Bush Administration Poor Custodian of Organic Integrity

by Elizabeth Henderson

A mere twelve years after the passage of the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA), USDA held its official “roll out” of the National Organic Program (NOP). This event makes our NOFA mission to connect local farms with local markets more urgent than ever. The growth of the organic market and the conversion of some large scale farms to organic predates the NOP, but its existence will smooth the trend toward the industrialization of organic production and processing. Like Dale Perkins at NOFA summer conference fairs, we need to keep our feet planted firmly on two horses - strengthening loyalty to our local farms, whether certified organic or not, and pressuring USDA to maintain the integrity of the organic label.

While the NOP was difficult to work with under the Clinton administration, Bush’s Secretary of Agriculture Veneman seems to believe we can solve the ecologized problems of agriculture with biotechnology. At a press conference in June, 2002, Veneman stated, “In many ways, biotechnology will create, and has the potential to create, some of the same effects and benefits that people have been trying to get from organics.” The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture Organic Committee, which I co-chair with Michael Sligh of RAFFI, has no confidence that Bush’s USDA will avert a “shake out” of small organic farms and farmer-consumer controlled certification programs. We are planning a series of action alerts to arouse the supporters of organic farming, at a minimum, to pressure the NOP into compliance with existing international norms for organic accreditation and fair dealing with small certifiers.

NOP Overrules NOSB Advocates Say Organic Program Yielding to Pressure

by Jack Kittredge

November 24, 2002

Several recent decisions by Richard Mathews, program director of the USDA’s National Organic Program (NOP), have alarmed organic advocates. The program, which began operating on October 21, 2002, sets the rules for certifying organic farms, producers and processors. According to the establishing legislation, the Organic Food Production Act (OFPA) of 1990, the program is overseen by a National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) composed of unpaid members of the organic and scientific communities.

The NOSB has been meeting for several years to draw up lists of materials suitable and not suitable for use in organic food production, and to set policy on hundreds of issues from compost making to standards for animal access to the out of doors. But now, fear respected members of the organic community, those NOSB policies are being undercut by NOP administrators.

Just days ago Mathews said that he intends to add “List 3 Inerts” to the National List of approved substances. List 3 Inerts are the many hundreds of materials the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) considers of “unknown toxicity”. They include substances such as phenols, benzene, naphthalene, urea, acetone, chlorotoluene and piperonyl butoxide. In 1999 the NOSB Materials Committee voted unanimously not to allow any List 3 Inert in organic agriculture unless it had been individually reviewed and approved. The NOP move to overrule the NOSB is “clearly in response to industry pressure” says Maine’s Eric Sideman, vice chair of the NOSB Materials Committee at the time of the 1999 vote. Although some producers are pressing for inclusion of the materials, he noted, and will be hurt if they remain excluded, a much bigger problem will result for the organic program if they are included. “The consumers’ and certifiers’ loss of confidence that the NOP is following the Rule will hurt much more,” he warns.

Another alarming move announced by Mathews is the exclusion of “food contact substances” from review by the NOSB. “Food contact substances” is an FDA classification which includes substrates used in the ion exchange process, a subject of controversy at a recent NOP meeting. Now they will no longer be subject to NOSB review.

NOP Threatens NOFA/Mass Organic Certification Program

An NOP decision with special impact in the Northeast was announced by Mathews just two weeks ago during a visit to New England. At a meeting with organic growers in Connecticut, according to Bill Duesing, NOFA Interstate Council president, and several other organic farmers who also attended, the NOP program continued on page 27

Sally Fallon to Keynote 2003 Summer Conference

by Steve Lorenz

The more things change, the more they stay the same for the NOFA Summer Conference Committee: Although we’ve lost some very valuable members from years’ past, the 2003 committee is coming together—due to the special leadership of cornerstone coordinator Julie Rawson—and is already getting things done.

Many of you out there in NOFA land will be very pleased to hear that we have secured Sally Fallon as our keynote speaker on Friday night August 8th. The very popular author of the cookbook Nourishing Traditions is also going to present at a pre-conference on August 7 and 8, a la Joel Salatin. Watch this space for more elaboration in the future, and in the meantime, create your own nourishing traditions this holiday season.

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Where Have All the Farmers Gone?

In the following pages we report on the problems facing new farmers and look at some of the programs available to overcome these problems. We feature folks who are making a go of it and learn about what resources they are calling upon. We hope that people thinking about farming will read this issue and gain confidence that it can be a successful choice.

The Natural Farmer Needs You!

The Natural Farmer is the newspaper of the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA). Regular members receive a subscription as part of their dues, and others may subscribe for $10 (in the US or $18 outside the US). It is published four times a year at 411 Sheldon Rd., Barre, MA 01005. The editors are Jack Kittredge and Julie Rawson, but most of the material is either written by members or summarized by us from information people send us.

Upcoming Issue Topics - We plan a year in advance so that folks who want to write on a topic can have a lot of lead time. The next 3 issues will be:

- Spring, 2003: Farm Equipment
- Summer, 2003: On Farm Dairies
- Fall, 2003: Irrigation

Moving or missed an issue? The Natural Farmer will not be forwarded by the post office, so you need to make sure your address is up-to-date if you move. You get your subscription to this paper in one of two ways. Direct subscribers who send us $10 are put on our data base here. These folks should send address changes to us. Most of you, however, get this paper as a NOFA member benefit for paying your chapter dues. Each quarter every NOFA chapter sends us address labels for their paid members, which we use to mail out the issue. If you moved or didn’t get the paper, your beef is with your state chapter, not us. Every issue we print an updated list of “NOFA Contacts” on the last page, for a handy reference to all the chapter names and addresses.

As a membership paper, we count on you for articles, art and graphics, news and interviews, photos on rural or organic themes, ads, letters, etc. Almost everybody has a special talent or knows someone who does. If you can’t write, find someone who can interview you. We’d like to keep the paper lively and interesting to members, and we need your help to do it.

We appreciate a submission in any form, but are less likely to make mistakes with something typed than hand-written. To be a real gem, send it via electronic mail (JACKKITT@AOL.com) or enclose a computer disk (Macintosh or PC in Microsoft Word ideally). Also, any graphics, photos, charts, etc. you can enclose will almost certainly make your submission more readable and informative. If you have any ideas or questions, one of us is usually near the phone -(978) 355-2853, fax: (978) 355-4046

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Advertise in or Sponsor The Natural Farmer

Advertisements not only bring in TNF revenue, which means less must come from membership dues, they also make a paper interesting and helpful to those looking for specific goods or services. We carry 2 kinds of ads:

- The NOFA Exchange - this is a free bulletin board service for NOFA members and TNF subscribers. Send in up to 100 words (business or personal) and we’ll print it free in the next issue. Include a price (if selling) and an address or phone number so readers can contact you directly. If you’re not a NOFA member, you can still send in an ad - just send $5 along too! Send NOFA Exchange ads directly to The Natural Farmer, 411 Sheldon Rd., Barre, MA 01005 or (preferably) E-mail to JACKKITT@AOL.COM

Display Ads - this is for those offering products or services on a regular basis! You can get real attention with display ads. Send camera ready copy to Dan Rosenberg, PO Box 40, Montague, MA 01351 (413) 863-9063 and enclose a check for the appropriate size. The sizes and rates are:

- Full page (15” tall by 10” wide) $240
- Half page (7 1/2” tall by 10” wide) $125
- One-third page (7 1/2” tall by 6 1/2” wide) $85
- One-quarter page (7 1/2” tall by 4 1/8” wide) $65
- One-sixth page (7 1/2” tall by 3 1/8” wide), or (3 3/4” tall by 1 1/2” wide) $45
- Business card size (1 1/2” tall by 3 3/8’ wide) $12

Note: These prices are for camera ready copy. If you want any changes we will be glad to make them - or to type set a display ad for you - for $10 extra. Just send us the text, any graphics, and a sketch of how you want it to look. Include a check for the space charge plus $10.

Frequency discounts: if you buy space in several issues you can qualify for substantial discounts off these rates. Pay for two consecutive issues and get 10% off each, pay for 3 and get 20% off, or pay for 4 and get 25% off. An ad in the NOFA Summer Conference Program Book counts as a TNF ad for purposes of this discount.

Deadlines: We need your ad copy one month before the publication date of each issue. The deadlines are:

- January 31 for the Spring issue
- April 30 for the Summer issue
- July 31 for the Fall issue
- October 31 for the Winter issue

Disclaimer: Advertisers are helping support the paper so please support them. We cannot investigate the claims of advertisers, of course, so please exercise due caution when considering any product or service. If you learn of any misrepresentation in one of our ads please inform us and we will take appropriate action. We don’t want ads that mislead.

Sponsorships: Individuals or organizations wishing to sponsor The Natural Farmer may do so with a payment of $200 for one year (4 issues). In return, we will thank the sponsor in a special area of page 3 of each issue, and feature the sponsor’s logo or other small insignia.

Contact for Display Ads or Sponsorships: Send display ads or sponsorships with payment to our advertising manager Dan Rosenberg, PO Box 40, Montague, MA 01351. If you have questions, or want to reserve space, contact Dan at (413) 863-9063 or dan@realpickles.com.
An Appeal to Readers

by Jack Kittredge

This issue brings Julie and me to the end of 15 years as editors of this paper. It has been a wonderful opportunity to do important work and serve a cause in which we very much believe. Thanks for giving us this wonderful job!

We hope to continue in this job as long as we are able and you like our work. This Fall, however, NOFA-NY decided to eliminate the Natural Farmer as a benefit of membership and, instead, to make subscribing an option for a separate $10 fee. This could mean the loss of up to a quarter of our subscribers and puts us in a precarious financial position. For us to keep publishing at our current level of pages and frequency, we are hoping to earn your help in any of the following ways.

If you think the paper is a useful vehicle for articles on organic growing, food issues, and national agricultural policy, consider giving a gift subscription to a friend or relative. At $10 per year it is a great value! A form on the inside back page gives details.

If you recall an issue that you have lost, or would like to give to a friend, you can now purchase a back issue of The Natural Farmer. A form on the inside back page gives details.

If you have a farm or business (or know of one) which might advertise in or sponsor this paper, please consider it. The rates are quite low and the readership is very focused on organic food and farming. Sponsors are always prominently listed on page 3. All rates and details are on page 2 of each issue.

If you would like to give a (tax-exempt) donation for the work of The Natural Farmer, we promise it will be used frugally. Make such a donation to the NOFA Education Fund, 411 Sheldon Rd., Barre, MA 01005 and mark it for use of The Natural Farmer. The Education Fund will acknowledge your gift promptly.

Let us thank these Friends of Organic Farming who have generously supported
Blow Your Own Horn!

Land available to farm organically in Whitingham, Vermont. 32 acres, some fields, some woods. Once used as a draft horse farm. Barn available for storage of supplies, possibly equipment. Spring fed well at barn. Beautiful views of Lake Whitingham (Hanna Reservoir) and surrounding mountains. No residence available. Terms negotiable. Please call Caryl or Vinnie @ 603 924-9997.

Butterworks Farm Organic Dairy, located in Westfield, VT, has a surplus of cows and heifers and needs to sell a handful of them. For more information, contact Anne and Jack Lazor at 802-744-6855.

Farm Manager needed for thriving, mission-driven, not-for-profit CSA in New York’s Mid-Hudson Valley. The Poughkeepsie Farm Project uses organically prepared results and sells a handful of them. For more information, contact Anne and Jack Lazor at 802-744-6855.

