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March is Frost Seeding Time

**Spring may seem far away as winter winds and snows blow, but start planning now for pasture improvement**

by Nancy Glazier

March is a great time of the year to add some legumes into your pastures or hayfields. It is a way to improve pastures without losing a production year. Added legumes will boost production and fill in thin patches or bare spots; they will provide needed nitrogen to the grasses already growing, and provide protein for the livestock. Little or no tillage is involved which reduces the potential for soil erosion. Hopefully, you did your homework last fall by checking the forage quantity, types and groundcover. If not, take a walk!

Frost seeding is the same as any other type of seeding or planting — seed-to-soil contact is critical. What works with this technique is the freeze-thaw process in late winter/early spring. As the days get above freezing and nights are below freezing, this action works the seeds down into the soil in preparation for germination. Your best option is to spread seed on frozen ground to reduce the potential to rut up the pasture.

Legumes work best for frost seeding due to seed shape. Success will vary farm to farm, but clovers will establish better, especially red clover. They are shorter-lived in a pasture; a way to offset that would be to frost seed red clover with slower-establishing birdsfoot trefoil. By the time the clover dies out, the trefoil will be growing well. Another way would be to routinely frost seed half of your pastures every year. It can be an inexpensive improvement. Alfalfa can be frost seeded, but don’t try to seed into a field with alfalfa (even a thin stand) growing. The existing plants have an allelopathic effect on alfalfa seedlings; they won’t let them grow and become established. Suggested rates are below. The price of seed is relatively low, so don’t skimp.

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<th>Lbs/Ac</th>
<th>Red Clover - 6 to 10</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Ladino Clover - 2 to 5</td>
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<td>Birdsfoot Trefoil - 5 to 8</td>
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<td>Alfalfa - 6 to 10</td>
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Frost seeding grasses may have limited results, but is more successful with bunch type grasses like orchardgrass. Try seeding some on a small scale. If the pasture is tall or matted, your success with grasses or legumes may be limited. An option to try is to broadcast the seed and let livestock in — carefully — for a flash or quick grazing. Between their minor munching and hoof action, the seed will have a better chance of the soil. Also, a light disking or harrowing could scratch the ground enough to let the seed get down the soil to grow. You may need to frost seed grasses and legumes separately due to the seeds’ differing shapes.

Equipment for frost seeding can be as little or as big as needed. The size of the pasture or field will dictate what’s needed, unless you have time to walk a large field with a small cyclone spreader. A broadcaster can be mounted on the back of an ATV or small tractor. Fertilization will help seedlings get established as well as existing grasses. Wait till late summer if a soil test shows phosphorous or potassium is needed.

Sometimes overgrazing or continuously grazing will leave bare or thin spots, or kill the existing legumes. Frost seedings can be done to improve the stand, but this will only be a short term fix. Rotationally grazing is the best way to improve a stand for the long term. Frost seeding will return legumes to the pastures; dividing the pasture into at least four paddocks will provide forages time to rest and regrow through the growing season. Grazing needs to be carefully managed early season to prevent damage to the tender seedlings, yet allow light to reach them.

Who can predict what this spring will be like? Dry spring conditions will discourage seed germination. Unfortunately, there is no way to control this. With the seed in place, there is a chance that it will germinate and grow when sufficient moisture is there.

Nancy Glazier is Small Farms Specialist with the NWNY Dairy, Livestock and Field Crops Team, Cornell Cooperative Extension. She can be reached at her office in Penn Yan at 315.536.5123 or nig3@cornell.edu.
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January 13, 2014

Readers Write

Welcome to our new “Readers Write” column where we feature a few of the questions and comments we receive about Small Farm Quarterly articles.

Article: The Case for Regional Seed, by Petra Page-Mann

Q: What resources are available for local commercial growers that need to acquire seed in more economically priced formats at larger volumes than what is customary for retail buyers? We’ve been looking at both the Fruition and HSL websites and the maximums are still thousands of seeds smaller than what we would normally plant. Our farm is interested in planting regional seeds, and will plant in smaller patches to make it work, but we aren’t sure who can supply enough quantity to even accommodate a smaller operation that still needs to be sufficiently large for a commercial operation. We can’t bring a tomato to an NYC farmer’s market just once no matter how cool it is!

-Jennifer

A: Dear Jennifer, Market growers’ ability to sow local, high quality and organic seed is indeed a huge gap at present. It is exciting to know there is the demand awaiting supply! Regional seed companies are just starting to offer bulk seeds, so check back with them soon! Fruition Seeds is now able to offer 30+ varieties. High Mowing Seeds grows about 60 varieties of seed in Vermont that are well adapted to the NY bioregion. The Hudson Valley Seed Library is now offering about 20-25 locally grown varieties in bulk. Happy Planting!

Article: Quinoa Curiosity, by Abigail Woughter

Q: Thanks for posting this story and link to the Project Report. We grew quinoa here in Dutchess County NY in 2013 and would like to network with NY farmers growing and processing quinoa. I’d also like to find Cornell students to work with in analyzing our saponin rinse wash in the lab for antifungal and antipest foliar spray value. Can you help me find such people at Cornell?

-David

A: Dear David, I suggest contacting David and Meiling, the growers that are featured in this story, directly, so that you can find out who their other quinoa contacts are. Regarding your question about finding students to participate in your research, I suggest you reach out to the Cornell Department of Horticulture Undergraduate Coordinator, Leah Cook. Her email is lcc2@cornell.edu.
What is the Ideal Weight for a Market Lamb?

by Ulf Kintzel

Over the years, I’ve read many articles about the ideal weight for market lambs and had many conversations with producers. I am left with the impression that many domestic lambs are grown to well over 100 pounds, to 110 and 120 or even to more than 130 pounds. I have long wondered why. Why make lambs this heavy?

As many of you have gathered by now, I am coming from the old world; from Germany, to be precise. My first 11 years of a total of 29 in the sheep business were spent “over there.” Naturally, when I came here I did many things the way I did in the old country, one of them being that I harvest my lambs at 80 to 90 pounds live weight. However, most of these lambs were at first sold at the local sales barn and I didn’t give the weight much thought from a marketing perspective, only from a production perspective. A few were sold directly to individual customers. While I had mostly positive feedback, I distinctly remembered a customer complaining about the size (or lack thereof) of the leg of lamb. She stated that the ones she previously purchased at the supermarket were much larger. I suggested that this is where she ought to get her lamb from here on, figuring the leg of lamb was compared to a large grain-fed Suffolk lamb (or something like that), with which I wasn’t going to compete.

Seven years ago I moved to the Finger Lakes area and had to look for new customers. Two of the new ones were food vendors who purchased my lambs and sold it in places like New York City to restaurants and stores. To my surprise at that time, the weight was discussed quite extensively. They wanted heavier carcasses. I wanted to stick to my guns. So I started thinking a little more about why I did what I did and why I wanted to stick with “my” weight and not theirs.

Let’s crunch a few numbers first so that we are all on the same page. When a lamb is harvested, the carcass weight is about 50 percent of the live weight. That figure can vary a little. Lambs of wool sheep breeds when carrying some wool will often “dress out” a little less than 50 percent. Hair sheep breeds tend to dress out a little above 50 percent. Then, you need to take into consideration the amount of food the lamb still had in its guts at the time of harvest because that affects that percentage as well. On top of it, in some slaughtering facilities the carcass is weighed with the head on and in some without. So let’s not complicate the issue and for easy math let’s settle for 50 percent of a live weight being the carcass or dress weight.

