, establishing. The fourth row of the chart is a general definition of the hypothetical beginning farmer’s attitude and needs during the specified phase. If the reader follows a phase vertically down the graphic, they will see education and support programs that are in place to help that phase of beginning farmer. NODA chapters, MOFGA and many Northeast organizations provide these services and programs.

Recruits make up the first phase of farmers using the NENFN divisions (in the graphic, recruits are to the far left). Recruits are prospective farmers, but may not even see themselves as such. Teachers, friends, family and the media expose these people to the idea of farming. In a way, all people who know about farming could be considered recruits. Thus if we as a community are to support a new generation of farmers, we should expose as many new minds as possible to agriculture through schools, family activities and the media. Positive associations to farming are most important for recruits—they require hope that farming would bring them an interesting and viable lifestyle. "Become a farmer" should not be a surprise answer to the question, "what would you like to be when you grow up?" It is up to the general public to recruit farmers, and many of them, through positive messaging. The recruits who use this exposure to farming as a career and turn it into active learning about farming can progress to the exploration phase.

The exploration phase is concurrent with participation in agriculturally-focused school projects, college courses, short-term farm work experiences, farm apprenticeships, farm jobs and self-education. Explorers consider farming to possibly be their future. Explorers need to learn via a low-commitment or low-risk situation what appeals to them about farming—they need many, varied and accessible farm-work and farm-education options. The explorers are not ready to commit to a full-time farming job or apprenticeship in many cases. They might look into nearby part-time jobs on farms while maintaining a non-farming lifestyle (as a student or with a different full-time job, for example). This interested but uncommitted explorer should be encouraged to find out about hands-on experiences and technical information that would influence the decision to continue on the farming career path, at least to the next, more committed phase.

The community of more experienced farmers and consumers must give explorers flexibility in work and volunteer opportunities. The non-farming community must allow explorers to pursue this interest. An independent study or project in agriculture during high school might be difficult or unusual for a school to administer, but that sort of flexibility goes a long way to the explorer-farmer. In the data collected from NOFA Winter Conference Beginning Farmer Scholarship recipients, only 7% of farmers indicated...
resources exist to guide planners to train in these crucial technical-skills competency and business-fight off low confidence to take next steps, so the before starting one’s own farm, they should focus on will know that to best take advantage of this time start-to-farm career pathway is especially useful. If apprenticeship, college coursework—but the plan - apprentice with “the right attitude” but does not have the resources to make that search (and this is where the aspiring farmers as well as their experienced-farmer members. Fewer aspiring farmers are discouraged from pursuing their career in a timely manner with supported programs and networks. These trial experiences are less risky for prospective and begin - ning farmers as well as their experienced-farmer mentors. Experienced farmers must get in touch with local farming organizations (like their NOFA chapter) to learn how to connect with more of these aspiring farmers to the growing demand that these work-learn opportunities offer. Apprenticeship is not a defined phase in the frame - work of training for an aspiring farmer but one can experience this as an educational tool that meets multiple training and networking needs, which is popular with explorers and planners. Young farmers surveyed in a National Young Farmer Coalition study, “Shepsi” Eaton, part of the farm crew at Sylvester Manor Educational Farm in New York put this best, “People ask the big question—I’m 2012 NOFA-VRG Winter Conference) for me was connecting with Don [Hewes] at Northland Sheep Dairy. His talk on draft horses and mules was great and I ended up going to his farm to work for a summer. That then connected me with more educational opportunities pertaining to draft horses and has brought me closer to the point of starting to incorporate and employ a team of draft horses on the farm I work at now.”