Farm Manager for Heifer Ranch in central Arkansas. Three year position training in the art/science of organic vegetable, herb, and flower production/management through a Community Supported Agriculture program. Intern will apprentice with current CSA intern, under guidance of Ranch staff, and work into certain aspects of the farm work. Participation in the biweekly CRAFT farm training program is required. Housing is available in the farmhouse. Please contact Ryan for additional information at (413) 467-SOIL or redfirefarm@juno.com.

Seeking a qualified harvest and crew manager. Must have extensive experience in commercial vegetable production and the ability to lead and motivate farm hands. Future partnership possibility for the right person. Contact Ryan at Red Fire Farm in Granby, MA for more information. (413) 467-SOIL or redfirefarm@juno.com.
Greenhouses for rent. Approx. 2000 square feet of organic greenhouse space is available to rent in Montague, MA. Heating and water systems are installed. Half an acre of outdoor growing area is also available. Possible housing arrangements also exist on the property. Call Ryan for more information at (413) 467-7645.

Aspiring farmer seeks to rent, share (or own?) land in central and northern Vermont for small-scale organic vegetable production. Willing to consider any interesting possibilities. Please call to share your town. Tom (802) 388-3240.

Small farm living situation. We need help on our farm in northwestern Connecticut. We sell grass and milk fed beef, veal and pork through our newsletter to local and regional markets. We’re looking for a homestead minded couple who’d like to live in a beautiful, quiet setting, have access to real food, and work with animals. Rent can be worked off, some seasonal work may be required. Rent includes food and local Farmer’s Market. We’re looking for a full time or part time person, residence not required. Call at (413) 467-7645.

For Sale: 1) registered Milking Devon bull calf. MOFGA certified organic. Born 9/8/02, available for Phil Kent, CT 06785 or 860-927-4457 before 8 pm, ask for Phil.

Small farm situation. We need help on our farm in far eastern Connecticut. Uncle Wayne needs you! Small, diversified organic farm in far eastern Connecticut looking for one apprentice/apprentice for the 2003 season. Ideally mid-May into October, but can consider less. Bright attitude, no experience necessary. You get room, board and a chance to raise heifers, or how about organic farming? Call Andrew, 802-933-5322, West Ensborg on VT Route 108.

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Compiled by Jack Kittredge

Imidacloprid and the Precautionary Principle. As a result of the Food Quality Protection Act two major organophosphate insecticides, chlorpyrifos (trade names of Durban or Lorsban) and diazinon are being phased out for use in residential areas. A new synthetic insecticide, imidacloprid, is poised to replace them under the trade name “Advanced Garden.” However, imidacloprid:

• is highly toxic to honey bees,
• harms some other important beneficial insects, including lady beetles, parasitic wasps, lacewings, and thrips,
• is systemic in the plant — is readily taken up by the plant roots and distributed throughout the plant, including in the nectar and pollen,
• persists in soils with a half-life of up to 224 to 257 days in turf and 266 to 457 in potatoes, and
• may result in contamination of groundwater.

In 1998 and 2000 French beekeepers marched on Bayer (the manufacturer of imidacloprid) in Paris. Imidacloprid was being used as a seed treatment of sunflowers, and the French beekeepers claimed there were massive die-offs of their bees each year when the sunflowers bloomed. Bayer attributes the die-off of bees to biological causes — mites and viruses. The French government, however, declined to approve the imidacloprid treatment of sunflower seed for 2 years in 1999, and renewed the ban for 2 years in 2001. In the U.S., however, imidacloprid is now marketed in your local garden center in many formulations for use on flowers, lawns and other ornamental plants. For more information you can read Imidacloprid and Honey Bees: Can They Coexist? at http://www.intermode.net/HoneyBee/Imidaclopid/index.html and File on Bee Poisonings (has recent documents, but most are in French) at http://www.beekeeping.com/menus, fr_dossier_intoxications.htm source: paper on Imidacloprid by Kim Stoner

The Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy Farmers is one-year certificate program in grass-based dairying provides opportunities for internships, mentoring, farm tours, and networking with experienced grass-based dairy farmers. You can also learn about grazing sheep, goats, and other species. Specialized scholarship support and a distance education option are available for this course. The Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy Farmers is part of the UW-Madison Farm and Industry Short Course. For more information about this program, contact Dick Cates: rlcates@facstaff.wisc.edu

American plans to force genetically modified crops and food on to Third World countries were unexpectedly frustrated at the Earth Summit in September. After an impassioned plea from Ethiopia, ministers rejected clauses in the summit’s plan of action which would have given the World Trade Organization (WTO) powers over international treaties on the environment. One effect of this would have been to give the WTO the power to override the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, giving developing countries the right to refuse to take GM imports. The WTO regards free trade as its top priority. “I have never seen so many environmental ministers hugging each other as when the proposal went down,” said one British negotiator early this morning. source: The Independent (London) Sep- tember 2, 2002

Roundup Wheat Postponed Again. Monsanto, the creator of genetically engineered Roundup Ready crops has “indefinitely” put off commercialization of a Roundup Ready wheat. The grain was originally scheduled to be released in 2003, then in 2005. Now it will be on the market when the market meets “certain goals” says the biotech company. According to the New York Times, the delay reflects the company’s “difficultly...in winning acceptance for the crop.” source: Alternative Agriculture News, September, 2002.

Organic Food More Nutritious? A study revealed at the American Chemical Society meeting found that organic oranges contained, on average, 30% more vitamin C than conventional oranges. The researchers theorized that high nitrogen fertilizer may cause more water uptake in conventional oranges, diluting the vitamin C concentrations. source: Wild Matters, September, 2002

Giant Hogweed Found in Massachusetts. An invasive weed native to central Asia has been spotted in several Massachusetts communities. The plant, hogweed, can grow to 20 feet tall with a hollow, purplish stem 4 inches in diameter. The plant’s sap can cause burns on the skin and blindness if it gets in the eyes. source: Country Folks Grower, September, 2002

Catnip for Mosquitoes? Researchers report that nepetalactone, the essential oil in catnip, is ten times more effective in repelling mosquitoes than DEET, the synthetic pesticide used in most mosquito repellents. source: Our Toxic Times, August, 2002

Organic Food is Growth Industry! Organic grain sales doubled from 1998 to 2000, according to a new study. Over the same time, organic meat sales have grown 71%, dairy by 96% and convenience foods by 86%. Also, for the first time in 2000, more organic food was sold in conventional supermarkets that in health food stores. The other 3% was sold direct via farmers markets, farm stands and CSAs. source: Alternative Agriculture News, October, 2002 and The Germinator, October, 2002

Increasing CO2 Boosts Crop Productivity. A study published in the New Phytiologist in October has found that rising atmospheric carbon dioxide levels (which is expected to double by the end of this century) increase crop size significantly but result in lower nitrogen levels, thus less protein, in plant seeds. Legumes, however, are an exception to this last finding, since they fix their own nitrogen. source: Alternative Agriculture News, November, 2002

Overall Nutrient Decline. A Canadian study has found that in the last 50 years nutrients in produce have declined. They tested 25 fruits and vegetables and found 80% showed declines in calcium and iron, 75% in Vitamin A, half in Vitamin C and riboflavin, and 12% in niacin. source: Growing For Market, August, 2002.
Engineered Genes Migrate! Two new studies have demonstrated this alarming fact. In one, researchers found that the Bt gene engineered into sunflowers to resist pests was passed on to nearby relatives. The second generation wild sunflowers had the Bt gene and far less insect damage, suggesting the Bt toxin was being passed on to wild relatives.

Biotech Gets in Trouble Contaminating Food! The danger of genetic contamination of food crops by pollen from related crops engineered to produce drugs and industrial chemicals is suddenly looming large for the agricultural biotechnology industry. In October the industry association BIO (Biotech Industry Organization) announced a moratorium on growing transgenic corn in much of the Midwest, or transgenic canola in the Canadian prairie if the plants are engineered to produce non-food chemi-
cals. Early in October the Wall Street Journal article quoted two food industry executives about their concerns over contamination from such plants. Mark Dollins of PepsiCo said: “We want to ensure that our corn is protected” and “I want to see the Applebaum of the National Food Processors agreed, suggesting that “If need be, we could even go to the public” with their worries about the danger of contamina-
tion!” A week later this flurry of concern surfaced. According to the Washington Post, a company named ProdiGene, which had been growing bioengineered drugs (including an experi-
mental oral hepatitis vaccine) in corn, sold soy contaminated with Pharmed corn into the food supply. Apparently a plot of ProdiGene corn was grown on a Nebraska farm. Ordinary soybeans were planted in the same field this year. Corn seeds left over from the year before sprouted and grew a small number of corn plants containing the drug. The company was supposed to check and lift the ban for years to come. “The whole thing was blocked,” he said. “We want to be sure” that “If need be, we could even go to the public” with their worries about the danger of contamina-
tion!”

European Opposition to GE Crops Grows. Monsanto’s chief executive, Hendrik Verfaillie, stated in August that it can take at least to 2005 to gain regulatory approval for the company’s GE seed in Europe. The statement is taken as an admission that the company understands the degree of opposition it encountered from environmental groups and governments. Then in November European Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy warned the United States against formal dispute settlement proceedings in the World Trade Organi-
zation against the European Union over its de facto ban on imports of genetically modified foods, saying it was now under way to lift the ban for years to come. “The whole thing
will be blocked,” he said. source: Guardian, August 24, 2002 and International Trade Daily, November 12, 2002

GE Crops Not Profitable. A report released by the Soil Association, a British organic group, says engineered soy, corn and canola have cost the US economy at least $12 billion since 1999 in farm subsidies, lower crop prices, loss of exports and product recalls. A copy of the report is available by mail and can be ordered at www.soilassociation.org/gm. source: Acres, USA November, 2002

SARE Looking for Farmer/Educators. The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program is seeking nominations for three new openings for its Sustainable Farmer Educator program. This program offers grant support for time and travel to articulate and experi-
nabled farmers. Please ask them to share their knowledge with others while continuing their farming opera-
tions. Appointments normally run one year, and preference is given to successful farmers with previous experience presenting at workshops or in other educational settings. Applications can be downloaded from the Northeast SARE web site at www.uvm.edu/~nesare; or a printed version can be requested by calling 802/656-0471. The application deadline is January 6, 2003. Selections will be made in February. source: SARE press release

Featherless Chickens Developed. Naked chickens have been bred in Israel, when hot conditions can kill up to 20% of a flock. The chickens are dec-
skinned from a mutant breed discovered in New Hampshire in 1954. They are very sensitive to the sun, however, and must be kept in the shade. source: Acres, USA October, 2002

NOP Backs Off Cosmetics. So you think organic food is big? Try cosmetics. The entire world’s organic food trade is only $26 billion, whereas the cosmetic industry in the US alone is worth over $30 billion. And the growing legitimacy of the word “organic” in food has — guess what? — attracted the interest of big corporate interests. (Sound familiar?) It seems that a lot of body care product lines are now introducing products which call themselves “organic”. Unilever has an organic shampoo, for instance, and Avalon has a line of organic handcreams. But these products not only do not meet the defini-
tions required for food products to use the word “organic”, they in many cases contain toxins and endocrin-disrupting industrial solvents such as phthalates and methyl paraben. Cosmetic manufactur-
ers readily admit these ingredients, but reply that their products are used in tiny amounts and must only last often years on a shelf, as opposed to the food. The National Organic Program (NOP) on May 5 re-
 leased a statement indicating they intended to regulate use of the word organic in the cosmetic industry. Immediately an intense lobbying campaign was begun by the industry to reverse that decision with companies claiming they had millions of dollars of product in containers which would not qualify. And apparently the NOP has agreed to leave the body care industry alone, for now, although it has not made any public statement to that effect. But NOP Public Affairs Specialist George Chartier was recently quoted as saying: “...people higher up in the USDA ... were confirming that those products would not be covered.” source: In Good Tilh, October 15, 2002

NOP’s Integrity Challenged. Over the last few months observers have become increasingly con-
cerned about signs that the National Organic Program (NOP) will not support recommendations of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) when they are opposed by significant political and commercial interests. Tufts professor Willie Lockenetz resigned from the NOSB last summer when he “saw a pattern emerging in which NOP almost never acted in accord with NOSB’s policy recommendations.” When Alaska Senator Ted Stevens pressed for inclusion of wild Alaska salmon as organically produced, he got it. When Georgia Congressmen pressed for an exemption from the 100% organic feed requirement for a local poultry producer, they got it. Now a well-connected Massa-
chusetts egg producer has convinced the NOP to ignore carefully thought-out NOSB regulations on access to the out of doors for livestock. Groups are begining to file legal actions to force the NOP to live up to its enabling law. The Center for Food Safety is leading a suit to force the USDA to estab-
lish a peer review panel to oversee the accreditation of certifiers. The number of applicants has jumped from 49 to 122 and the CFS is concerned that many of them lack adequate experience and objectivity. source: Alternative Agriculture News, November, 2002 and Acres, USA, September, 2002.
Thanks to the extraordinary funding provided to the NOFA conferences by the Pond Foundation, I was able to attend the conference along with representatives from the other state NOFA organizations. Although I have heard about the Bioneers Conference for years, it has never been within my means to attend and, likewise, it has never made the NOFA-NY agenda because of the costs involved.