I have medium sized sheep. The ewes will reach about 160 to 180 pounds when fully grown. Individual animals may weigh a little more but I do not have sheep that weigh above 200 pounds when fully grown. However, many sheep breeds in the U.S. do get that heavy. A large sheep has higher maintenance than a medium sized sheep. Yet, a large sheep cannot give you more lambs either. Furthermore, higher maintenance most often requires feeding grain, something I don’t do. Naturally, a large sheep cannot be used for meat. I reach that weight on average between four and five month with my male lambs. I reach that weight on average appropriately, to 80 pounds and slightly above. I reach that weight on average between four and five month with my male market lambs. The top lambs get to 80 pounds at three and a half months. These are mostly single male lambs from adult ewes. Some lambs will need six or perhaps even seven months to get to this weight. These are often lambs that were born to a young ewe, perhaps even a twin born to a ewe that lambed the first time that doesn’t get the same milk as others and therefore grows slower.

At about 80 to 90 pounds I have a lamb that is exactly as it should be: the bone, meat, and fat ratio is exactly right. The lamb is meaty and it is ‘finished’ — meaning it has just the right fat cover. Fast growing animals put a bit more growth into meat a while longer. So they might be finished at 90 pounds or slightly above. However, once the lamb reaches a weight well above 90 pounds and starts reaching 100 pounds, that ratio starts changing. The lamb now starts putting more nutrients into producing fat and less into muscle growth. They also grow slower. So while I need to have more input for the same growth, I also have the input turned into more fat. You are not getting bonus points or premium prices for more fat last time I checked. So it makes sense to sell these lambs at this point, which amounts to about 40 to 45 pounds dress weight with some lambs just under 40 pounds and some in the high 40s or even 50 pounds.

I always figured that this is a rather selfish approach, viewing the issue from only my end, the production end. Then I read a research report by Whit C. Stewart in “The Shepherd” magazine that addressed this issue. According to the author, only six percent of the graded carcasses in the U.S. were 45 to 55 pounds, yet these ‘light’ carcasses retrieved the premium. The author gleaned the data from a USDA weekly report. He goes on listing the norm for carcass weights in New Zealand and Australia, being 35 to 44 pounds and 39 pounds to 52 pounds respectively.

When it comes to sheep, I am always listening to what they do down under. The sheep production in these two countries are the leading edge in the sheep industry. It so happens to be the case that their approach and mine are matching. In case of my vendors I went to rather great length explaining why I didn’t want to increase the weight before harvesting. Perhaps in the future I only need to use one sentence: “For my medium-sized sheep, 40 pounds dress weight makes the ideal lamb carcass.”

Ulf Kintzel is a native of Germany and has lived in the U.S. since 1995. In 2006 he moved from New Jersey to Rushville in the Finger Lakes area in Upstate New York. Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm. He breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper Sheep without any grain feeding. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by email at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone at 585-554-3313.
Local Compost Materials Heat Community Greenhouse

Jesica Clark trials compost substrates to find a sustainable way to heat an urban greenhouse

by Abigail Woughter

From Empty Space to Green Space

When farming a quarter-acre community garden on a city block, it is easy to feel as if everyone is watching. Jesica Clark of South Pine Street City Farm in Kingston, NY had to learn to grow efficiently under the watchful eye of the community.

Having seven years of growing experience on different rural farms, Clark noticed, “I felt a little more pressure in an urban setting when my neighbors were 20 feet away from the garden to make it look as nice as possible. If it didn’t look good, the neighbors would be calling.”

South Pine Street City Farm is located in downtown Kingston, though off a main road on a quiet dead end street. The farm’s plot of land was once just an empty house lot, then a lawn turned community garden, and finally became South Pine Street City Farm in 2011. In addition to growing vegetables on permanent raised beds and operating a farm stand for local consumers, the farm is home to several youth organizations, such as Dig Kids, a program for summer employment that gives students hands-on urban farming experience. Clark and fellow South Pine Street City Farm farmer KayCee Wimbish also support their community by donating one-quarter of the farm’s harvest to local food pantry, Queen’s Galley.

Designing a Compost Heated Greenhouse

When it came time to grow seedlings, Clark drew on her experience and her local farming contacts to rent space in an off-site greenhouse. But small-scale farming had made her especially attuned to sourcing local, and her daily 30-40 minute commute across the county to check on the seedlings made Clark worry about sustainability.

She determined that South Pine Street City Farm needed a greenhouse of its own. She knew the greenhouse site had no source of electricity. The idea for a low-energy-input greenhouse came from a friend who used animal manure from his livestock farm as the composting base to heat his greenhouse.

Composting was no novel concept for South Pine Street City Farm, and Clark wondered if the mixes she used in the garden could be an effective passive heat source in the greenhouse.

“When I was managing the compost at the garden, I sourced coffee grounds from a couple of local cafes in Kingston. I noticed that the coffee grounds were getting up to 125, 130 degrees. So I figured that was probably warm enough to work for a small sized greenhouse.”

Clark received SARE funding to test the performance of three locally sourced compost mixes. The first mix was made up of half coffee grounds, half chipped city mulch, by volume. The second mix was comprised of double the amount of coffee grounds by volume than mulch, and the third mix used a 2:1 ratio of coffee grounds to dry leaves, making it the most finely textured mix of the three.

The compost mixes served as a direct heat source and were located inside the greenhouse. Clark used concrete blocks to form a container that neatly held the compost mixtures. This table-like structure is called a compost bay, and is central to the functionality of the greenhouse.

“The concrete blocks make a nice little heat sink, and they’re sturdy so I’m able to put a frame on top of them for seedlings.”

Extending Fall Production

When Clark began the compost-heated greenhouse project, her main objectives were to grow high-quality seedlings and experiment with extending the spring and fall growing seasons in an effort to produce local vegetables longer for her community. “In this whole urban farming movement,” she considered, “I think one thing that has been neglected is the idea of a community greenhouse, especially when it comes to growing in the wintertime and being a resource for different community gardens.”

In terms of South Pine Street City Farm production, the greenhouse helped Clark extend the season of her plants, but not in the way she originally planned. “What I was thinking when I proposed the project,” she remembered, “was taking plants from the garden and transplanting them to the greenhouse as it started to get colder.”

Creating Barriers Against Vandalism

South Pine Street City Farm’s greenhouse is not located on the same dead end lane as the farm but nearby in a field next to the local YMCA, an area of high pedestrian traffic. When deciding between cover materials for the greenhouse, either plastic or the more durable polycarbonate, Clark chose the plastic film for its cost-effectiveness and ease of replacement. Little did she know, replacing it was exactly what she’d be doing. Vandalism became her biggest issue of the season.

“Something about that plastic covering,” she laughed, “must have just said ‘rip me!’ because I had to repair several holes over the winter time.”

She conceded that this was frustrating, and not in keeping with her thoroughly positive experiences with community members in her time at South Pine Street City Farm. When it comes time for greenhouse renovations, polycarbonate covering will be installed, hopefully deterring any greenhouse vandalism.

Producing Food and Possibility

Clark was satisfied to achieve her goals of seedling production and season extension, but the greenhouse also represented community independence and sustainability.