The start-up phase is when the beginning farmer strikes out on their own—with their own enterprises, or perhaps as a farm manager. This phase presents the beginning farmer with a whole new set of needs and perhaps exposes some new gaps in farming knowledge. Those starting on their own farm no longer have the luxury of daily interaction with a boss or manager, they find themselves seeking occasional guidance or reassurance. Mention the farming community to many experienced farmers, they will be eager to strengthen the next wave of farmers through hand - down wisdom. Since beginning farmers may come from outside the agricultural community, they once again face the barrier they faced as aspiring farmers: new farmers may not know how to reach the large pool of mentor farmers that they know exists. A begin - ning farmer during the winter season (the NOFA-VT Winter Conference commented, “Practical advice from farmers who are growing the things I want to grow is invaluable. I would love to have a mentor farmer available for me to call or email to ask, “When did you start those onions?” Most Northeast states, through NOFA chapters and other organiza - tions, have farmer mentor-matching capabilities or technical assistance programs. Holistic Management International courses also include farmer-to-farmer mentorship in their programs. These programs meet the start-up farmers’ need for a mentor that is included within the sustainable farming community or a list of technical consultants to ask for good advice. Even with high-quality guidance from experienced farmers, start-up farmers face a few other distinct discomforts. They find themselves in a position of management as a component of the learning curve. Off-season training in management (farm-related or otherwise), and in-season activities can relieve the stress of hav - ing to manage employees or volunteers to accom - plish farm work. Often this is a view of farm work as a professional, why shouldn’t the new farmer also complete employee management training as one does in an office setting already? Or perhaps as a farm manager. This phase presents the beginning farmer with a whole new set of needs and perhaps exposes some new gaps in farming knowledge. Mentors in the farming community are few and far between, they once again find themselves seeking occasional guidance or reassurance. Mentors in the farming community are more likely to support the farmer, while the farmer can learn toles like organizing financial files or writing the farm newsletter to these trusted new friends. These non-farmers are a support for the career of the start-up farmer-business owner. At about the 3-year mark as independent farmer, a farmer may find themselves re-defining and re - considering their farm. This could be sudden, with a school to final stage of a mentoring relationship, or become a “full-time farmer” or could be a combina - tion of re-strategizing decisions. The re-strategizing phase can take a lot of time, for those looking to move to a different farm, the re-strategizing farmer should seek specific edu - cational opportunities, but should also be an active advisor to any farmer-education organization that plans training events. The farmer progresses to the establishing farmer phase when they are prepared for their eventual retirement. An independent farmer. No farmer will claim to have learned everything, but during this phase (as well as during the re-strategizing phase) the advanced beginner may have some idea of the work involved. The advanced beginner farmer to keep thinking and pursuing these meaningful changes. Mentorship is a clear option for guidance, as is attendance at conferences and field days. Farmers are likely to know what specialized training they need, having the experience with their farm to have seen hardship and success. With such a clear idea of serious changes to be made, the re-strategizing farmer should seek specific edu - cational opportunities, but should also be an active advisor to any farmer-education organization that plans training events.

A clear understanding of a gap in knowledge can light the fire to overcome obstacles. Some of the steps a planner encouraged are to quantify their level of crucial technical-skills competency and business- planning skills. They can use self-evaluation tools and tracking tools. Planners should spend time and energy networking, discovering significant knowl - edge gaps and taking time to create a set of guiding principles that can serve as a road map. To that end, new resources exist to guide planners to train in these knowledge and skills-allowable. Online courses target a slew of farm-business and farm-planning topics. Work experiences, on-farm field days, conferences and regional gatherings all contribute to the planner’s education. However, planners (and explorers) may unintentionally put themselves in a holding pattern by not targeting every area of farming knowledge, skills and behaviors they need to address. Only 18% of the beginning farmers interviewed had having attended a NOFA-on-farm day field (a train - ing which focuses on a specific topic) as part of their training. Host farms, employers and mentors do more to encourage farming training of the line worker and managers to attend trainings—allowing them the half-day off work or encouraging workers to apply for NOFA Conference scholarships would have a measurable impact on the knowledge and skills of farmers. Since the beginning farmers have no longer the technical consultants to ask for good advice. A lack of history with a place, a community, or a climate will naturally lead to stress for the beginning farmer. It’s hard to believe that everything will work out in the end if there is no evidence on which to base that belief. This is why the NOFA-Safety First certification, Organic certification, expanding to new farmers and markets and re-strategizing and establishing farmers may find grants and partnerships for research and opportunities with new resources, opportunities and often, other farmer - ers. Farmers’ organizations base their activities on physical, mental and social well-being. An hour off the farm each week, time spent celebrating suc - cesses with other farmers or the greater community, or time spent talking to beginning farmers does not seem important to the sustainability of the farm. Any social or farmer-oriented activity is the career-sustaining resource here: new farmers should establish patterns of offering farm activities as an investment in long-term wellness. During the first few years, the start-up farmer needs to focus on building a foundation for success in their farm’s community. When new farmers are fresh off highly-engaged CSA farms or have worked mar - kets and small farms, they have a new perspective, a sudden isolation from that former consumer group can be jarring and discouraging. Marketing and cost-of-production education improves the start-up’s farm’s bottom line and thus acts as a resource in disguise—the opportunity connects the beginning farmer to the community in a new way and ensures that the professional networking of farmers remains strong. The establishing phase is time to pursue interesting technical topics, perhaps even as research.
The Natural Farmer Winter, 2012-13