The conference not only lived up to its billing, it widely surpassed my expectations. Ironically, it not only provided expanded networking linkages to farmers and agricultural groups from around the country but also among members of our own NOFA delegation that will directly benefit the functioning of our emerging interstate organization. There’s nothing like traveling thousands of miles to increase the connections in your own area!

The conference was an opportunity to see plenary presentations by people whose work I have been following for years, such as John Todd, from the days of the New Alchemy Institute in Woods Hole, Paul Hawkin from the early days of Erowhon in Boston and Kenny Aasabel from Seeds of Change. Writers such as Fritjof Capra have held a special place on my bookshelf for years. I was quite unprepared for the dynamic quality of many of the other speakers, especially Katsi Cook, a Mohawk from Ontario; Andrew Kimbrell, author of a new book on industrialized agriculture; Jeremy Narby, a Swiss anthropologist and Naomi Klein, journalist and author.

The breakout sessions each afternoon also provided exemplary presentations. Of special interest to farmers were Toby Hemenway speaking on Permaculture and Elaine Ingham on the Soil Foodweb. The political aspects were well covered by John Stauber and Ronnie Cummins.

It was also highly stimulating being part of the 2500 attendees participating in the conference and I made some great connections for future networking and further endeavors. I also appreciated the scope and diversity of the trade show and came away with stacks of valuable materials. The California setting also provided a welcome respite from the record low October temperatures in the northeast this year with sunny skies and warm weather. I managed a brief side trip into farm country and out to Point Reyes for a glimpse of the Pacific Ocean and the awesome surroundings.

About the only advice I would give to the conference organizers is to pay more attention to the food. The NOFA Conferences have spoiled me by always presenting well-prepared organic food, based on the premise that if you’re going to be talking about it, you should be serving it as well. The exception was the Saturday night Awards Dinner which served an excellent meal. I again thank the Pond Foundation for including the NOFA representatives in this special event, allowing us to experience the Bioneers group from the inside.

All in all, this conference will take some time to digest. I am extremely thankful to the Pond people for providing the opportunity to participate and feel a responsibility to spread and use what I gained there every way I can. The event was also very stimulating and highly invigorating and I feel I have gained renewed energies to carry out the work.

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Taste! Organic Connecticut is a Smashing Success

by Bill Duesing

What a combination on September 8th at Topmost Herb Farm!

• a gorgeous September day
• a spectacular site overlooking eastern Connecticut
• ten farmers selling bountiful, beautiful, organic, ecological produce
• ten crafters selling beautiful, local products
• delicious local, organic food
• good music
• children’s activities
• educational seminars and walks
• Certified Organic Associated Growers (COAG), the Willimantic Food Coop and CT/NOFA working together
• dozens of volunteers, and
• a crowd of over 700.

At the end of the day, smiles on the faces of attendees, volunteers and vendors abounded. Farmers market coordinator and COAG president, Wayne Hansen, said that his sales far exceeded his expectations and estimates about $7,000 of organic produce sales counting the farmers market and the produce sold to the CT/NOFA Food Booth.

Chef and caterer Doug Coffin volunteered his services and equipment for the cause and created a delicious, all local, organic, vegetarian menu. (See the Annual Meeting announcement for more about Doug.) Denise D’Agostino did an incredible job coordinating this very complex undertaking. Chefs Jamie Malagrino and Jennifer McTiernan Huge helped guide the many volunteers in preparing grilled sweet corn, roasted fingerling potatoes, focaccia with grilled vegetables and summer vegetable soup. Although one of the purposes of this event was to create a larger market for organic food, many farmers donated produce for the food tent. Thanks to all those who supplied the delicious food. Many board members, including Marion Griswold, Erin Amezzane, Tom (and Joan) Kemble and Mary Tyrrell worked long hours in the kitchen tent. Thanks also to the volunteers from the food coop.

For safety and flavor reasons all the food was prepared on the site using Doug’s trailer mounted wood-burning oven or one of the three grills it took to keep the food coming.

Suzanne Duesing demonstrated the making of fresh gazpacho and salsa all day. Folks were thrilled with the free samples. Mary Lou Nolin stepped in to help when the demand got real strong.

Folks spread blankets under the large trees or sat under a large tent to enjoy the food and the music. Educational talks on Raising Chickens, Making Compost, CSAs, and Garlic, were well attended. People were really interested in learning more about these topics, asking lots of questions. Thanks to (respectively) Joey Noto, Jim Roly, Mark and Carole Gauger and Wayne Hansen for presenting the talks.

Carole Miller, who hosted this event, led several Weed Walks. Many, many thanks to her for her generosity in making such a beautiful place available to us. Carole talked about visiting this spot as a little girl with her grandfather. It was their favorite place on the farm.

Carole has offered us the use of her farm for next year’s Taste! You can get a look at the place by attending HerbFest there on the first Saturday in June.

Tori, Ed, Joey and Anna Natoletti of Stone’s Throw Farm coordinated the children’s activities and provided goat milking demonstrations.

In addition to educating, Jim Roly, site coordinator and Mark Gauger did a great job of handling the logistics including tents, porta-potties, parking, electricity and vendor layout.

Committee member Teresa Schacht arranged for a donated tent. She and Alice created the program book, and Kathleen Rooney coordinated the vendors.

We are collecting feedback from those involved in this year’s event to begin the planning process for next year. Please volunteer now to get involved with the Second Annual Taste! Organic Connecticut, the Sunday after Labor Day in 2003. This is a great group of people to work with and an exciting event. Call me at 203-888-5146, email bduesing@cs.com or get in touch with a committee member.
The following discussion is based on Listening to New Farmers: Findings from New Farmer Focus Groups. (The full text can be found on the GNF publications page at www.northeastnewfarmer.org.)

Definitions

There are a number of terms and definitions that apply to this sector: new farmer, beginning farmer, young farmer and next-generation farmer are often used interchangeably. However, there may be slightly different meanings to these terms as used by a particular organization.

For example, according to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), a beginning farmer is one who has operated a farm for ten years or less. This definition is used to qualify for USDA beginning farmer loan programs. These loan programs also require that a beginning farmer have at least three years’ experience as a farm manager.

According to Farm Bureau, a young farmer is a farmer under the age of 35. The Future Farmers of America and 4-H programs work with young people of high school age. A young farmer may also be someone working with the older generation on the family farm.

The term next-generation farmer is often used to describe a young person who will be among the next generation of farmers. Sometimes the term specifically suggests the next generation of the family to take over an existing farm. Farmers who are the next generation on the family farm are likely to be moving through various stages of decision-making and control during the process of the farm transfer.

Other organizations propose a broad definition of a new farmer. This definition includes both people who have started farming and those who have not yet begun to farm. In this definition, a new farmer includes all of the above, plus people who are considering or planning a farming career.

New Farmer Typology

Under the Northeast New Farmer Network Project (NENFN), the predecessor to GNF from 1998 - 2001, a series of focus group discussions was held with new farmers throughout the Northeast. A way of classifying — a typology — emerged that more particularly describes new farmers. As we strive to improve how we meet the various needs of the region’s new farmer clientele, it is important to understand that they fall into different categories depending on factors such as their level of farming awareness, decision making, commitment and risk.

In this typology, there are two broad categories: prospective farmers and beginning farmers. Within these, there are six commitment or decision-making stages depending on various factors such as their level of farming awareness, experience and commitment. These stages are: recruits; explorers; planners; start-ups; re-strategizers; and establishers.

For service providers and educators, it is important to recognize that new farmers have diverse educational, resource and training needs in each of these various stages.

New Farmer Descriptions

Prospective farmers: Prospective farmers fall into three stages. In the first two stages prospectives have not yet begun to farm. In the third stage they may work or apprentice on a farm, but are not decision-makers in their own farming activities and do not have a high level of commitment or risk associated with active farming. In these first three stages, they may be taking part in educational or introductory farming experiences such as apprenticeships.

1. Recruits: might consider a career in production agriculture if provided with information and connections to agriculture. This includes farm family members and those not from a farm. They could be high school students, or people who want to change careers.

2. Explorers: are investigating a farming future. They are gathering information and may be participating in introductory educational programs and/or farming related experiences. This includes next generation farm family members as well as those not from a farm.

3. Planners: have made a choice to pursue some sort of commercial production agriculture. They may not actually be farming yet, but are actively planning their farm entry. Farm employees, apprentices and farm family members who do not have control of farm assets and limited decision making responsibility also fall into this stage.

Beginning farmers: Beginning farmers are those who are farming, but have been farming for ten years or less. They also fall into three stages.

1. Start-ups: are in their first three years of farming. They can be an employee, manager, or operator on rented or owned land. They have decision-making responsibility and an increasing commitment to farming either in time, equity and/or resources, either on their own farm, a rented farm or on a family farm.

2. Re-strategizers: are farmers who are making adjustments in their fourth to seventh years. They have increased decision-making responsibility and an increasing commitment to farming as a farm renter, manager or owner. Typically, re-strategizers go through a critical phase of modifying or restructuring their operations.

3. Establishers: are farmers who are stabilizing in years eight to ten of the beginning farmer phase. They are on their way to becoming established farmers, and who continue to make changes and improvements to their farm.
These days, the idea of anyone going into farming as an occupation seems to inspire varying degrees of incredulity and/or hilarious laughter. Or at least that’s the response I hear most from my friends and family: “You went to college and now you drive a tractor and do what!”

But after fleeing from the Midwest, where I’ve watched the sad, steady decline in the number of family farms, I’ve run into what seems a highly improbable situation here in New Hampshire—more and more, people are starting to farm! While some of this might be attributed to my own reorientation of scale (I’ve come to appreciate that you don’t need one thousand acres and ten thousand hogs to be a “real” farmer), the numbers seem to say that there really are more farmers now than last census. The 1997 Census of Agriculture (USDA) records 2937 farms in New Hampshire, up over 20% from 1992!

So what’s a person or family to do if they want to start farming? Where can you find land, learn your options to work it, and learn how to work it? If you are lucky, you may stumble into the world of apprenticing on farms. Or perhaps you have neighbors or relatives who can give you some advice. Or in New Hampshire, there is an organization called Beginner Farmers of New Hampshire.