“It was so important,” she assessed, “to be able to have a greenhouse in the city that did not run on fossil fuels and could really be put anywhere.”

South Pine Street City Farm, itself once just a lawn, speaks to Clark’s ability to work efficiently within the parameters provided. Small-scale farming allows her to more creatively use the resources Kingston has to offer—be it coffee grounds or yard waste—to sustainably serve the community.

To learn more about South Pine Street City Farm, visit the website SouthPineStreetCityFarm.org. To learn more about SARE project FNE12-739, view the summary at sare.org. Click on Project Reports > Search the Database.

South Pine Street City Farm operates in partnership with Binnewater Ice Company, Kingston Land Trust and The Queens Galley.

Abigail Woughter is a junior Agricultural Sciences Major at Cornell University and served as the Cornell Small Farms Program summer intern in 2013.
Invest in Your Farm Education this Winter
Evaluation Shows Online Courses Inspire Action

by Erica Frenay

Too busy to travel to a workshop or conference? Have you ever thought of taking an online course to advance your farming education? Whether you are a new, aspiring or experienced farmer, the Northeast Beginning Farmers Project offers interactive 6-week courses that connect you to the information and people you need to start or diversify your farm. The courses consist of weekly webinars with presentations by experienced educators and farmers and allow for readings and discussion on your own time. The cost is $200 per farm to attend.

Evaluation polls from the 2012-2013 season show that students that complete courses are inspired to take action! Seventy five of students that completed last season’s online courses intend to further develop their business plans; fifty-one will invest in farm infrastructure; thirty-seven will expand or improve their marketing; and 99 of them will improve their farm financial management or take other measures to improve farm profitability.

Students that have taken the courses say:

“As a city dweller looking to move to a farm, all the information was very eye opening. I can plan properly now that I have concrete information. I have a clearer idea of what is involved and I am still excited to try.”

“The most valuable thing about this course was that it made me hash out and put on paper each section of my business plan. It is so easy to put business plan writing on the back burner, and this course made it move to the top of my to-do list and allowed me to get all my ideas and financials into one organized document.”

“While there is no ‘by the numbers’ guide to farming, this course has provided me what I think of as mental infrastructure to organize and move forward, access to great resources both online and human. In addition, the discussion forums allows me to connect with so many enthusiastic people who share a common thread to make their small (or not so small) farm a reality.”

See http://nebeginningfarmers.org/online-courses for more details.

Winter 2014 Course Catalogue

The following online courses are starting soon! Tips for choosing the best course for you are available at http://nebeginningfarmers.org/online-courses

Organize Your Farm Business Records with Financial Record-Keeping, BF 104
Jan 13 - Feb 17, 2014

Plan for Profit, Reduce Stress with Holistic Financial Planning, BF 203
Jan. 14 - Feb. 18, 2014

Understand Organic Requirements with Organic Certification, BF 108
Feb. 4 - March 4, 2014

Get Introduced to Marketing & Feasibility with entry-level course Markets & Profits, BF 102
Jan. 16 - Feb 20, 2014

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My Ole Dad

Memoirs of a 78 year old Vermont farmer

by Stuart Cheney

My Dad was a big muscular fella about six foot with heavy broad shoulders. His arms were huge, and he had hands more like paws. It has been said that he and Bob Henry who was even bigger (Bob used to be the milkman back in the 40s) once picked up the front end of a Chevrolet car six inches off the ground. But that was before my time, I only know what I’ve been told.

About 1945 or ’46 we were sugaring and it was the end of the season. We had a lot of sap and it was a real warm day and Dad was in the sugarhouse boiling. Gramp and I were outside working up some wood when I heard Dad holler. I ran in and saw Dad slumped over the pan like he was trying to hold himself up and I yelled to Gramp to come help. Dad’s face was beet red and Gramp and I tried to get him straightened up so we could walk him outside.

I know I was awful scared and didn’t exactly understand what was happening. Well, we finally got him over by the wood pile and quickly made a place so he could sit down. Lord, his face was so red. Gramp mentioned that he might be having a heat stroke. Well, I went over to the little stream that runs by and got him a nice glass of cold water and he chug-a-lugged it right down. I brought the horses and sap sled around and we loaded him on and took him up to the house. I took off his boots and he went and laid on the couch.

The next day, my mother made an appointment at the doctor’s office and my father was a little better and was able to tell the owner of the chickens what happened. “That sure went down easy.” The owner of the chickens said, “We’ll leave it up to you to tell the owner of the chickens what happened.”

Meanwhile back at the farm, I done all the haying every summer and there was a boy down the road who would come up and help put the hay in the horsebarn for the horses.

Before my mother and father sold the cows, I thought a lot about asking if we could keep them and I could do the chores before and after school. I thought about it a lot but I never said anything to them about it. They never talked about money matters in front of me and I knew nothing about money matters myself, absolutely nothing.

Inside I knew, too, that getting up early and doing the milking and feeding and cleaning for the cows and feeding and watering the horses, all in time to get a ride at 6:30 with my father into town where my high school was, just wouldn’t work. So really I was smart enough to know that, especially in the winter. As much as I loved the farm, getting up at 3:30 a.m. in the winter was out. So I never mentioned it.

As soon as spring came when I was a freshman, I asked Dad if I could sugar and he said, “go ahead. I made about 74 gallons that year but it tested a bit light, so one Saturday Dad helped boil it all over and we ran water in behind it so the pan wouldn’t burn down. We lost a little when it mixed with water, but I guess you can’t help it.

As soon as I got my license in 1951, I got a job hauling bagged chicken feed for a large poultry farm in town. We’d go to the railroad siding and find the car and get the door open and back up to the door with the truck and load on about 120 bags and deliver it around to all the different chicken farms — they farm out broilers for other farmers to raise. I also hauled chickens to Manhattan Poultry in Upper Manhattan where they were slaughtered. I made three trips down there. There wasn’t any throughway back then. I was only 17 years old, but I had another boy with me.

On my first trip my boss went with me to show me the way. Somewhere down in Connecticut we came to an underpass and I started slowing down. My boss started hollering, “Keep going, keep going!” (He was kind of a nervous cuss sometimes.) I tried to tell him that on top of the seven tiers of chicken crates there were four more roped on top in the middle. He said, “No, no, you don’t need to slow down. I know it fits, I been there myself with seven tiers. Keep going, keep going.”

CRASH. The truck went under but the four crates on top didn’t quite make it. Well, the cops came from nowhere. They got out and paid no attention to us but grabbed those chickens and wrung their necks so fast, opened the car trunk and threw them in. They must have gotten a dozen or so. The officers got back in the car and said, “We’ll leave it up to you to tell the owner of the chickens what happened.” That sure was no fun.

After I got the job in school driving the truck, Dad sold the horses and the equipment, and in 1950 he and my mother sold the farm. They bought a house in West Brattleboro and I lived with them until November 1956 when I got married.

My dad worked around a bit at woodworking shops and then had a stroke and died in the middle seventies. Mom kept teaching for quite a while and retired in the eighties. She received a large silver tray for her good teaching efforts.

Stuart Cheney grew up on a 145 acre diversified farm near Brattleboro, VT. He resides in a small five room house built by his grandfather in 1940.

To read Stuart’s other memoirs, visit www.smallfarms.cornell.edu and click on Quarterly > Search by Column > Farm Memoir.
Kale, second generation of seed production.