Regiona! Collaboration Publishes the “Landowners Guide to Leasing Land for Farming” compiled by Ben Waterman, University of Vermont Extension

Much of the Northeast Region’s farms and farmland are not owned by farmers. In fact, over 30 percent of the area’s pastures, fields and woodlands are owned by non-operators. The USDA calls “non-operators” or non-farming landowners. These landowners, by leasing their land to farmers, can play a significant role in sustaining the region’s agricultural heritage and livelihood moving forward. Led by Land for Good, a team of over ten New England-based agricultural service providers have recently published a comprehensive manual for non-farming landowners exploring options and considerations for leasing land to farmers.

The “Landowners Guide to Leasing Land for Farming” is a useful resource, not just for landowners, but also for new farmers who want to acquire land through leasing from non-farming landowners. Farmers seeking land can refer prospective landowners to the new guide. Non-farming landowners are not expected to be farming experts, but the better educated they are on the basics of farm tenure arrangements, the better chance there is for the farmer to enjoy a productive and potentially long-lasting arrangement.

The Guide’s publishing is timely, considering that farmland is becoming increasingly hard to find, and trends of the last few decades show that increasing amounts of the region’s resource base is now owned by non-operators. The Guide’s introduction reads: “Good farmland is increasingly difficult for farmers to access — especially new farmers. Purchasing land is prohibitively expensive in many parts of New England, and sometimes even rental rates are out of reach. Substantial amounts of good farmland are sold for development and lost forever. Yet there are many eager farmers looking for land to farm. By making your land available to them in a way that is beneficial to both parties, you may qualify lands for state open lands tax benefit programs. Farm tenants can potentially help with property maintenance and improvements. Open land usually retains higher property values, and benefits to non-farming landowners of making land accessible to a broader audience."


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Finding Land: How Two NH Farmers Found Their Farms

by Ray Conner

According to a 2011 survey by the National Young Farmers’ Coalition (www.youngfarmers.org), 68% of farmers polled said land access was their biggest challenge. An additional 78% cited “lack of capital” as a top challenge for beginners, with 40% ranking “access to credit” as the biggest challenge. The report found that almost double the number of farmers under 30 farmed on rented land as opposed to farmers over 30.

For the past couple months I’ve been thinking a lot about land access for farmers, and have come to recognize the issue as complex and difficult to resolve. I’ve worked with a number of folks who are working with organizations and agencies committed to helping connect the dots for farmers in need of farmland, and have realized that the economic and cultural issues surrounding land access are steeped in the notion that the value of land—its highest and best use—is based primarily on a suburban development model. Some of the best agricultural land is also some of the best for subdivision and sale to the highest bidder.

Then there’s the issue of access to capital, especially for first-generation farmers who have experience working on farms through either formal or informal education, apprenticeship or farm work positions, and who have the drive to strike out on their own, but who have a high debt to income ratio after college, little to no savings to speak of, and would never qualify for a standard bank loan. I wondered what options folks in this situation had.