I first heard about Beginner Farmers (BFNH) about a year after coming to New Hampshire to intern on a farm here. Coincidentally, BFNH was looking for an intern just as my apprenticeship year ended. I signed on and have been with the group ever since—first as an AmeriCorps volunteer and now as a farmer member—because basically, it’s an incredibly supportive environment for all farmers new and old!

In the following paragraphs, I will give a brief description of how BFNH got started, how it’s organized, and what it does (so if other farmers out there are interested in getting their own Beginner Farmer group going, you can get a sense of one way to go). I’ll then look at some of the benefits of being part of this beginning farmer movement.

Organizational History

Beginner Farmers came together in Meredith, NH in 1997 when three new farmers met to talk about their farms, their plans and their problems. From this first meeting grew a countywide group called Belknap County Beginner Farmers. One of the first organizations contacted by the farmers of this group was North Country Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D). The RC&D’s are non-profit organizations who work in partnership with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). North Country RC&D saw the enthusiasm of this farmer group, realized the need that they were addressing,
and decided to help by providing office and administrative support and technical assistance.

Belknap County BF received a grant from Heifer Project Northeast in 1998, which further helped develop their infrastructure. They quickly realized however, that the need of new farmers stretched across the state, not just in their county. By 2000, there were BFNH chapters meeting across the four northern NH counties and spreading down throughout the state.

**BF Structure, Members and Meetings**

Beginner Farmers of New Hampshire has some statewide structure, but the real action happens at the county level. County groups meet about once a month. The county meetings are open to the public, and there is usually a continuous flow of new faces at each meeting, with a core group of regulars. Each county decides what they want their meetings to cover, depending on their members’ interests or needs. Most often the meetings have a set topic and a presenter who speaks on that topic. Each county also has two Council Representatives to speak for them in the larger state organization. These representatives meet regularly with the other representatives to work on and decide on issues that affect all the counties.

Beginner Farmers is a group whose members have a wide range of experience and backgrounds. Some members dream of farming one day, but aren’t yet in a position to make those dreams reality. Other members have farmed for decades or were raised on farms and went away, only to return later. And more members have decided at varying points in their life (after college, after having children, or after the kids leave home) that farming is the right lifestyle or profession for them. Members are all ages and have all different ideas or visions of what kind of farm they want (or have). Some people hope to have a grade A dairy. Others manage CSA’s or market gardens. And others raise food for their family and friends.

Because there are members with so many interests and experiences, often the meeting presenters come from within the group itself. An accountant member teaches others how to keep good financial and farm records. A CSA grower demonstrates raised bed techniques. Cheese makers make cheese with everyone. Biodynamic farmers explain their methods. A shepherd and spinner shows what to do with all that wool. Sometimes statewide meetings or workshops are held on topics of interest to all. Recent larger events include a mushroom workshop (where participants inoculated their own logs) and a poultry workshop (whose presenters included the former poultry extension agent for Vermont and NH, the NH egg and organics inspector, and an alternative poultry housing builder).

**Why BF of New Hampshire is a Great Group to Be in:**

So what makes Beginner Farmers such a good organization? There are many reasons why people become members or get involved. I guess I can best explain by listing my own reasons to be part of the group:

- **Education**—BFNH holds workshops and hosts speakers whose presentations help make me a better farmer and improve my farm’s profitability and sustainability.
- **Support**—I meet other growers in my area and have the opportunity to work with and share experiences with them. Some BFNH members have a lot more experience than I do and they’ve helped and encouraged me through my rough times. Others I can help and encourage when they have hard times.
- **Exposure**—BFNH connects me with organizations and agencies that help farmers; with opportunities to meet and network with other farmers and potential consumers; and keeps me abreast of what’s going on in agriculture in NH and in the Northeast.
- **Marketing**—BFNH helps get more local products out there in the public and builds markets for NH farmers.
- **Outreach**—By combining with other farmers we can better teach the public and consumers about good, local and organic food.
- **The food**—Okay, so we have good potlucks and eating’s my main avocation in life.

If you are interested in learning more about Beginner Farmers of New Hampshire, or want some help in setting up a similar group in your area, contact us any time. Our website is www.beginnerfarmers.org and our office phone number is (603) 223-0083. I can also be reached at maryellensheehan@hotmail.com if you have any questions or want to talk more. Happy farming!
**Access to Land**

by Kathy Ruft

New England Small Farm Institute and Growing New Farmers

This article is in remembrance of Chuck Matthei, a visionary and pioneer in the area of equitable access to land. He founded the small farm trust (SFT), a non-profit organization dedicated to the transfer of land to farmers and others who seek to own land and housing. Chuck passed away in October 2002.

"I want to start farming. How can I find a farm?" "I just bought some farmland. How do I start farming it?"

"I can't afford to purchase a farm. How can I get onto farmland?"

Are any of these questions familiar to you? If yes, you are asking some of the most important and challenging questions facing new farmers today — how to find, evaluate and get onto the right piece of farmland. Especially in some parts of the Northeast, where land prices and cost of land is high, accessing farmland may be the toughest obstacle for a beginning farmer.

The "farmland question" addresses: 1) locating land; 2) assessing suitability against your farming goals; 3) choosing the right tenure model; 4) negotiating the transfer; and 5) securing any necessary financing.

**Tenure** means "to hold". There are different ways to "hold" land. How a new farmer feels about his or her relationship to farmland will guide decision-making about tenure. Many farmers have a deep, value-based commitment to owning a farm. They view farmland as a legacy. For them, stewardship and ownership are inextricably linked. Others feel that stewardship values can be realized on land they don't own. Many new farmers, owning the land is not as important as long-term security. Some are guided by values that question private ownership of land as a commodity. They welcome tenure arrangements that address issues such as speculative gain. Others feel that it's better not to invest capital into land, but rather into growing the business. They realize that for their enterprise, they cannot carry the costs of owning the land. As one wholesale grower pointed out, "Farmers cannot pay for itself by farming it. Still other farmers hope eventually to own their own farms, but value the option for shorter-term tenure agreements as a first step. So choice of tenure is both a very personal as well as business decision.

What are the elements of tenure? You need access to the land. You need security. You need to be able to "hold" land. How a new farmer feels about his or her relationship to farmland will guide decision-making about tenure. Many farmers have a deep, value-based commitment to owning a farm. They view farmland as a legacy. For them, stewardship and ownership are inextricably linked. Others feel that stewardship values can be realized on land they don't own. Many new farmers, owning the land is not as important as long-term security. Some are guided by values that question private ownership of land as a commodity. They welcome tenure arrangements that address issues such as speculative gain. Others feel that it's better not to invest capital into land, but rather into growing the business. They realize that for their enterprise, they cannot carry the costs of owning the land. As one wholesale grower pointed out, "Farmers cannot pay for itself by farming it. Still other farmers hope eventually to own their own farms, but value the option for shorter-term tenure agreements as a first step. So choice of tenure is both a very personal as well as business decision.

Often tenure decisions change over the course of a new farmer's development. In the start-up phase, it may make sense to begin farming with a short-term rental arrangement. Short-term rental (say, 1-5 years) offers the advantage of flexibility and lower land costs. If you decide to change your enterprise, or your location, it's easier to move on. On the other hand, short-term rental can discourage investment in improvements that have a longer-term structure.

For some farmers, a longer-term lease agreement offers the best option for generation of farm managers who are interested in organic and sustainable farmers to meet goals to have the land in active use, and farmers can negotiate secure tenure through a variety of arrange-ments. More and more non-farming landowners are interested in organic and sustainable farmers to meet stewardship interests such as wildlife habitat enhancement or water supply protection. For example, Joe negotiated a long-term lease for farmland owned by a local land trust. The terms of the lease required that the land be farmed according to organic certification standards. The land trust arranged and paid for technical assistance to help Joe develop his business plan.

How can you find land? Unless you are a next-generation farmer poised to take on the family farm, you need to find the land that meets your personal and farm business needs. Thinking through some of these complicated issues around tenure is an impor-tant first step. Then what? There are programs and strategies to help you find the right farm.

Over ten years ago, the Center for Rural Affairs in Nebraska recognized that more and more retiring farmers did not have heirs to take over the farm. At the same time, there were more and more young farmers from non-farm backgrounds who wanted to find farmland, or young farmers who were not interested in or able to take over the family farm. The Center founded the first land linking program. Its purpose was to match farmers seeking land with farm owners, and to facilitate the farm transfer.

Since then, land linking programs have sprung up across the country. Today, the Northeast boasts more linking programs than any other region. New England Land Link, a program of the New England Small Farm Institute, was first in the region, and covered the six New England states. Since that time, state-specific program emerged in Vermont (meat and Link Vermont) and Maine (Maine Land Link). Programs in New York (FarmNet/FarmLink at Cornell University), Pennsylvania (PA Farm Link) were established in the early 1990's. Newer programs have been launched in Maryland and New Jersey.

All land link programs have in common the linking component. However, soon after these programs were established, their sponsors realized that linking was necessary but not sufficient to assure successful access and transfer. A lot of technical assistance, "hand-holding", education, information and referral were required beyond the simple exchange of contact information about available properties. These days, linking programs provide a wide array of programs and services, from estate and retirement planning workshops to publication of alternative tenure, to individual farm succession consultations, to expert facilitation and mediation, to trainings for professional service providers.

Training service providers is really important. There are very few estate planners, attorneys, accountants, extension educators, etc., with expertise in farm succession and acquisition. Even these advisors are not necessarily familiar with some of the more innovative approaches that are increasingly popular with farmland owners and seekers alike, such as the use of conservation easements.

Another challenge is finding and educating farm-land owners. In linking programs, the ratio of lookers to owners can be as high as 7:1. It's been shown that farm owners, especially those in the generation ready to retire, are reluctant to think about succession planning. Many do not have wills. Most do not have a succession plan, and fewer still
have identified a successor. Too often, adequate planning does not happen, and heirs are forced to sell the farm — often to development — to pay estate taxes, and to abandon the farm business. So, to help new farmers get onto farms often means helping exiting farmers prepare to pass the land along to a new farmer.

In the Northeast, there are many “non-traditional” partners that can play an important role in getting new farmers onto farmland. These partners participate in creating tenure “packages” that can make secure and affordable tenure a real option for new farmers.

For example, some land trusts are very interested in “working landscapes” and are active in obtaining easements — meaning a restriction prohibiting the land from being developed — on agricultural land. They want farmland protected, and sometimes have specific stewardship goals. The Vermont Land Trust is a leader in this area. A few land trusts own land and offer secure lease agreements. More often, they own an easement. The easement makes the land more affordable because it removes the development value. The land trust can be an important partner in negotiating tenure terms that allow “sustainable” farming practices.

Publicly held open space — properties purchased or protected by municipalities or states can be a source of land for new farmers. The new farmer will never own the land, but innovative long-term agreements can benefit both parties. Shareholders in community supported agriculture (CSA) farms can be among the most powerful partners in a farmer’s search for secure tenure. In some cases, shareholders raise money to buy the land, or to contribute to a fund that enables the farmer to purchase the land. Other community interests such as recreational clubs or schools may be willing to invest in preserving a piece of property for farming if they also derive direct benefit from the arrangement. They may contribute in exchange for the right to use riding or snow mobile trails. Equity Trust, an organization in Voluntown, CT, is a pioneer and leader in promoting snow mobile trails. Equity Trust, an organization in direct benefit from the arrangement. They may purchase a functioning farm with farmstead.

Where to look for a farm? Besides checking in with land linking organizations, a new farmer could work with a realtor. New farmers report, however, that many realtors are not interested in farm properties. Linking programs mention that farm publications and state department of agriculture and extension newsletters sometimes have classified sections with farms listed. Look on bulletin boards of farm suppliers and dealers. Attend farm organization meetings and conferences. Ask around; get plugged into the network. Sometimes a new farmer will say, “There’s a farm in my town with an elderly farmer (or non-farming widow). Can I knock on the door?”