“Kale is life,” says Scott Signori, head chef and owner of Stonecat Cafe in Hector, NY. “Kale is a reflection of how you live. We have phenomenal soils and fantastic farmers here in the Finger Lakes. Now we have the seeds to sow.”

Chefs play a key role in our food system, connecting farmer and eater as they craft the leading edge of food and culture. Increasingly, chefs are asking how and where food is grown and some of their choices are beginning to influence the very DNA of their ingredients.

This is not new. For the last 14 millennia, seeds have been selected and saved, flavor and regional resilience the key selections. Those who selected the seeds (breeders) and those who those crops sustained (eaters) have often been one and the same. By contrast, the focus of crop breeding for the last several decades has been yield, uniformity, and shelf-stability, guided almost entirely by the interests of multinational corporations rather than public interest. Modern breeders and eaters are as removed from conversations and collaborations with one another, often thousands of miles apart both literally and figuratively.

However, breeders, farmers, chefs and eaters are now collaborating to cultivate crops with increasing public interest, flavor and regional resilience back at the forefront. Nathaniel Thompson owns and operates Remembrance Farm in Trumansburg, NY. He cultivates 100 acres, focusing on greens, from kale to lettuce. “We are interested in salad mixes with interesting colors, textures, flavors with uniform maturity to make harvest practical,” says Thompson. On-farm breeding offers him the visual and gastronomic diversity he is after while ensuring only the uniformly maturing plants seeds are saved. With each generation these seeds are becoming more and more customized to his soils, climate, cultivation practices and tastes. His own taste as well as his community.

Thompson appreciates being a part of a collective CSA where he is able to hear, firsthand, how people enjoy his produce. Increasingly, the personal relationships he is building with local chefs are deepening his interest in food, culture and seed. “Chefs understand the subtle qualities of food,” observes Thompson, “I love to work with chefs, willing to make the effort.”

“Farm to table is here to stay,” observes Paterson. “As chefs, we find ways to go deeper, more intimate, more connected. Local seed is the next level.”

Each of us play a significant role in our food system: we eat every day. Whether you sow the seeds, prepare the meal or simply sit down to the table, you are influencing the seeds being selected and sown around the world. Seeds are the small, unassuming heart of resilience. Join the conversation!

Petra Page-Mann is the co-owner of Fruition Seeds in Naples, NY, customizing organic seed to thrive in the Northeast! Her website is fruitionseeds.com and she may be contacted at petra@fruitionseeds.com.

PHOTO FEATURE

Postal Peepers

This winter photo feature comes to us from FoodCyclist.com, a resource and blog following Kate and John Suscovich’s journey toward a sustainable and happy farm. Their definition of a FoodCyclist is a person who adheres to the belief that healthy food, active living, and pursuing one’s passions are the keys to a happy life. The FoodCyclist Farm operates a pastured chicken and herbs CSA out of Kent, CT.

Here’s the story of how these chicks came to FoodCyclist Farm:

It’s 6:30 in the morning, the phone rings. “It’s the Post Office. ‘Umm hello, is this FoodCyclist Farm? We have your baby chickens here, please get them out of here.’ We drive to the Post Office and see why they are annoyed. There sits several cardboard boxes of incessantly peeping little chicks. They’re super cute, super loud, and ready for a drink (of water).

For more photos and stories, follow John and Kate’s blog at http://foodcyclist.com.
Mushroom farming, like any other agricultural enterprise, requires study, experience, controlling the growing environment as best you can, a certain amount of intuition and some luck. Edible mushrooms are the fruit of certain kinds of fungus. To grow edible mushrooms profitably isn’t that easy, nor is it overnight success. It takes about 15 to 16 weeks to produce most varieties as a crop, with only the last three weeks or so dedicated to sowing the seed and the actual growth of the mushrooms. Most of that time involves a lot of hard work up front. Compost must be made, the beds prepared, spawn (seed) ordered, the growing medium (compost) seeded, and then there’s the patient wait for the first signs of growth. All the while the temperature and humidity of the compost and the growing room must be maintained as close as possible to that preferred by the mushroom. The national average for mushroom growers in 1980 was 3.12 pounds per square foot. Depending on the type of mushroom, that’s not bad, but it’s not a get rich quick scheme.

Even before you create that first compost pile, it’s best to have your potential customers in mind. Will you be selling to restaurants, to stores, at farmers markets or directly from your farm? Is this going to supplement the income from your other crops or will it be your main focus?

Blue Oyster Cultivation, owned by Joe Rizzo, his wife Wendy and their children, is a small farm near Ithaca. Right now they use the mushrooms to supplement their income, though they hope that it will eventually evolve and become more than that. Currently they sell mushrooms and vegetables at the Ithaca Farmers Market, other markets and from their farm. They also sell mushrooms to a seasonal restaurant, the Copper Oven, which specializes in wood fired pizzas topped with hyper-local meats, cheeses and produce.

Country Folks is partnering with New York State Corn and Soybean Growers Association for the advertising year 2014. We will be continuing the insert in Country Folks East and West four times throughout the year. The newsletter will also be mailed to all of the members of the associations and to prospective members.

To place an ad or inquire about advertising opportunities in this or future issues please contact your Country Folks sales representative or contact Julicia Godbout at jgodbout@leepub.com or at 1-800-218-5586 ext. 164.

If you sell harvesting equipment, grain drying equipment, grain storage, seed or provide custom harvesting you need to be in these issues!

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mushrooms, turkey tails, white elm mushrooms (Hypipiszygus ulmarius) and horse mushrooms. In addition to selling the mushrooms fresh they also sell them dried and in gourmet products such as teas. They also sell mushroom kits to those interested in growing their own. Rizzo and family have teamed up with experienced mushroom hunter Carl Whittaker to found the Finger Lakes Mushroom Consortium, an organization that will warm the hearts of all mycophiles. The organization is planning to offer a 2014 CSA to those who enjoy dining on these delectable fungi.

Mushroom growing is a family affair on the Blue Oyster farm, with all hands at work turning compost, pasteurizing straw, manning the booth at farmers markets or posing for pictures, a special job for daughter Jillian, who is featured on the website along with the crop. Each variety of mushrooms needs its own growing medium. Shiitake, for instance, grow on blocks of oak that have been soaked in water, whereas oyster mushrooms are much less picky, any form or cellulous will do. Both mushroom varieties take matter indigestible by humans and turn it into protein and one of the ingredients for a very good meal or an interesting drink. Still, there is temperature and humidity that needs to be attended to, no matter what the growing medium or variety of fungus it is. Too hot a temperature will kill the spawn, and too cold a temperature can slow the mushroom growth to a halt. If the growing medium dries out, that too, can kill the spawn.

Wendy says, "Our mushrooms are almost too pretty to eat and our customers keep coming back for more. We pride ourselves on customer service and on offering the best product available that money can buy."

Blue Oyster Cultivation recommends that people buy mushrooms from an experienced grower or harvester.