So I asked around. I spoke with realtors, representatives from Land for Good, the Farm Service Agency (FSA), Farm Credit East, real estate lawyers, and farmers. The following two stories highlight NH farmers who, when they found themselves in this very position, succeeded in finding their permanent place.

Brookford Farm

Canterbury, NH

I met Luke Mahoney, owner of Brookford Farm, in Canterbury, NH, on a quintessential autumn afternoon. The sun was low in the sky, and the foliage took on a fiery cast that lit up the landscape like a torch. I showed up to go on a hayride around the farm, and Luke was driving the tractor.

Every Saturday at 3 pm, Luke takes a couple hours off to drive guests around the farm in a hay wagon and share with them his values and vision for this new landscape. He understands how important the connections that are farmer and community, and he takes this time to connect. There were only three folks in attendance that Saturday, but he didn’t cancel the ride or take the short road. Rather, he took time to tell us his story and answer our questions thoughtfully, and only began to rush as milking time approached.

I followed him into his parlor and he told me the story, while milking forty cows, of how he found his farm.

Beginner Farmers

Luke and Catarina Mahoney have been farming organically for fourteen years. They met on a 240-acre biodynamic, diversified farm in Germany in 1999, and in 2004, moved to Kattendorfer Hof, a diversified farm in Russia in 1999, and in 2004, moved to Kattendorfer Hof, a biodynamic farm near Hamburg, Germany, where Catarina took part in a formal biodynamic apprenticeship program with a focus on vegetable production and Luke worked with dairy cows. After a few years at Kattendorfer Hof, they learned how to run a larger farm efficiently and successfully market directly to consumers, they decided to move to New England and start their own operation.

Leasing Land

Their farm search started while they were still in Germany. They focused their search for farmland on New England and New York State in order to be close to family and markets. They connected with Land Link Vermont (at the University of Vermont) and New England Land Link (a service of the New England Small Farm Institute), to start their search. Through these land linking services, the Mahoney’s found a 200-acre dairy farm in Rollinsford, NH that would extend to them an affordable five-year lease.

With the five-year lease secured, the Mahoney’s were able to secure an operating loan from the FSA, a USDA agency that provides affordable loans to farmers who often don’t qualify for conventional bank loans. Considering their access to a 200-acre dairy farm, and their collective experience with organic dairy management, Luke and Catarina invested in the infrastructure they needed to start a small-scale organic dairy operation. At first, they sold most of their milk to Organic Valley, saving a little raw cream and milk to sell on the side. Soon enough, however, they saw the demand for raw milk products and other local foods rise, and started focusing on marketing direct to consumers. In 2010, they added pastured meats, vegetables and eggs to the mix, and things were going great.

All the while, however, Luke understood that there was a good chance that their lease would expire without renewal in 2012. But it was hard to think about that possibility while focusing so exclusively on growing their business. Without the burden of a mortgage and taxes, the Mahoney’s were able to reinvest all of their earnings into the farm infrastructure required to support various value-added enterprises: more milking equipment, a mill for grinding their own grain, a wood-fired oven for baking, dairy processing equipment, etc. The value of leasing land was clear as it enabled them to reinvest in growing their business, and grow it they did.

Then, in the spring of 2010, the Mahoney’s received word from their landlord that their lease was definitely not going to be extended, and they had a year and a half to relocate their entire farming operation.

The Search

Luke and Catarina took the winter of 2010-11 off from farming and started gathering resources. They again contacted real estate agents and land linking organizations. They looked at parcels in Maine and Connecticut, but every parcel they found had its drawbacks. Either it was too expensive, or too far from their markets to enable them to continue the business they had built.

While utilizing these formal resources, the Mahoney’s also started talking. They used their personal and business networks to put out the word that they were looking for 200+ acres of farmland in NH. That’s when a woman they knew in town mentioned a parcel of land that the town of Canterbury, NH was looking to sell. The 610 acre property along the Merrimack River, formerly Gold Star Soda Farm, was located 50 miles from Rollinsford, and had some of the best agricultural soils in NH, although it had been ravaged by over forty years of conventional sod farming.