The most common complaint from farm owners who are approached by a “transferee” is that the new farmer is “starry-eyed” and does not have his or her ducks lined up. Why would he entrust his beloved farm and farm business to someone who doesn’t have a clue? So, it’s important to be knowledgeable, professional, and prepared. And, be realistic about your level of experience. You may be better off to learn about farm management as a farm employee or assistant manager before you take on your own farm business.

What to look for in a farm property? There are so many considerations in looking for land that it can feel daunting. Sometimes it helps to divide the variables into three categories: necessary, desirable, and optional.

For some new farmers, it is necessary to live in a certain area, for example if a partner has a job there. For others, a necessary feature might be high quality soils for specialty crops, or a visible location for a retail outlet, if these business choices are firm. It might be desirable (but not necessary) to find a property with a barn in good condition. It might be desirable to have existing well water, but possible to dig your own well. It might be necessary to have a house on the property, or it might be an option to live nearby.

Regarding location, consider access, both by you, the farmer, and your customers, if you want them to come to the farm. Consider neighbors, visibility and the general community environment; is it friendly to farming? Are there other farms in the area? Does it matter? Where are the nearest suppliers and repair services? How far to the markets you choose to pursue?

You can get a good sense of a farm property by eyeballing it, but that’s not enough. Consult a soils map and ask for or obtain soil tests. Consider the ways in which microclimates, wetlands and other sensitive features may contribute to the overall health of the farm or constrain it. What is the lay-out of the farm and any structures? Is it workable or adaptable to your business interests? Where are the boundaries? What size and shape are the fields? In what condition are the buildings, fencing, culverts, woodlands?

What about housing? Some land link seekers fantasize about their ideal house in their farm search: “3 bedrooms, southern exposure, energy-efficient, hardwood floors”, etc. etc. Others are satisfied with the prospect of living in a mobile home, above the barn, or down the street in rented rooms.

It is very important to inquire about the history of the farm. What were the past uses? Where are any underground storage tanks? Where were chemicals stored and used? Where are any non-farm uses of the property? Are there any liens or other encumbrances? Of course, the questions you ask will depend somewhat on the tenure model you select. If you plan to rent some acreage, many of these questions are not as critical as if you are planning to purchase a functioning farm with farmland.

You can find land to farm! And, there is help to do so. Check the Growing New Farmers web directory (www.northeasternfarmer.org) or contact any of the linking programs (New England Land Link at landlink@smallfarm.org, Land Link Vermont at dheleba@zoo.uvm.edu, NY Farm Link at info@farmlink.org; for NJ contact sherry.dudasi@ag.state.nj.us; in PA contact pafarmlink@redrose.net) The National Farm Transition Network can be found at www.extension.iastate.edu/nftn/.
New Hampshire is not known for its farmland. It stands to New England the way New England stands to the rest of the United States: a little rocky, a little colder, a place where you have to be picky about where you grow things.

But there are anomalies — small spots where old river currents, glacier action, or perhaps just unalloyed Providence put great soil. One of these appears to be where the Pitcher Mountain CSA garden is — on a high ridge a few hundred feet below the summit of Pitcher Mountain, a half hour northeast of Keene.

Tim Wichland, now Pitcher Mountain CSA’s farmer for the second year, thinks the site where the garden is was a glacial soil deposit. “For some reason,” Tim says, “when the last glaciers came over there were spots where isolated pockets of good soil were dumped. There’s not much good soil in the whole town of Stoddard. Mostly it’s rocks. But when I looked on the soil map I saw that the good soil roughly mimics this pasture here I’m on. That’s why it was pasture. It grows well. There are almost no rocks in it. For New England, it’s damn good soil.”

The land is at 1800 feet, in the high country of Cheshire County. Its elevation protects crops against many frosts, which tend to settle into the valleys. Last year the killing frost was 3 or 4 weeks later than nearby Keene. On the other hand, the average temperature never gets quite as high as in the low lands. This makes it great for lettuce, the cabbage family, and anything which doesn’t require an early start or a lot of heat. On the other hand, the elevation makes it quite windy. Some crops like corn are at risk of being blown down, and it’s too harsh an environment for a greenhouse.

Somewhat curiously, there are five CSAs in about a 30 mile radius from Pitcher Mountain, (including Temple-Wilton, one of the earliest CSA in the country at more than 100 shares) making it the most concentrated area for CSAs in New Hampshire.

Tim is a native of Keene. He didn’t discover he wanted to be a farmer until moving back to New Hampshire in the fall of 1999 after completing a college degree in Geography in Montana. Although his father had a garden when Tim was a kid, he says he doesn’t remember helping him much. “I was a pretty typical kid”, he admits, “watching TV and eating junk food.”

But at college Tim started eating organic food and loved it. During his senior year he did a little volunteering in a community garden, half a day on Saturday. He liked it, and when he came home he and his brother often talked about how unsustainable our society is and tried to figure out a different way to live. Their father had bought a big piece of land in Nelson, NH, so they got to thinking about raising food.

As he tells it: “My brother and I were convinced we had to grow our own food. So he started a mushroom room operation, growing gourmet mushrooms on logs. Over the winter of 1999-2000 I read Bill Mollison’s Permaculture book. I found out that Stonewall Farm, a non-profit farm in Keene, has a CSA and an internship program. So I did an internship there in the summer of 2000. That was going from not knowing much to being thrown into a big CSA. I started volunteering twice a week in April, and May I was my official start date. I went until the end of the season at the end of September.”

At that point the paths of Tim and the Pitcher Mountain CSA crossed. Pitcher Mountain CSA grew out of a visioning session by Antioch College of New England, in Keene, with people in the Stoddard area around how they want the area to look in 20 years. They talked about what kind of community-building projects could be started that would ensure their vision becomes reality. One woman, Gail Mitten, who knew about CSAs proposed starting one there. That first year they had only 10 families, a part-time farmer for two months, and a lot of volunteering.

At the same time, a woman named Jennifer Mayo was starting the Beginning Farmers of New Hampshire. As a starting farmer in the mid 1990s she couldn’t get much help from the various government farming agencies: USDA, NRCS. So she organized a support group of starting farmers. Right now there are chapters in 6 New Hampshire counties. They meet once a month , having members talk or inviting others they know. Each month there is a different topic.

So in September of 2000 Tim went to a founding meeting of the Beginning Farmers of New Hampshire. A full CSA farmer for the next year. “I was getting done with Stonewall Farm and living in Stoddard at the time,” recalls Tim. “So it was uncanny timing, and hard for me to take lightly. This was a young farm and I was a young farmer. They hired me. With the help of my mentor at Stonewall Farm I figured out how many row feet of crops I needed, how much seed to buy. We planned it out over the winter.”

In 2001 the CSA had 35 families (getting an equivalent of 23 full shares). This year they added some new land and now they have 60 families getting an equivalent of 40 full shares (40 half and 20 full shares). Many of the half shares are couples or younger people who can’t afford a full share. The members come from the local area – Stoddard, Hancock, Peterborough, Nelson, Harrisville, Marlow, Hillsboro, Washington, Keene.

“There are still a lot of gardeners up here”, says Tim. “A lot of my shareholders have their own gardens. But we can give them more consistency in things that they want — and that they don’t want too, like kale (laughs). In terms of my share price, though, the local agriculture movement isn’t as strong up here as in other parts of New England, like the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts. A full share was only $300 last year, but I had to do a half share because a lot of members thought $300 was too expensive. This year the shares were $350 and $185. Now most of my shareholders see how much they get and have a hard time finishing it.”

One of the best aspects of the Pitcher Mountain CSA is its organizational strength, Tim feels. “I’m really lucky that I have that core group of about 10 people. We meet once a month and they’re very supportive. We have a treasurer, secretary, they design the brochure — they help me so that I can just worry about farming. We have promotional pot lucks, advertise in the winter and spring. We had our potato harvest pot luck last night. I showed people who were new how to harvest potatoes. I love the community aspect of this – connecting people to their food. Then they understand how much work it takes, too!”

The CSA isn’t incorporated and right now doesn’t have a tax status. They are at the threshold of figuring out whether they should be a non-profit, based on all the educational work they do, or have a regular tax status.

Distribution takes place on Mondays and Thursdays, anytime from 4 to 6 pm. It happens on tables set up at the garden site. Tim puts out baskets of produce and people weigh out their portion and fill their own bags. The more labor-intensive and perishable crops are pick-your-own. They always have a bed of flowers and mesclun mix going, and seasonally peas, beans, cherry tomatoes and herbs are pick-your-own. At the beginning of the year Tim has to do a little educating of members about how to harvest mesclun, (with scissors).

If it rains, the beef farmer from whom they lease the land has offered them a stall in his barn. But Tim is reluctant to use it. “I think having distribution right at the farm is important”, he stresses. “During my internship at Stonewall Farm, distribution was 400 feet away from the garden, and you couldn’t even see it. With just that little distance people were stopping and picking up their produce and not doing the you-picks, not going out to the garden. I really like having people here. They can see it change a little every week, see how much work it is. I get really nice compliments and that’s really good for me (laughs).
The biggest production problem the CSA has is that there is no easy access to water at the garden site. It’s just a fenced pasture along the road. About 400 feet away is a pond that is fairly clean — the beef cows haven’t been near it for a long time, Tim says. The CSA has acquired a solar pump and solar panels, and next year they are hoping to draw a line from the pond (sending it under the road through a culvert) and pump it up to a raised reservoir and then on to a large storage tank. Then they could gravity feed it to use for irrigation.

So far Tim has managed without it, however. The last two summers have been really dry, but except for eggplant and cabbage the garden has produced well. The soil is heavy and has a high organic content, having been used as a pasture for so many years.

The garden was plowed up by the beef farmer initially, and now Tim maintains it. Even since going to a raised bed workshop at NOFA Vermont two or three years ago, Tim has been sold on them. “In the spring,” he says, “sections of the garden are crazy wet! The raised beds definitely help me to get a jump start on the season. I like not disturbing the soil once the bed is built. Just adding nutrients every year. I also like it that once the bed is built I don’t have to roto-till it. I can plant intensely on them. I’m young and the raised beds are one-time work of labor!”

“I have a little one-row pinpoint seeder I got from Johnny’s”, he continues. “It has a little trough you put seeds in. You can see seed really close together. You rake the bed first and get it smooth. Then I can do a 30 or 40 foot bed of lettuce – 7 rows — in 5 minutes. As great as raised beds are, though”, he grins, “I think I’ll always want to keep some space hogs like squash and potatoes not on raised beds. That way I’ll always have a big area I can roto-till and plant in.”

Wichland doesn’t plant cover crops on the beds. Instead he adds a good layer of compost to each bed in the fall. “I don’t want to try winter rye if I’m not going to till it in come the spring,” he vows. “I have several flat sections where I use it, and it’s a pain even with the tiller. I’d like to try oats on the beds, but they have to be well established before the frost hits.

About half the garden’s seedlings are bought from NOFA farmer Dave Trumble. But Tim has been working with the kids at the Stoddard Elementary School, where there’s a small greenhouse. They help him start seedlings, then they come up to the garden during the growing season and help. The school is expanding the greenhouse because the kids pretty much take it over in late March.

The idea with Wichland’s raised beds is to put mulch in the pathways. But he has been having trouble getting enough organic matter to use that way. One woman who has a chemical-free lawn gives him her clippings, which work well. He tried leaves last year, but they all blew away because it’s such a windy site. Hay has so much seed in it that he’s hesitant to use it. So mostly he buys straw for mulch, which is a big expense he’d like to bring down.