If you want to grow your own, buy spawn from a reliable source. If you harvest mushrooms in the wild, make sure that you have a very good guidebook and some training with an experienced mushroom hunter. Some poisonous mushrooms look almost exactly like the edible varieties. For more information e-mail fingerlakesmushrooms@yahoo.com or go to the Blue Oyster Farm web site which features mushroom pictures, more information and several recipes, blueoystercultivation.com. The Copper Oven, 6800 Route 89 in Ovid, just north of Ithaca, will reopen on May 10th, 2014. Call them at 607-220-8794 or e-mail mj@slowfoodonthego.com.
NEW & BEGINNING FARMERS
One Solution for Farmland Access
Organic dairy farm family expands by partnering with socially responsible farmland company

by Kevin Egolf

As of October 15, 2013, the Richards family now has room to expand their organic Holstein herd after teaming up with Iroquois Valley Farms. Iroquois Valley Farms, a socially responsible farmland company that started in 2007 in Iroquois County, IL purchased 163 acres in Washington County, NY through the Company’s Young Farmer Land Access program to support Erin and Dan’s growing heifer and dairy business. The farm, which will be named Taconic Ridge Farm highlighting the picturesque location in the Taconic Mountains between the Green Mountains of Vermont and Adirondack Mountain range in New York, represents Iroquois Valley Farms’ first entry into the Northeast and brings the total funds committed to the Young Farmer Land Access Program to over $7 million.

Erin and Dan Richards, now with the help of their one-year old son Mason and recently born twins boys, Jack and Randy, operate an organic dairy in Washington County, NY. They started farming in 2003 on leased land and switched to organic in 2007, but really established themselves with the 2008 purchase of their main farm, 110 acres in Argyle, NY, approximately one hour northeast of Albany. At the time, they were the only organic dairy farmers in the area, but they viewed that as an opportunity rather than a challenge. Their dedication to sustainable operations and quality milk paid off and has allowed them to grow their farming operations over the last several years. In addition to the owned land, the Richards grow feedstock by Kevin Egolf

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Iroquois Valley Farms’ Young Farmer Land Access Program is dedicated to providing long-term land access solutions to young farmers looking to grow more nutritious, healthy and local foods. Access to farmland is increasingly expensive and difficult and the Young Farmer Land Access Program was established to specifically address this problem among young farmers. Since 2012, Iroquois Valley Farms has purchased just under 1,000 acres of farmland that have gone into the program. For more information on Iroquois Valley Farms or the Young Farmer Land Access Program visit Iroquois Valley Farms’ website, www.iroquois-valleyfarms.com.

For trade show and exhibiting information, please contact Dan Wren, Lee Trade Shows, P.O. Box 121, Palatine Bridge, NY 13428 • 800-218-5586 • e-mail dwren@leepub.com

• January 20, 2014: The 2014 Becker Forum will focus on immigration and related agricultural labor policy issues. This daylong session will tackle legislative proposals on immigration reform, immigration H-2A challenges, proposed changes in state agricultural labor laws, and community issues related to immigrant workers. The program will conclude with a producer panel discussing future strategies for effectively staffing the farm business. The Becker Forum will be hosted at the Doubletree Hotel, East Syracuse, NY. Just off the thruway. (Pre-registration is strongly encouraged).

• January 21-23, 2014: The Expo Trade Show just keeps getting bigger and better! Check out the newest products, services and specialized equipment for the fruit, vegetable, and direct marketing industries. The trade show will be open all three days in the exhibit. Stop by the trade show Tuesday afternoon for a little “Taste of Syracuse.” Area restaurants will offer tasting. On Wednesday, be sure not to miss the afternoon complimentary Ice Cream Social.

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Taconic Ridge barn and silos. Photos courtesy of Iroquois Valley Farms, LLC

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Iroquois Valley Farms, Dan Richards highlighted the importance of having the right partner. “If I do not own the land, it is extremely important that the owner has the same values and goals as my family and it is even better when I know the owner is 100 percent committed to supporting my farm business,” he stated. After reviewing several farms for sale in the area, the Richards and Iroquois Valley Farms were able to strike a deal on an under-utilized old farmstead in Cassayrua, NY. 10 minutes down the road from the Richards’ main farm, The Taconic Ridge Farm will provide the Richards new barns for the young heifers, more pasture, and good crops fields which are often difficult to find in the area. David M. Miller, the CEO and founder of Iroquois Valley Farms, commented on the process by saying, “We are extremely excited to have Erin, Dan, and family join the Iroquois Valley Farms family. We wanted to impact young farmers in the Northeast and we could not have a better farm family this land.”

A side benefit of the farm purchase, the Taconic Ridge Farm has an old farmhouse that the Richards will purchase from Iroquois Valley Farms in two years, providing plenty of space on which the three Richards boys can GRAZE around.

Kevin Egolf is the Director of Business Development at Iroquois Valley Farms and is an advocate for supporting local and organic farmers. He can be reached at kegolf@iroquoisvalleyfarms.com.
How to Love a Farmland Lease

Strengthening the landowner-farmer relationship with leasing and stewardship

by Rachel Carter

Sustainability, simply stated, is the capacity to endure. But the high cost of land in Vermont, combined with the financial challenges of owning land, are threatening the sustainability of local agriculture. According to Vermont’s Farm to Plate Strategic Plan to strengthen the food system, “Affordable access to farmland was described [by stakeholders] as a serious barrier for new farmers or those seeking to grow and expand.” In other words, productive farmland is imperative if Vermont is to increase its local food access and consumption.

“It could appear there is plenty of rural land in Vermont, but the agricultural land is largely inaccessible to new farmers,” says Garland Mason, the new farmer coordinator at Rutland Area Food and Farm Link (RAFFL). “The price of land is often prohibitive and the difficulty in finding a piece of land that fits farming needs can stop new farmers in their tracks. For these reasons, leasing farmland is often the best option for start-up farms.”

Happily, more and more farmers are leasing land from second home owners, retired farmers, and family-owned farm partnerships. And organizations have sprouted up to help foster and manage these relationships. Landowners who, a decade ago, might have looked out onto a fallow field now have the opportunity to see an active farm from their windows.

“There are many non-farming landowners who have inherited or purchased Vermont farmland without intentions of farming on their own,” Garland says. “These landowners may find that it becomes expensive and inconvenient to have the land hayed or brush hogged each year, and instead may consider leasing land to new farmers who work to keep the land open and the soils in good health.”

Carol Tashie and Dennis Duhaime of Radical Roots Farm, an organic vegetable farm located in Rutland, have leased two acres of land from Mary Ashcroft since 2010. Originally sub-leasing, Carol and Dennis transitioned into a direct lease with Mary and her now late husband, Harold Billings, a former dairy farmer who was glad to see his land being repurposed.

“Our farm has been in the Billings family since 1817,” Mary says. “We respect the relationship between people and the land. By leasing out different parts of the land for farming — both organic and conventional — and for other compatible uses, I hope to encourage balance and stewardship.”

The lease relationship was informal at first but easily moved into a formal agreement, thanks in part to Mary’s background as a lawyer. Both casual on-the-farm conversations and formal meetings structured the relationship. “Good communication among those farming and those leasing is important — we stay in touch regularly,” Mary notes. The lease includes cash payments and a CSA share for Mary.

“To grow local food access in the state we need more land, and landowners leasing to farmers is one of the best ways to ensure food sovereignty,” Carol says. “Dennis and I made a conscious decision to not buy land and to be better stewards by putting money into the land rather than a mortgage.” Radical Roots Farm sells veggies at the downtown Rutland Farmers’ Market, the Rutland Winter Farmers’ Market, and through CSA farm shares.