The Land

The Mahoney’s went to see the land in July 2011. In many ways it was perfect, but it was in desperate need of rehabilitation. They sent a quick survey to their customers asking: “Should we take on the project of rehabilitating the land which was conventionally farmed, or should we search outside New Hampshire for land which is already certified organic?” Would you continue to buy our products even if they were not, for a few years, certified organic?” These were important questions. Since only about 2% of the land in NH is actively farmed, and only a small percentage of that farmed organically, according to the 2012 Home Grown Report, Food Solutions New England), the Mahoney’s had limited options if they were to remain in state.

Apparently, their customers pledged their continued support, and by August, the Mahoney’s decided to try to purchase the farm. But how? They had no savings, since they had invested everything they had back into the farm business. They had no equity, since they had been leasing their farm land. They couldn’t qualify for a traditional bank loan. How were they going to buy the property?

They had to find investors.

But who?

Town Politics

All the while, the Board of Selectmen of the town of Canterbury had some of their own issues to contend with. Luke and Catarina were not the only farmers

Luke Mahoney takes an afternoon break at Brookfield Farm to give guests a hayride farm tour. The Natural Farmer, Winter, 2012-13

The Land

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Town Politics

All the while, the Board of Selectmen of the town of Canterbury had some of their own issues to contend with. Luke and Catarina were not the only farmers
interested in purchasing the old sod farm. Two dairy farmer brothers, whose family had farmed in Canterbury since the 1730’s, had also submitted a bid for the property. Although their first bid was rejected by the Board of Selectmen because it was deemed financially unstable, the brothers collected enough signatures to support bringing their lease-to-purchase option to public vote—against Luke and Caterina’s proposal. The town had to vote between two farmers with two very different approaches to farming: conventional dairy farmers with an historical connection to the town vs. young, organic, biodynamic dairy farmers from elsewhere.

Securing a Mortgage

Luke and Caterina knew they had to secure the funds to purchase the land outright, as the town would probably not consider a lease to own, or other purchase agreement. They also knew they had to find support for their vision in the residents of Canterbury.

Having never sought investors, Luke sought the advice of a friend who knew something about business. His friend told him he should connect with an entrepreneur in his field who had become financially successful. His friend mentioned Stonyfield Farm CEO Gary Hirschberg. Luke contacted Gary Hirschberg regarding becoming an investor, and Hirschberg agreed, purchasing the property for $900,000, and acting as a lender.

Securing Operating Loan

But securing a mortgage isn’t enough to seal the deal. You have to develop a business plan that will allow you to access the capital (in the form of operating loans) to improve and run the farm in a manner that shows financial viability. Luke and Caterina had not only to secure a mortgage lender, they also had to secure a substantial operating loan that would allow them to make improvements to the infrastructure required to run their operation successfully, starting immediately.

They approached the NH Community Loan Fund, a non-profit organization that works to provide traditionally underserved people with access to the loans, capital and technical assistance they need to understand town politics.

During the planning process the NH Community Loan Fund suggested that, at their scale, Luke and Caterina might want to have an advisory board. Now Luke meets monthly with a group of stakeholders including Gary Hirschberg, a representative from the Community Loan Fund, a representative from the Concord Coop and various business owners and townspeople. Through this advisory board Luke gets sound business advice from folks in his field, his stakeholders stay informed about what’s going on at the farm, and Luke gets to know his community and better understand town politics.

To Lease or To Own

When asked if he preferred the security of ownership over the flexibility of leasing land, Luke didn’t bat an eyelash, “I get more sleep at night now.” Which is important when you’re a farmer.

Despite the intense pressure of increased expenses, and the fact that there is little left over right now for reinvestment after paying the monthly bills, the security of knowing that all the work one invests in a piece of land will pay for itself in the long run is critical to the greater vision that Luke and Caterina share.

That being said, while they were leasing land, they were able to reinvest their income in a lot of mobile infrastructure that has enabled them to expand into the various enterprises that generate value-added income on their farm today.

Like most tough questions, the answer isn’t black or white.