On the flat areas which haven’t been made into beds, such as where he has squash, Tim admits to using black plastic this year. “It’s just night and day,” he says, “comparing the output to last year! It holds back the weeds, warms up the soil, and keeps the moisture in. I also use row cover – Remay – early on for help with bugs. Even though it’s windy, I can keep it down with rocks and boards.”

Tim says his soil has 9% organic matter in it. He has been adding compost, and the beef farmer gives him some manure, but most of that has been built up over the years because the land was all pasture. Right now the garden takes up about 5/8 of an acre, but a new section was just disked up in September — although Wichland said in July that he wasn’t going to expand!

The CSA leases 2 1/2 acres right now, for $1 a year. They lease it from the Faulkner family, which owns about 11,000 acres in the area. The family started buying it up in the 1930s and has been putting it under conservation easement. They want this land to be actively farmed and love the CSA being there.

The Pitcher Mountain Beef Farm, which the Faulkners own, sells Scotch Highland beef. At some of the CSA pot lucks Tim has their beef to sample. And the farm pushes CSA memberships in the autumn. Tim figures the beef cows grazing around the garden, being big and furry, keep a lot of critters away. Despite being surrounded by 11,000 acres, they say they have never had a deer in the garden.

The most challenging problem Wichland faces with the current operation is how to get the labor he needs. The CSA offers a working share discount: a full share goes to $300 for 12 hours of work, and the half shares go to $150 for 8 hours. Already almost half the shareholders take advantage of that. Next year Tim wants to increase the share prices and also the hours of work needed. But producing enough produce for 60 families, and mostly doing it by hand, is just pretty daunting.
“Earlier this year”, he recalls, “when I was putting in everything and getting a late start, I was feeling the limits of doing everything by hand. I think I need to figure out ways to get more help. I had a high school internship program this year. They volunteered and would get a small stipend and a full share in the garden and they could get some independent study course credit. But it bombed. Out of four interns, none of them followed through.

“I think I need to rework that”, Wichland continues. “I don’t want to give up on it. The year before I had one intern, Eric, and he was great! He worked above his hours, got his stipend and a full share, got a course credit. Now he has a great reference from me and we have a potential farmer on our hands! Those kids are out there. They’re just hard to find.”

As far as changes for the future, irrigation, seedlings, and perhaps a distribution structure are at the top of Tim’s list. “It seems like you shouldn’t have to have irrigation in New England”, he muses. “We get 40 to 60 inches of rain a year. That should be enough. But uncertain weather patterns hurt us. Also, I think growing all my own transplants would save us some money. We could pay me to do that instead of somebody else. And then building some structures to do distribution under if it rains would help.”

Building a structure poses some legal problems, however, so it may take more thought. Right now there are no structures at the garden, and since the land is zoned for current use, building anything permanent would take rezoning the land under them. Tim thinks they may be able to build something on skids, which would keep it from being permanent.

Wichland also is thinking about adding strawberries or raspberries. The Faulkner family does wild blueberry management on Pitcher Mountain, so the CSA probably wouldn’t want to raise blueberries.

As far as Tim himself, he’d like to stay on. “I like this here”, he is glad to admit. “I kind of see this as my own — it wasn’t my original idea, but my energy has made it what it is, more bountiful and successful. I don’t feel vulnerable — even though I don’t own the land — because it’s all protected. It would be neat to make this work.”

As far as earning what he needs, he is trying to think creatively. “Maybe finding chickens or other products to sell would help”, he suggests. “The easy thing is a meat share with the beef farm. We could buy a couple of cows. Maybe getting more involved in the beef farm — diversifying things down the road — might be a neat possibility. But if things don’t work out here I have enough experience that I could go to another CSA. I’d have to work for somebody, though. As a young farmer I just don’t have the capital to start out on my own, and with this job I’m not able to save much.”
As the coordinator of the Small Farm Development Center at the New England Small Farm Institute (NESFI) and co-instructor for its Exploring the Small Farm Dream course, I talk to a lot of beginning farmers. I also have many great resources come across my desk, but I never thought to share some ideas, books, websites, magazines, and organizations that the beginning farmers I work with have found to be most useful.

Resources for Beginning Farmers

by Eric Toensmeier

The Natural Farmer, Winter 2002-03

On-Farm Education and Employment Opportunities

Beginning and established farmers agree that workshops, classes, and farm tours can teach new farmers valuable skills and see if farming is for you. For those interested in organic farming, there are a number of organizations that can assist you in locating a farm for apprenticeship, employment, or farm management opportunities.

• Northeast Worldwide Opportunities on Or-

• The Collaborative Regional Alliance for

• New Farmer Programs and Services Directory.

How to Keep Up With The Cutting Edge

Before you decide on your desired location, enter-

• Conferences

• The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners

• Magazines

• ATTRA

• Employment Opportunities

Develop a Business Plan

If you are looking at farming as a business, rather than self-sufficient homesteading or working for an educational farm, it is crucial to develop a business plan. Things are just too tight for new farmers not to pay close attention to ensuring that the enterprise meets business goals.

• Tilling the Soil of Opportunity: If you are thinking about starting a farm business, the Tilling the Soil of Opportunity course is a great investment of your time. This ten week business planning course for farmers is spreading rapidly across the Northeast. At the end of the course you will have a workable business plan (if you have kept up with your homework!), and you will have had a struc-

• NERAES Business Management for Farmers

Decide How (and if) You Want to Farm

There is a lot to think about before you decide to start a farm. The following resources will help you through some important considerations.

• Exploring the Small Farm Dream: Is Starting an Agricultural Business Right for You is a course and self-study workbook which aims to assist aspiring farmers in deciding whether or not they want to farm as a business. Developed by the New England Small Farm Institute specifically to meet the needs of those thinking about Exploring a Farm, Exploring the Small Farm Dream covers goal-

• ATTRA: Is S

• Find Organizations that Offer the Topical

• Employment Opportunities

• Conferences

• Employment Opportunities

• Employment Opportunities

• Employment Opportunities

• Employment Opportunities

• Employment Opportunities
Resources for the Farm Business covers renting, leasing, and purchasing of farmland; information on making decisions about what machinery to purchase and how to manage and maintain it; as well as determining labor needs and hiring and managing labor. It is written both for beginning and established farmers. Getting Established in Farming is written specifically for beginning farmers. It focuses on different options for start-up including becoming a partner in an existing business, gradual farm transfers from a retiring farmer to a new replacement, and going the solo route. While the tone of both of these books is somewhat dry, and very much oriented towards mid-western conventional commodity farms, they contain much valuable and up-to-date information for beginning farmers in the Northeast. Available from NRAES at (607) 255-7654 or www.nraes.org.


“Farmers and Their Diversified Horticultural Marketing Strategies” is an excellent video featuring some of the most successful farm marketers in the Northeast. This video lets you hear direct from farmers how they manage to be profitable in a tight farm economy. All the farmers profiled are vegetable, herb, and/or flower growers. It would be great to see a video like this on successful farmers with other enterprises like livestock products or on-farm food processing. Available from (607) 255-7634 or www.nraes.org.

Find Some Land
Many of the beginning farmers I talk to want to rush right into buying land. There are some important issues to think through first. Is purchasing land your best option or should you investigate alternative tenure options like renting or leasing? What locations are best suited to your marketing strategies and desired crop and livestock enterprises? How are the soils on that cute-looking farm? Land-linking organizations can help you sort these issues out. Land Linking Organizations are active in many areas of the Northeast. They specialize in making connections between landowners (often retiring farmers) who are looking to sell, lease, or rent their land, and farmers (often beginning farmers) who are looking for access to farmland. Many of these organizations also provide other services to beginning farmers including assistance in obtaining credit, writing a business plan, and technical assistance regarding the purchase, lease, and rental of farmland.

- Maryland Farm Link (410) 841-5770 or www.mda.state.md.us/farmlink.htm
- New England Land Link (413) 323-4531 or www.smallfarm.org
- New York Farm Net 1-800-547-3276 or www.nyfarmnet.org
- Pennsylvania Farm Link (717) 664-7077 or www.pafarmlink.org
- Vermont Land Link (802) 656-0233 or www.uvm.edu/landlinkvt

Stay Out of Legal Trouble!
Farms face a large number of legal concerns. Acquainting yourself with these issues before you get started can keep you out of expensive trouble later on.

- Legal Guide for Direct Farm Marketing by Neil Hamilton. Believe it or not, this is a very readable and enjoyable book about legal requirements and liability issues. It covers much more than direct marketing issues, including labor, zoning, and permits. Required reading for anyone thinking about starting a farm operation – this book could save you tremendous amounts of trouble if you set up your operation legally in the first place. Available from Drake University Agricultural Law Center, (515) 271-2065.

This list is a good starting place, but not intended to be comprehensive. To close I would like to re-emphasize three points:
1) learn everything you can from established farmers, preferably by working or apprenticing for them;
2) take advantage of the resources at www.northeastnewfarmer.org;
3) don’t forget to contact ATTRA!
If you would like further information, contact me at (413) 323-4531 or erict@smallfarm.org. Good luck!

Eric Toensmeier is the Librarian and Program Coordinator of the Small Farm Development Center for the New England Small Farm Institute in Belchertown, Massachusetts.
to huge, diverse markets is one great appeal, par-
ticularly to those new generation agricultural
entrepreneurs who see direct marketing and value-
added approaches as key to their success. The
Northeast’s rich customer base seeks a wide range
of products, which is compatible with farming
practices that are founded on diversity. The North-
east consumer is particularly drawn to organic and
sustainably raised products, a booming “niche” that
many new farmers are committed to. While the
climate and topography in parts of the Northeast
present challenges, it is a rain-fed region, with
diverse micro-climates and soils, inviting new
farmers to create viable farms on smaller acreages.
And although institutional supports for Northeast
agriculture may be eroding, many new farmers from
outside the region say they come to the Northeast to
farm because of its reputation for nurturing progres-
sive, supportive farming communities.

At the same time, starting to farm in the Northeast
does present unique challenges. New farmers
mention the high costs of start-up (most notably the
cost of purchased land), as well as the costs of
production (e.g., higher prices for feed and supplies)
as formidable obstacles. Others will say the main
hurdle is getting into markets, or obtaining credit
from lending institutions that no longer do any
agricultural lending. Of course, the main challenge
all farmers face is the slim profit margin in farming
due to our nation’s cheap food policy. For new
farmers to survive — to thrive — in the Northeast, a
beginning farmer support network must be rebuilt to
provide serious new-entry farmers with access to the
technical, natural, and capital resources they need to
succeed at a commercial farming career.

What is a “new farmer”? We begin with some basic terms and definitions.
According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), a beginning farmer is one who has oper-
ated a farm for ten years or less. This is the defini-
tion used for USDA’s Beginning Farmer Loan
Programs. Some loan programs require that a
beginning farmer phase.

Recruits” might consider a career in production
farmers have not yet begun to farm. There are three phases of prospective farmers:
“Explorers” are investigating a farming future, and
may be gathering information, but have not yet
made a commitment to farming.
“Planners” have made a choice to pursue some sort
of commercial production agriculture, but are not
actually farming yet.

Beginning farmers also fall into several categories:
“Start-ups” have been farming for three years or
less. “Restrategizing” farmers, typically in their fourth
to seventh years, are making adjustments to their
farming enterprises. These include changes in farm
size, crops, enterprise type, market outlet, and land

tenure.
”Establishing” farmers are stabilizing their farm
enterprise in years eight to ten of the beginning
farmers.