Mary also has lease arrangements with other agriculture businesses, including a conventional corn farm, a sugarbush, a horse farm, a nursery, and a developing forestry product business — all viable solutions to keeping an old dairy farm active in a working agricultural landscape.

Mary and Carol recently shared their story at a “Lease Your Land to a Farmer” workshop presented by Land For Good, the UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture, and the Vermont Land Trust.

Mike Ghia, the Land For Good field agent for Vermont, says farmer-landowner matchmaking is not unlike the process of dating before getting married. “Exploratory relationships teach about what each party is looking for before entering into a marriage. Likewise, a property owner may interview and meet with a number of farmers before they find someone who shares the same goals, with whom they are compatible, and helps determine if each want to pursue the lease relationship. Property owners shouldn’t be discouraged if some of the farmers they connect with don’t meet their expectations or even if a past leasing relationship with a farmer didn’t work out. Instead, it’s important to look at these interactions as learning experiences that can help inform a better, successful relationship in the future when the right farmer comes along. The same can be said for farmers looking to find the right property owner from whom to lease.” Land For Good is a New Hampshire-based nonprofit that educates and assists people throughout New England on farmland access, tenure, and transfer.

Landowners interested in exploring lease arrangements also need to obtain baseline knowledge of their property in order to provide the necessary details in a matchmaking description. They must know their land’s soil type, consider housing options for a leasing farmer, evaluate barns and outbuildings, and estimate water availability.

Land For Good highly encourages mutually beneficial, written lease agreements. Stewardship clauses that state expectations around the care and management of natural resources over a long period of time are strongly advised, as are leases sustained over a broader time frame than just a few years. It’s also recommended to have a dispute clause that requires disputes to be handled through mediation, including through services such as the Vermont Agricultural Mediation Program, or similar programs found in other states. Include who’s responsible for property repairs, alterations, and improvements to structures, and state that insurance liability is maintained by the farmer and includes property owners in the policy. (Standard homeowner insurance policies do not cover leased farming.) Land For Good provides direct technical assistance to both property owners and to farmers on working through and understanding these and other farmland leasing issues.

Benefits should also be clearly understood. Property owners benefit by receiving land maintenance and stewardship, lease payments, business partnerships, and potential property tax discounts. Farmers benefit by having workable land and clear expectations.

See How to Love page 15
Stress Free Chicken Tractor Plans

by John Suscovich

Looking to raise broilers on pasture? “Stress Free Chicken Tractor Plans” is a new e-Guide to building your own chicken tractors. The designs provided solve the common issues related to pastured poultry: predation, ease of daily moves, walking inside the coop, serving more than one purpose, and keeping birds safe and happy.

The eBook contains detailed 2D and 3D drafting combined with detailed step by step instructions on building and moving these chicken tractors around your fields. In addition to that, author John Suscovich (the “FoodCyclist”) includes videos, materials lists, cost break-down, 50+ color photos, and information on his inexpensive custom waterers and feeders.

FoodCyclist Farm operates as a Pastured Chicken and Herb CSA in Western Connecticut. Every week members receive one whole chicken and a small bunch of culinary herbs. The chickens are raised in John’s chicken tractors out on pasture and moved once daily.

With 12 chicken tractors on pasture, John has taken raising chickens to a production level. That does not mean you have to. These chicken tractor designs work well for the backyard grower as well as the production farmer. Having sustained 50+ mph winds, driving rains, and just about every predator known to Connecticut, these chicken tractors have proven their worth.

Troy Bishopp, the ‘Grass Whisperer’, says, “I liked John’s style because it had enough rugged features in construction without being too heavy. The simple wheel design and portability of one set of tires made it cost effective and easy to move, even through taller swards. The high ceiling made for good ventilation and easy access for bringing in grain and water and removing birds. A plus on those hot humid days.”


How to Love from page 14

Sally grew up on the farm when it was raising beefalo in the 1950s and ’60s, but challenges bringing beef to market led Sally’s father to quit farming. She eventually faced the reality that money could not be made farming in her situation, so she began promoting small farms and farm products while exploring new avenues of entrepreneurship.

Sally now partners with Quarry Hill Farm to raise sheep, sold through Vermont Lamb Company. Quarry Hill also taps the sugarbush and, as longtime tenants, have created a home-school enrichment program on the property.

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Mighty Food Farm: mightyfoodfarm.com; and Quarry Hill Farm: quarryhillfarm.wordpress.com.

To learn more about farmland leasing, to attend a workshop, or to obtain a copy of “A Landowner’s Guide to Leasing Land for Farming” visit landforfood.org. To find a farmer or farmland visit newenglandfarmandfinder.org and vermontlandlink.org. To learn more about Vermont’s 10 year food system plan, visit vtfoodatlas.com. Additional article mentions include RAFFL: rutlandareafarmlandfood.org; Radical Roots Farm: radicalrootsvt.com; Mighty Food Farm: mightyfoodfarm.com; and Quarry Hill Farm: quarryhillfarm.wordpress.com.

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Taking a Butter Knife to Kefir Cheese

Rose Belforti of Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery received a second SARE grant to make her newly perfected kefir cheese recipe spreadable.

by Rachel Whiteheart

After Rose Marie Belforti’s four daughters took off for college, she was left with an empty nest and an emerging interest in raising cattle in the countryside. Rose researched breeds and finally landed on the Dexter cow, a mini-cattle breed that can be used both for milk and meat. Out of this, the Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery was born.

Rose started out as a subsistence farmer, using Dexter cattle to generate only enough milk and meat to support her family. But, as the years passed and the farm grew (Rose jokes that “it seems like we put up a new barn every year”), Rose wanted to expand her farm’s focus. She had always been a proponent of utilizing raw milk as much as possible. She had been producing kefir - a fermented drink made with raw milk and kefir grains which contains 30-50 varieties of living bacteria - since she brought home her first cow. When Rose started to notice a surge of consumer interest in the positive health benefits of probiotic products, like kefir, inspiration took hold. In 2006, she received a SARE ‘Farmer Grant’ which supported the process of scaling up a home kefir recipe to a commercial cheese prototype (see article in Spring 2010 Small Farms Quarterly).

Kefir cheese also uses kefir grains to ferment milk, creating a probiotic “living” cheese. Rose says, “Kefir grains propagate naturally when immersed in milk, making them an ideal sustainable natural resource. As they propagate, one can either give them away, save them for later by freezing or drying, or simply eat them!” With the funding Rose received from SARE and the help of a Cornell faculty member, she developed a commercial kefir cheese recipe which she marketed to local stores and at the farmers market.

But Rose still wasn’t satisfied; she wanted to expand her kefir cheese line with a new product. She decided to pursue another SARE grant, this time to refine her existing recipe to develop a recipe for a spreadable kefir cheese that adhered to USDA standards.

Healthy, Spreadable & Delicious

For her second SARE grant, Rose experimented with two main methods of creating a spreadable kefir cheese. While developing both of the methods, Rose had to adhere to USDA requirements that raw milk cheese must age for 60 days and that, at the end of that aging period, the cheese has a moisture content of 44 percent.

The first of Rose’s methods involved using the recipe for kefir cheese that she had created for her first SARE grant, but instead of aging the cheese naturally, she vacuum-packed it (which helps keep the moisture content of the cheese as high as possible). After the required 60 days of aging, Rose blended together the vacuum-packed cheese and some natural rind-aged cheese to make the cheese as flavorful as possible.