Tracie’s Community Farm

Fitzwilliam, NH

The weather was grey and drizzly (the other quintessential NH autumnal shade) when I arrived at Tracie’s Community Farm. Fortunately, Tracie was harvesting mesclun mix in one of her three greenhouses with one of her employees. They were running a bit behind this afternoon, and I offered to lend a hand, but she said she could talk while she harvested, and proceeded to share with me her story.

Beginner Farmer

For Tracie, it all started in her father’s backyard. Tracie started her own garden during her first summer back from college at the age of nineteen. That summer she realized how much she felt connected to the land and the earth and the rhythms of the season in a way that she didn’t feel connected in her college life. She spent the winter reading organic gardening books, and found herself drawn in.

“I felt attracted to the idea of a simple life. Of being connected to what really matters. Growing food and eating it seemed pretty consistent with that. I realized that it was what I wanted to do for a living: grow and sell and earn the money I needed to own my own farm.”

She was studying Environmental Horticulture at the University of New Hampshire, and had to have a summer work experience in order to satisfy the requirements of the program. She decided that instead of working elsewhere, she could spend her summer growing and selling vegetables. She drew up plans and budgets, and did all the work associated with running a small farm. And she was hooked.

That’s how it all started. The following year, she was back at it, and for many years she put all of her energy back into growing the farm business. She invested in tools, infrastructure and fertility. She was borrowing land from her father and living very frugally. Each year her business expanded, and nine years in, she had grown a 150 member CSA.

This was too big for her father. He was concerned about the traffic, the liability, the aesthetic. His needs were sometimes in conflict with the needs of the business, and she couldn’t do things as efficiently and affordably as she knew was possible. In April of 2007 he told her she needed to find a different piece of land to farm.

So she started looking for land to buy.

The Search

“It’s hard to find affordable prime agricultural land in NH,” Tracie expressed as she turned mesclun around in her hands and cut off too-long stems.

“I was pretty frantic, and I looked at a lot of pretty bad land. Once you start looking for a farm, all kinds of folks start telling you about this great land they have. They don’t understand what makes good farmland.”

Tracie tried to find a realtor, but back then nobody wanted to work with her because she couldn’t get pre-approved for a bank loan. So she started calling all the land-linking organizations, like Land Link VT, Land Link NE, New England Land and Link, and Land for Good, and found a lot of great lease options, but she wanted to buy property outright. She didn’t want to find herself in the same predicament in five years that she found herself in then. She didn’t feel she could continue to invest in more leased land.

Tracie looked for land in earnest for seven months, and found everything to be barely farmable or outrageously expensive due to development pressure along the Connecticut River Valley. She didn’t want to live too far outside of where she had family and community in western NH, and had spent years developing her market. If she had to start all over somewhere far afield, she would have to expend a lot of energy redeveloping those connections, all while trying to make enough money to pay the mortgage.

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The Natural Farmer

Winter, 2012-13
Giving Up

She started taking breath-work therapy sessions to help reduce her mounting stress. In October of 2007 Tracie came to a place where she was able to accept the fact that farming in western NH wasn’t in the cards, and that she would move to Arizona, become a landscaper, and save money to eventually buy a farm.

She wrote a letter to her CSA members explaining that because she couldn’t find land in the region, she wouldn’t be able to provide shares next year. She hoped that if she was able to return to farming in a future season, they would return.

“All of a sudden, after I finally let it go—within a week—land came.”

She received an email from someone who owned a large parcel of prime agricultural soil in town that they didn’t want to see subdivided and sold. They wanted to put the land into a conservation easement and keep it in agriculture. They found out about her through one of her CSA members who knew the land owners from synagogue.

The Land

Tracie saw the land in Fitzwilliam and immediately knew it was the place. Tracie and the land owners worked with the Monadnock Conservancy, a community land trust, to hash out the details of the conservation easement, determining what could happen and what couldn’t. They determined what kind of structures could be built and where they would have the least impact. They also discussed what practices were acceptable to use with the ultimate goal of preserving of the working landscape. The easement placed on the land allowed the owners to sell the 33 acres of the property under easement to Tracie for $133,000, while writing off a portion of the remainder of the assessed value of the property on their taxes. With the land in hand, Tracie was able to secure a loan from Yankee Farm Credit and within a week she was in full force—tilling and fertilizing the soil, moving perennials and infrastructure, all in preparation for the next growing season.