This expanded concept of the “new farmer” goes
beyond the traditional definition provided by
USDA. It encourages regional service providers to
develop a more comprehensive understanding of
their new farmer “customers,” and to develop more
carefully targeted support services to meet their
different needs. People who are exploring the
possibility of farming, and those who are planning

Northeast as a farming region does not
receive the same national attention as other parts
of the US, the twelve Northeast states — Maine to
West Virginia — offer unique opportunities that
new farmers are finding attractive. Access and proximity

Perhaps you’ve heard the startling statistics. There
are twice as many farmers in the U.S. over the age
of 65 as under 35. Twice as many farmers retire
evry year as are getting started in farming and
ranching. Over 400 million acres of farmland will
change hands in the next twenty years. At stake are
our farms, our production landscapes, local

economies and food systems. In the face of these
dazzling trends, the question is: who will farm?

Young farmers used to learn the trade at their
parents’ knees, or from relatives. Traditionally, farm
succession included the passing on of skills and
knowledge as well as the farm business. Land grant
institutions and vocational high schools and colleges
taught agricultural skills much more extensively.

Extension agents traveled from farm to farm, providing
on-site technical assistance and spreading the latest farm techniques and news.
Flourishing farm organizations such as Future
Farmers of America and the Grange nurtured new
farmers into a vital community where sharing of

resources and advice was standard.

Nowadays, it is much harder for next generation
farmers to acquire contemporary farming technical
and business skills. Many rural communities in the
Northeast are no longer centered around farming,
while educational institutions and community-based
organizations have been decimated by budget cuts
and priority shifts. Today, in Wisconsin, for
example, only 20% of next generation dairy farmers
remain on the family farm. People who grew up on
farms are more likely to leave the farm, often with
the blessing of their parents who discourage their
children from farming. Much of the traditional
“support infrastructure” — suppliers and services —
has vanished.

Nonetheless, there are people who want to farm.
At the New England Small Farm Institute and other
organizations that serve farmers, calls come in every
day from people who want to pursue a career of
some sort in production agriculture. Many are
creative, brave, and committed people want to get into
or have begun farming in the Northeast. But traditional
sources of information and learning don’t meet the
needs of today’s new farmers. Yesterday’s newly

farmers were the sons of established farmers, heirs
to their land, their knowledge, and their support
networks. Today they are more and more from a
wide range of backgrounds - young men and women
in their twenties and early thirties who were raised
in the suburbs, immigrants from tropical Asia, Latin
America, and the Caribbean where agricultural

traditions remain strong, people who grew up on
farms and hope to take over the family farm or
strike out on their own, and mid-life career changers
and early retirees including high school teachers,
carpenters, attorneys, and military officers. Their
enterprises and marketing strategies run the gamut
from traditional commodities to organic produce,
grass-fed livestock, and organic dairy.

These next-generation farmers may be interested in
learning and operating their own farms, creating a
farm business on leased or rented farm land, or
owning and operating their own farms, creating a

succession needs. These groups, held in three states with

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These next-generation farmers may be interested in
learning and operating their own farms, creating a
farm business on leased or rented farm land, or
becoming salaried employees of farm businesses or
agriculture education centers. They may have
adequate capital, but no practical farming experi-
ence. They may have great agricultural skills, but
poor English, or poor credit. Each of today’s new
farmers brings a unique set of needs and values to his
or her farming career, and requires support and
services that are responsive to these differences.

While the Northeast as a farming region does not
receive the same national attention as other parts
of the US, the twelve Northeast states — Maine to
West Virginia — offer unique opportunities that
new farmers are finding attractive. Access and proximity
to farm are our future; they need special attention and services to nurture them along the farming career path.

Who are the new farmers in the Northeast?

New farmers come from all backgrounds, are in all stages of development, and bring a wide range of resources and talents to the task of launching a farming enterprise. From data gathered in NENFN’s new farmer focus groups, as well as other sources, we can make some observations:

• Most Northeast new farmers are young, although some are older, “mid-life career changers.”
• More and more new farmers are coming from non-farm backgrounds — in other words, they did not grow up on farms. Some still come from farming families; they may be the next generation on an established family farm, or may move on into a different farm.
• In our region, new farmers are ethnically and culturally diverse; there are new farmers of Asian and Hispanic origin, but there are relatively few African-American new farmers.
• Northeast new farmers are interested in an extremely diverse range of farming enterprise types, crops, production approaches and marketing strategies.
• Many new farmers will start out farming part-time, and some will continue part-time for a variety of reasons.
• New farmers who want to farm or have started to farm in the Northeast come from urban, suburban and rural backgrounds. They come from every Northeast state, and some come from outside our region, drawn to the Northeast for its markets, Northeast state, and some come from outside our region.

• New farmers acquire their skills and resources in a variety of ways and sequences, suggesting more of a career lattice than a ladder. Successful farmers need to pass through critical steps in the lattice — touch all the bases — but the sequence is idiosyncratic.

Also, there are many different ways people make a living farming — farm operators and farm employees; part-time and full-time farmers; people for whom farming is a primary or a secondary occupation. Yet another important variable to consider is the farm career cycle, which moves from “new” farmer to established farmer to retiring farmer. Each stage in the cycle has important implications for farm entry and farm succession. For example, for a new farmer to take over an existing farm, the exiting farm family must negotiate a successful transfer, whether the new farmer is an heir or an unrelated person. To learn more about “farming careers,” you can download the NENFN report, Exploring the Concept of Farming Career Paths at www.northeastnewfarmer.org.

What do new farmers need?

New farmers in the Northeast face barriers in four major areas:

• Access to training, education, and technical assistance;
• Access to land;
• Access to capital and credit; and
• Access to markets.

Beyond these fundamentals, they often experience inadequate social supports from family, community, and existing farmer and service networks. Ann Topham, a livestock farmer, remembers that, “When we moved in (the early 1980’s), there were only two people in the U.S. making goat cheese, so it was hard to get information…. A bank would never have given us a loan.” There was no precedent for what we were trying to do, and it was certainly a risky proposition.” (Finding the Niche, p.5) The organizations involved with the NENFN project reached an important conclusion: to serve new farmers most effectively, programs must be targeted specifically to the new farmer audience.

Targeted programs are specifically developed for and offered to new farmers, and sometimes more particularly to certain kinds of new farmers. Workshops on farm startup or finding land are considered targeted. Relevant programs and services are not specifically designed for new farmers. Many general programs — for example, a workshop on crop rotation — may be relevant and valuable to new farmers. A general farm business planning workshop may be relevant and valuable to a start-up farmer with no financial or market history.

It is clear that more targeted programs are necessary to meet new farmers’ particular needs. Individuals in their first year of farming will have very different questions and needs than those just exploring the possibility of farming, or those of more established farmers.

Capital and credit: One of the greatest obstacles for beginning farmers everywhere is access to capital. Low farm income and slim margins make it difficult to qualify for loans (or to pay them back), afford land and equipment purchases, especially outside of the region, and find the time to devote to learning new techniques, developing markets, or even to enjoy the lifestyle and rural living that makes farming attractive to beginning farmers. Most new farmers have a low net worth and few assets. If they are just planning or beginning to farm, they won’t have a track record or a business plan with any financial history. Traditional lenders will be reluctant to take risks on “unproven” entrepreneurs, particularly if they want to farm with small acreages, high risk crop production, low margin crops, or crops with a short growing season. New farmers need creative new strategies to access the capital and credit necessary to launch a farm enterprise. New loan programs may help some new farmers, but developing entry strategies that do not require high capitalization may be an even more effective way to address this barrier.

Education and training: New farmers bring a wide range of educational backgrounds, experience and skills to their decision to farm. They need both knowledge and skills to launch farming ventures. New farmers from farm backgrounds may be familiar with farm machinery and equipment, but may never have been exposed to financial management on the farm. Career-changers may have no background in business management and marketing, but may never have cultivated a field or selected seeds varieties. Education, experience and extent of “farm-launch” research vary greatly; in some cases, farmers don’t even know what it is they don’t know when first starting out. There’s no shortage of general information and resources, but farmers need to know what they need to learn. But new farmers require targeted programming that first helps them redefine their questions and then directly connects them with the answers they need.

Focus groups, interviews, and surveys of both beginning and established farmers by NESFI have generated a list of priorities for which training is needed. As a first step, NESFI convened a panel of established farmers to develop an “occupational profile” of small-scale Northeast farmers in 1999. The profile described the types of work performed by farmers (business management, crop and livestock production, equipment maintenance, etc.). Focus groups of beginning farmers offered input on what farming tasks would be most important in a training curriculum. Established farmers were sent a survey with the revised profile, requesting input on training needs.

The results were interesting! While the popularity of some topics, such as pest management and soil fertility, could have been predicted, the expressed need for business and marketing training was not anticipated. From beginning farmers, the most highly requested training topic was “business and legal requirements” — not what one usually thinks of as a new farmer training need.

Training and education need to be delivered in a wide range of formats and that format depends on both the subject matter and the trainee. New farmers can learn business planning in an evening course, but learning to plow must take place in a field with the proper equipment. Some prospective farmers will gather information in a classroom while gaining academic credits. For others, an academic setting with reading and writing tasks is useful. For them, useful formats include self-study guides, weekend workshops, and one-on-one mentoring. In a study by the Wisconsin Rural Development Center, new farmers identified experienced farmers

A prospective farmer’s current situation considers who you are and, on the one hand, will not be very useful to you. What sort of background do you come from? Do you have any farming skills, knowledge, or management expertise? What are your assets and available resources, including tangible like land and capital, and “soft” resources like family, community support, peer networks?

A person’s farming vision considers where you’re going and what you want. How much time do you want to spend farming? What’s your desired income and standard of living for you and your family? How much decision-making power (and therefore, risk) are you willing to shoulder? What are your goals for the farm operation in terms of production style, size, enterprise size and philosophy? Each new farmer will answer these questions in a unique way, making it inadvisable and nearly impossible to respond to new farmers with a cookie-cutter approach.

NENFN gathered all of these finding in a report called Listening to New Farmers: Findings from New Farmer Focus Groups. You can download a copy of this report online, and find other information and resources at www.northeastnewfarmer.org.
As farmers retire, the farming community loses its most vital source of farming knowledge. This serious challenge to the transfer of knowledge and skills from one generation to another needs to be addressed by augmenting traditional, informal mentoring relationships with more conscious, structured networks of on-farm mentors. Several organizations have risen to the challenge of building a mentoring infrastructure. The international network of “WWOOFing” (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) programs, including the Northeast WWOOF program managed by NESFI, matches interested apprentices with on-farm experience. The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association has a strong network of on-farm training opportunities in Maine. Several Northeast groups of farmer-mentors in the Northeast have formed CRAFT (Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training) networks, meeting regularly throughout the growing season to offer structured trainings and farm tours to their apprentices. NESFI is developing a network or association of trained on-farm mentors throughout the Northeast.

Access to markets: Identifying and reaching markets is a particular skill, one that some new farmers have in abundance while others may be at a complete loss. One complicating factor for all farmers is time—starting a farm, often while working two jobs in order to capitalize a new enterprise, leaves little time for market research, outreach, or the maintenance of relationships required to hold onto a market niche. Sound business planning at the early stages can make an enormous difference in the success of new agricultural ventures. New farmers need appropriate guidance in identifying and meeting market needs, way before they polish their logo. New farmers are at a market disadvantage. Often, they don’t have enough information about market options. Or, they haven’t given enough thought to how a particular market strategy meshes with their personal or family preferences. For start-ups, their volume may be small, and quality irregular, so markets that are more “forgiving” are a better starting choice for some beginners. For some start-ups, going it alone is a handicap. Options that encourage collective marketing such as cooperating CSA farms, or aggregating produce for the restaurant trade may mean the difference between success and failure in the marketplace.