The second method that Rose employed was much more hands-on; she started with a cheese making vat full of raw milk and kefir culture brewed from kefir grains, and adjusted her recipe for a spreadable cheese as the cheese aged. Throughout the 60 days of aging, Rose carefully monitored the pH and moisture content of the cheese, adding ingredients such as Holbac (to encourage bacterial growth) and rennet (to acidify) as needed. She created several batches of cheese, tinkering around with the recipe each time, until she had a cheese that both adhered to the USDA’s standards and tasted delectable.

Since developing the spreadable cheese, Rose has continued to craft her cheese line to perfection. She now offers a range of aged cheeses, including kefir Italian pasta cheese, kefir blue, peppercorn cheese, kefir tomato-garlic, kefir salad cheese and kefir wine companion. All offer a different combination of flavors and textures, but whatever the variety, Rose guarantees you’ll taste a pleasant combination of pungent & tangy. The cheeses also can be fancied up for a gourmet meal or eaten as a plain snack. Rose advises, “eat them with fruit, melted on bread, grated, or take them on long walks or commutes for a wholesome uplifting snack!”

Meanwhile, Rose continues using her cheese and dairy practices to challenge the dairy status quo and highlight the health value of raw unadulterated milk. Rose feels that the best outreach she can do to propagate the usage of raw milk is to, in her words, “put a product out there that other dairy producers can make too.” She has already managed to spread word about how useful raw milk can be through customer interactions at the Ithaca Farmer’s Market and through an open house she hosted at her farm to discuss the basics of kefir cheese and her newest kefir cheese recipe.

For more information, the exact recipe and process of both cheese making methods are available in Rose Belforti’s final report, posted on the SARE website at http://mysare.sare.org/ProjectReport.aspx?do=viewRept&p=FE10-679&e=2010&t=1 (sare.org Project Reports Search Database project number “FE10-679”).

Rachel Whiteheart was a summer intern at the Cornell Small Farms Program during Summer 2012 and is now a senior Environmental Engineering major at Cornell University. She may be reached at rrw95@cornell.edu.
Cross Marketing
Enhance Your Business While Promoting Others
by Melody Reynolds

Farmers Markets and Community Supported Agriculture are spreading like wild fire across the country. With so many small farms competing for the same direct marketing dollar, many farmers find themselves looking for something to distinguish them, to stand apart from the competition. Steven Carlson, from Fully Rooted in Rhode Island, suggests just the opposite. “Do not try to set yourself apart from others; include others and cross market.” Carlson explains that Fully Rooted, a business that produces raw, cold-pressed juice from local fruits and vegetables, tries to tie farmers together with cross marketing.

Island, suggests just the opposite. “Do not seek out the farm for more products or to see the farm or farmer so the customer feels a solid connection to the locally sourced food. This once again creates conversation among customers and encourages them to visit the farm or market to see more produce or to visit a farmers market and meet the farmer in person.

Andrew Barden, from Barden’s Family Orchard, has the booth directly across from Fully Rooted. As I was asking Barden how cross marketing is working for him, a customer came over who was directed from Fully Rooted. The customer had just tasted the juice and was told the Crispin Apple provided by Barden gave it the amazing taste. Barden just smiled and said, “I guess the question has been answered. Cross marketing works for everyone!”

Donnie Reynolds from Reynolds Barn encourages cross marketing by distributing recipes to customers that not only use his cheese but incorporate as many other ingredients found at the market as possible. Reynolds states, “If I give the customers more ideas on how to cook and use my product, the more I sell and the more others around me succeed.”

Sampling is another great way to cross market, and is also a sure way to attract customers. Offering easy pick-up food often convinces the customer to stop, take a sample and give the vendor an opportunity to explain what they are tasting and how they can get more. Simple, quick techniques for cross marketing can include signage stating, “The bread we have sampled our cheese on comes from Seven Stars.”

“We are featured in all of Seven Stars products,” states Bonnie S. Kavanagh, RN/herbalist for Fairland Farm. Fairland Farm is a cranberry bog in Massachusetts that relies on cross marketing for its success. “I am proud to say we are on the menu in many Providence restaurants and the only cranberry that Providence Granola uses,” states Kavanagh. “We give a shout out to all our customers on our website with links to their farms and businesses. Cross marketing works for me when customers walk by with a sample of Providence Granola and tell me how delicious my cranberries are,” states Kavanagh.

Mary Haney, a volunteer at the Coastal Growers Market, states “Whatever we sample we sell more of. We get creative and combine the unusual for different tastes and find products that compliment each other. Products we would only sell a few of, sell out when we sample.”

In the eat local promotions that are taking place, restaurants have also come full circle. Most restaurants now purchase local products and highlight the farm’s name on the menu. Customers read the menu and then conversation starts about each farm. This menu, for the farmers and producers, serves as a form of free advertising and the restaurant gets noticed for using as many local producers as possible.

Small grocery stores have also started cross marketing and place signage near a product. Often times they also have a photo of the farm or farmer so the customer feels a solid connection to the locally sourced food.

“The more we all cross market, the further our own advertising dollars go and the better our chances of survival in farming and markets will be,” said Reynolds.

Melody Reynolds is Food and Marketing editor for Cornell Small Farms Program and Freelance Agricultural writer for Lee Publications and RI Farm Bureau. For more information on Cross Marketing, she can be reached at melodyreyoldsauthor@cox.net.
Reaching Underserved Communities with CSAs

When farmers and organizations work together, feeding underserved residents healthy food can be rewarding for all.

by Rebecca Heller-Steinberg

Food insecure households — those with limited food dollars and/or difficulty accessing healthy foods because of location or transportation — are typically not served by CSAs. This is understandable, since food insecure households are not a particularly lucrative market. Even for farmers who want to serve such an audience, the challenges are not insignificant. However, as the popularity of local food has grown, as well as awareness about food insecurity, some farmers and organizations are coming up with ways to overcome these challenges.

Binghamton Farm Share (BFS) is a pilot program seeking to improve food access for local residents as well as to support area farmers through a modified CSA format. The project was launched in June 2013 by a unique partnership of community organizations (see side bar).

Binghamton Farm Share partnered with local CSA farms to provide weekly shares to area residents. Although BFS is targeted to food insecure individuals, it is open to anyone. Two of the program distribution locations (a school and a community center at a subsidized housing complex) are on the north side of Binghamton, a neighborhood with limited access to healthy, affordable food due to a lack of a supermarket. BFS has two distribution locations in other neighborhoods too, including one at a church.

Farms partnering with BFS grow, harvest, and package the shares, then transport them to a central location where BFS distributes them to other sites. BFS does the majority of marketing, staffs distribution sites, deals with customer communication and paperwork, and collects and processes payments. The program operated from June through mid-November, with members allowed to join or drop at any time as long as shares were available.

Several challenges were addressed successfully in the first year including affordability, shareholders failing to pick up shares or dropping out of the program, how to sell CSA shares to customers unfamiliar with them, and ensuring shares were being used. Other issues were identified for which the program is still seeking solutions (such as needing a better shareholder tracking system).

To address the issue of affordability, BFS offered shareholders a choice of several different sizes and prices of shares. Members could pay on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis with cash, check, or SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program aka food stamps). Approximately one third of customers used EBT for payment at least once. Programs planning to accept EBT payments would be wise to apply to the USDA many months in advance, as well as to consider that businesses can only accept SNAP payments at the time when food is received by the customer, whereas a non-profit organization can accept SNAP payments up to 14 days in advance.