The Reality

In order to make it all work financially, however, she had to put everything she had into the farm. In order to carry the loan and pay the taxes, she had to increase her CSA to 210 members that first season with only herself and two full-time new workers and work share volunteers. The first year she ran on a lot of adrenaline. Ultimately she had a bumper crop to carry her through.

Now, five years later, Tracie has six full-time employees, over 265 CSA members, and is using every possible inch of her land. She hosts regular potlucks that allow her membership to mix and mingle, and connect her to her community.

To Lease or to Own

She realizes how lucky she was to have really inexpensive land to farm in the beginning, and how that experience helped her grow her business slowly and steadily so that she could successfully own and steward her land today. She feels very strongly, however, that land ownership (or long-term land tenure) is critical to growing a business in organic agriculture, because the need to establish efficiencies and systems that build soil, reduce pest and disease pressure, expand markets, and reduce expenses is so critical to her success.

“The folks who sold me the land are both CSA members, and a part of my community. To me, they’ll always be a part of my life. They’re really great people who helped me find my land. If that didn’t happen, who knows where I would be right now?”

In Conclusion

What I’ve gathered from this journey into the world of land access is a bunch of resources and a bunch of healthy tips. The most important message I’ve heard is that finding a land access situation that works for you can be challenging and that each farmer’s situation is unique, which means there’s no easy answer.

I learned that one of the most important things a farmer needs to do when seeking land is to make connections—with service providers, stakeholders (if currently established), landowners in their region of choice, friends, family, and community members. I learned that building up your community collateral is a huge part of finding the right place to lease or own.

I also learned that it is immensely important to do your homework. You have to understand the landscape, the soils, and the community surrounding the land that you want, or the region you are interested in farming. You have to understand how to budget for the lease or mortgage, and create a solid business plan to support the costs (especially if you plan to apply for a mortgage or operational loans). You have to know what your priorities are and have clear goals and objectives. You also need to know where you can be flexible. If leasing, you have to know what the landowner wants, needs, and expects, and make sure your practices and vision resonate with them.

One commonality in the above stories that stuck out was the farmer’s determination to own land after creating a successful business leasing land. I can’t help but think the combination of leasing and owning land at various stages in your farm operation’s development has its benefits, and that determining which option makes the most sense for you depends on a lot of different factors unique to your situation.

Finally, I think it’s important to tap into the multitude of resources currently available for beginner farmers seeking land. That list is long and growing, and the list of resources herein, which have been recommended to me by farmers and service providers in New England, is in no way comprehensive.

Good luck in your search!

Land Access Resources

Land Linking Organizations:

National Farm Transition Network, www.extension.iastate.edu/lnfn

Land for Good, www.landforgood.org

New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, http://nesfp.nutrition.tufts.edu/resources/farmland_landseekers.html


Maine Farmlink, www.mainefarmlink.org

Land Link Vermont (Beginner Farmer Land Access Program): www.uvm.edu/susagctr/landlink.html

Gardens and high tunnels in late October at Tracie’s Farm.

Financing:

USDA Farm Service Agency, www.fsa.usda.gov/

Yankee Farm Credit, https://www.farmcrediteast.com/

NH Community Loan Fund, www.communityloanfund.org

The Carrot Project, www.thecarrotproject.org


Granges, Extension Agents, Farm Bureau, NOFAs and MOFGA, universities and colleges with concentrations in agriculture, other formal and informal agricultural groups in your state or region

Ray Conner is the Beginner Farmer Program Coordinator for NOFA-NH and a beginner farmer herself, raising broilers and pigs at Evandale Farm in Pittsfield, NH.
Karma Glos trains intern Aurelie Challencin to drive the Kingbird Farm work horse, Mira.

This issue contains news, features, and articles about organic growing in the Northeast, plus a special supplement on

Beginning Farmers