BFS also offered a dollar for dollar match for all payments made by shareholders who received SNAP benefits. Matching funds were provided by the City of Binghamton from Community Development Block Grant funds and the United Way of Broome County. Money was also raised for a Share Bank, which enabled members to draw from it to pay for their weekly share up to two times during the season if they could not afford it on a particular week or failed to pick it up. Shareholders were encouraged to pay back into the Bank if possible to allow more people to use it.

Marketing was also a challenge. BFS used the term “farm share” instead of CSA because it is more self-explanatory. Outreach focused on the freshness of the food, health benefits, affordability, and convenient pick-up locations. The messaging was chosen based on limited focus groups conducted before the program began. All marketing materials prominently stated that the program accepted SNAP and the availability of matching funds. The most successful methods of outreach were face-to-face outreach at events and hearing about the program through another community organization. Marketing was also done through fliers, going door-to-door, local media coverage, and Facebook.

Since the program was targeting community members who were unfamiliar with CSAs, it was important to provide education on how to use the produce in the shares. Staff and volunteers met with each share recipient — at every pick-up — to review items in the box, provide cooking tips for any new items, and answer questions. Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) offered samples of prepared dishes at one distribution site per week and BFS provided printed recipes at all sites. Cooking suggestions and recipes were also shared via email and Facebook.

Although the program is primarily intended to increase food access, a secondary goal is to support local farmers. Though programs like this offer a way for CSA farms to reach new markets and sell more shares, it is important that the motivation for participating is not solely financial, but also a strong belief in increasing access to healthy, affordable food. Farmers are often expected to be actively engaged in the program. BFS highly values farmer participation and feedback and believes it is essential for farmers to be involved in shaping the program, including providing input about program structure.

A program like this could be a great opportunity for a new CSA farmer in that much of the logistics are handled by the program. Program grants may also include money for technical assistance to farmers involved in the program. BFS helped one farm that was new to CSA develop their share sizing and pricing. However, all farmers need to consider the ways in which such programs differ from a typical CSA and whether that will work for them. Farmers should decide the minimum number of shares they need to sell as well as designating a maximum number of shares sold through such a program. This can ensure that the farmer has a good balance between shares paid up front and those paid throughout the season. Farmers also need to decide whether they will accept new sign-ups throughout the season. Doing so can be an advantage, as programs can continue to recruit new members to offset shareholders who drop out, but can also make crop planning tricky.

Binghamton Farm Share and other programs focusing on food access can greatly improve the quality and quantity of healthy, affordable food available to more residents of our communities while also opening up new markets and increasing share sales for CSA farmers. The logistics of doing so are more complex than a regular CSA, but farmers and organizations working together can overcome the challenges to make it rewarding for all.

For more information on Binghamton Farm Share, visit www.vinesgardens.org/farmshare or www.facebook.com/BinghamtonFarmShare or contact farmshare@vinesgardens.org.

Rebecca Heller-Steinberg is a local food entrepreneur and advocate and the coordinator of Binghamton Farm Share.
Orb Weaver Farm

Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack pioneered the artisanal cheese making movement.

by John Thurgood

The cyclical rhythm of nature is the foundation that supports Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack of Orb Weaver Farm. Like the cyclical pattern of a spider’s web, Orb Weaver farm engages the seasonal activities on the farm. In the words of Marjorie “sowing, harvesting and enriching the soil to grow new pastures and gardens season after season.”

Starting over 30 years ago in the Town of Monkton, VT, Marjorie and Marian began farming and soon purchased a herd of Jersey cattle to set out to make cheese. When they began producing cheese they were working out of the mainstream because at that time there were only a handful of people making artisan cheese on the farm. For Marjorie and Marian it seemed to be just the right enterprise. They began learning about cheese making by participating in a workshop given by Ricki Carroll of New England Cheese Making, and began preparing cheese in their kitchen.

Marian and Marjorie were never concerned about the type of cheese they were making; rather, they created their own recipe for cheese that, as Marjorie put it, is “good tasting, kid friendly, something just right for making macaroni and cheese.” To be more specific, their cheese is something in between Havarti and Colby. Their aged cheese she likened to a Gruyere.

They have seven cows that are milked twice each day from November through May. These seven cows provide about 50 pounds of milk per cow, per day. From the milk the two cheese makers craft 7,000 pounds of artisan cheese each season. Their cheese is truly outstanding, as evidenced by their receiving numerous national and international awards. In 1989, Orb Weaver farm was presented the Innovative Farmer of the Year Award by “Country Folks.”

The cows are honored for their work and are given names based on family themes and nicknames. As the organic vegetable enterprise gears up each season, the cows are set out to pasture. When the animals reach the end of their productive lives they aren’t sent to the auction barn. “We wouldn’t want to lose that milk,” says Marian. They decide to use the milk for other purposes.

Marjorie and Marian on a beautiful summer’s day. Photo by John Thurgood

Jersey cows of Orb Weaver Farm. Photo by Marjorie Susman

See Orb Weaver page 24

Marjorie and Marian on a beautiful summer’s day. Photo by John Thurgood

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to put them through that humiliation,” Marjorie said. Orb Weaver cows are sent to a local butcher house, and their meat is donated to H.O.P.E. food shelf in Middlebury.

The vegetable portion of the farm consists of a wide variety of crops including just about everything from lettuce and shallots, to root crops and artichokes. Marian related, “Tomatoes are probably our favorite crop. First of all, a tomato grown out of doors tastes like a tomato should. Bright and juicy, with the perfect balance of sweet and tart.”

The culture of the tomato plant to Orb Weaver farm is “… a thing of great beauty. From planting, to weaving or trellising it resembles a beautiful dance…”

For 33 years the farm has sold its produce to the Middlebury Natural Foods Coop. They meet with the Coop manager each winter to scope out what produce the Coop would like to offer. “It’s a wonderful relationship. The Coop takes great pride in promoting local growers, and we in turn work to give them produce that shines in their display case,” said Marjorie.

From a functional side, the farm has seen its share of droughts and wet seasons, and these seem to be on the increase in recent years. Having a diverse set of crops and fostering healthy soil adds resiliency and minimizes effects of the weather on their operation.

As they approached retirement, Marjorie and Marian were concerned about the future of the land they had devoted their lives to nurturing. To this end, they contacted the Vermont Land Trust and last year they sold a conservation easement, forever protecting the land from development. The Vermont Land Trust worked in collaboration with numerous other funding sources, including the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service - Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Town of Monkton’s Agricultural and Natural Areas Committee.

The story doesn’t end here. Last fall, Marjorie and Marian invested part of the money they received from selling the easement to refurbishing the barn. The main purpose was to shore up the facility for future generations. The floor plan was kept open “so the next owners can do with it what they wish.” In addition, “there is a huge usable space for the cows to roll around in.”

If you would like to purchase Orb Weaver Farm cheese or would like to learn more about Orb Weaver farm, visit their website at: www.orbweaverfarm.com.

More information on the Farm and Ranchland protection program can be found at: www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portalnrcs/main/national/programs/easements/farmranch. Vermont Land Trust can be found at www.vlt.org.

John Thurgood is District Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Central Zone, Vermont.