Access to land: There is no easy way to get onto farmland. Even for next-generation farmers who stand poised to take over the family farm operation, farm succession is fraught with interpersonal, financial, and legal complexities. For those without farms, the process to acquire secure tenure is daunting. Whether to own or rent, where to farm, how much and what kind of land, whether land is viewed as a legacy or a working asset are questions with enormous implications for all other farming decisions, as well as for the lives of the farmer and his or her family.

How well are new farmers’ needs being met?

In 2001, NENFN published a Directory of Programs and Services for Northeast New Farmers. The Directory is the result of a region-wide inventory of programs that were targeted or relevant to new farmers in the Northeast region. The Directory, now available on the web at www.northeastnewfarmer.org, contains over 300 organizations located throughout the twelve states. Despite the number of entries, significant gaps in services for new farmers exist in several areas.

Targeted vs. relevant programming: As mentioned, targeted programs are specifically developed for and offered to new farmers. Relevant programs and services are not specifically designed for new farmers, but they could be of interest. There are very few targeted new farmer programs; this is not news to readers who are beginning farmers.

New farmer audiences: Programs may be directed to a particular type of new farmer (such as “Explorers,” or those from immigrant backgrounds). Some programming will be appropriate for all types of new farmers. However, some programming excludes certain categories of new farmers. A few federal loan programs, for example, require at least three years’ experience.

Program accessibility: Not all types of programs are available in all parts of the Northeast. Geographic accessibility is one important variable. The type of delivery is important too. Classroom-and-credit? Weekend workshop? Printed or Web-based publications? Distance learning? On-farm experience?

New farmers vary greatly in their learning needs and preferences. For example, someone who is working a full-time job, has a family and wants to explore farming won’t be able to take an academic course, or a season-long apprenticeship. A young farmer working on her family’s farm may want to experience life on another type of farm, but would have scheduling and travel challenges. Outreach is critical. New farmers need timely information about services and programs scheduled to their convenience and learning preferences.

Program content: There are several major categories of programming for new farmers: introductory; access to land; hands-on skills development; production; financial and credit services; marketing; business planning and management; and special interest. On-farm apprentice networks exist throughout the region, but they vary as to the training they provide. Similarly, high school and college courses may be more or less useful to the prospective or beginning farmer.

For a more detailed version of this analysis, you can access the NENFN report Gaps in New Farmer Programs and Services on the web at www.northeastnewfarmer.org.

What’s being done help new farmers?

While it might seem obvious that next-generation farmers need support, there is no history of attention to new farmers and ranchers by the federal and most state governments. For the first time in its 140-year history, the USDA now has a Beginning Farmer and
Rancher Development Program. Authorized in the 2002 Federal Farm Bill, this grant program provides funds to develop a wide range of eligible programs for beginning farmers. This achievement is the result of over a decade of work by a national network of beginning farmer advocates, including several organizations in the Northeast. This is good news. The bad news is that there is no money attached to the program; the program must be funded by Congress every year in its annual appropriations process. New farmer advocates must persuade the appropriators to fund this important program for the next fiscal year—and every year thereafter.

The first response to the critical lack of new farmers began at the grassroots level in the early 1990’s, when Nebraska’s Center for Rural Affairs established the first “land linking” program. Other land linking programs followed (now totaling 18) supported by non-governmental organizations, university extension, or state departments of agriculture. Originally conceived as matching services to connect farm seekers with exiting farmers, many of these programs now provide a wide range of expanded services for new farmers, including start-up business planning, skill-based farm to family development, technical assistance and referral, as well as succession and transfer planning for retiring farm families.

In the Northeast, three leading organizations with land link programs (New England Small Farm Institute, Cornell’s NY FarmLink, and Pennsylvania FarmLink) in 1999 to form the Northeast New Farmer Network (NENFN), the first regional project in the US to focus on new farmers. Its findings have provided the basis for much of this article. NENFN was followed by the Growing New Farmers Project, a four-year initiative funded by USDA.

The Growing New Farmers (GNF) Project was conceived as a comprehensive regional initiative to provide future generations of Northeast farmers with the support and expertise they need to succeed. GNF brings together service providers from across the Northeast who are committed to working with and advocating for new farmers from Maine to West Virginia.

GNF is addressing the need for a strong, responsive service network for new farmers on many fronts: by funding and promoting new programs, providing new services and information, and creating a supportive, well-connected community of service providers to welcome, support, and meet the needs of the Northeast’s new farmers. GNF is a special project of the New England Small Farm Institute, the grant recipient. The Institute is a private non-profit organization serving beginning, small scale, and limited resource farmers since 1978. Three-dozen collaborating organizations and individuals work with GNF as Project Partners.

Highlights of the Growing New Farmers Project GNF works on two levels to strengthen services for new farmers. At the “macro” level, it is building a network of service providers to raise awareness about new farmer needs, spread the word about effective programs, and encourage collaboration and effective referral. One way this is happening is through the Growing New Farmers Service Providers Consortium. Over 150 organizations signed on as Consortium members to participate in networking, professional trainings, electronic discussions, policy development, and regional conferences. Consortium members share tools, information, resources and insights, and work together on advocacy and services for new farmers. Members can apply for mini-grants for innovative program development, and participate in specialized professional training activities.

In April 2002, GNF launched an innovative, interactive website for new farmers and service providers at www.northeastnewfarmer.org. The “one-stop” site serves as an information clearinghouse and virtual meeting place for new farmers and their service providers to connect with one and another exchange ideas. Features include: a searchable directory of programs, resources and organizations aimed at or helpful to new farmers; an event calendar; on-line learning, where farmers and service providers can create, teach, and take on-line courses; and publications, links, and other useful information for and about Northeast new farmers.

In addition to GNF’s broad goals of network building and resource-sharing, the project also is sponsoring the development of an impressive array of new programs, products, and services. These new programs seek to address barriers in the four key areas discussed above — access to knowledge, financial resources, land, and markets. Some highlights include:

Access to Knowledge: With support from GNF among others, the New England Small Farm Institute is developing curricula and tools for on-farm skills development. Based on DACUM “occupational profiles” developed for both small-scale new farmers and on-farm mentors, learning guides on such topics as obtaining land, selecting farm enterprises, developing a farm mechanization strategy, and researching legal requirements for farm start-ups are under development. A set of guides for on-farm mentors to build their teaching and mentoring abilities will also be created. NESFI’s first set of products, recently released, includes the “Exploring the Small Farm Dream” self-study and classroom guides, with accompanying instructor, advisor, and program manager guides. “Exploring the Small Farm Dream” courses soon will be taught by a network of delivery partners throughout the Northeast.

In another Access to Knowledge project, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Washington County, is using GNF funds to create an alternative knowledge-delivery system for new farmers, including print resources, workshops, and on-line research, through local libraries in the Mohawk Valley. Librarians will teach new farmers how to do research using the Internet.

Access to Financial Resources: The Council on the Environment/Greenmarket is creating a New Farmer Revolving Loan fund for immigrant farmers in the NYC area. Administered by a Peer Committee, this fund provides revolving, no interest loans for start-up expenses such as fencing, rototillers, or other vital equipment without which a low-income new farmer cannot establish a successful farm enterprise. GNF is working on a project to promote state-level programs to help new farmers to obtain financial assistance.

Access to Environmental Resources: Pennsylvania FarmLink is leading the effort to strengthen the NE network of “land linking” programs, which focus on farm succession and transfer. Through several projects, GNF is working to strengthen the link between farm transfer and farm conservation planning, so that long-term strategies of land stewardship are not interrupted by farm changes. The Intervalle Foundation is promoting alternative land tenure models (e.g. rentals and long-term leases) that are coupled with stewardship standards. The Hartford Food System Working Lands Alliance, NOFA and others in CT will place new farmers on land protected by conservation easements.

Access to Markets: New farmers often struggle to identify and enter appropriate markets and then to meet the product quantity demands of certain market outlets. Addressing this, NOFA-VT is exploring the feasibility of a multi-farm CSA, where new farmers could pool product in order to supply subscription customers consistently throughout the season. At Rutgers University, a print and web-based decision-making tool is being developed to help new farmers select appropriate market outlets. It will address variables of risk and time management to help farmers evaluate market options and make appropriate choices.

Original Research: The Growing New Farmers Project and other efforts to help new farmers are breaking new ground. There really isn’t a lot of study or information in this area. This is particularly true when it comes to solid research about new farmers. There are so many questions that need well-considered and investigated answers.

Three original GNF research projects will study several factors that contribute to successful farm entry. The first evaluates different “learning systems” for new farmer training. This research project studies and compares six types of structured learning systems for new farmers, using a framework that considers how adults learn best, and how learning is transferred to new farmers.

The second project compares farm succession strategies, examining how land transfers operate in several cultural contexts. The findings will help us understand both particular and universal barriers that families face when passing on the farm. The third study will develop a web-based decision-making tool to address this, in order to help farmers make decisions about the appropriate markets and marketing strategies over time — of hundreds of farm start-ups in every NE state. Investigators will chart farmers’ evolution through several decision points from their beginnings through the three years of the study. (If you started a farm since 1992 and are interested in completing a questionnaire for the study, please contact Sue Ellen Johnson at 413-323-4531 or sejohnson@smallfarm.org.)

For people who want to farm or have started farming in the Northeast, growing food is a lot of fun. Despite the challenges, which can appear daunting, there are abundant opportunities, growing support, heightened awareness and new programs and services for new farmers. In the non-farming community, from CSA shareholders to land trusts to farm equipment dealers, more people are making the connection between current and future agriculture and future farmers. “It’s not farmland without farmers”, reads American Farmland Trust’s bumper sticker.

There’s no food or other farm products without farmers, New farmers will be the stewards of our land and the producers of food and fiber. New farmers will contribute to local rural economies; new farmers will invest in land conservation; new farmers will innovate, take risks, and be entrepreneurial in order to thrive. Their survival depends on the resources provided by a complex and engaged support network. The future is theirs.
Most farm businesses borrow money. Obtaining capital to launch or develop a farm business is possible! As any lender or farm financial consultant will tell you, there are sources of credit for those who do their homework. Homework includes preparation of a business plan and/or other documents that demonstrate that you know what you are doing and have the means to repay the debt. Farmers who arrive at the bank with their finances in a shoebox or all in their heads are much more likely to be turned away — and for obvious reasons.

Check www.northeastnewfarmer.org for programs and organizations that can help new farmers prepare business plans.

That being said, there are challenges to finding and obtaining loans. Fewer and fewer commercial lenders are in the ag lending business. Loan officers who are not familiar with farming are less inclined to make farm loans. New farmers and those who want to develop “alternative” or non-traditional products or markets have an even tougher time, as they are perceived as higher risk.

There are several agricultural loan programs to help new farmers. The USDA’s Farm Service Agency has several loan programs targeted to beginning farmers and ranchers. They offer direct and guaranteed loans for operating expenses and real estate. They have a unique downpayment loan program that helps new farmers package an affordable mortgage for farm property. FSA has a mandate to recruit and serve new farmers to reach their targets. Funds not spent on lending to new farmers go back into the general pool. They want you!

Another lender to beginning farmers is the Farm Credit System. It is a national farm-owned lending cooperative. It is overseen by the US government. FCS has a mandate from the government to serve “young, beginning and small farmers and ranchers”. Recently, the FCS has come under some scrutiny regarding their performance in this area. While they do not have specifically targeted funds for new farmer loans, they want (and need) to reach and serve new farmers. FCS also offers financial planning and management, tax, and farm management services.

A 1992 federal law established a federal-state partnership loan program for new farmers and ranchers. Commonly known as the “aggie bond” program, it offers low interest loans from money bonded by participating states. In the Northeast, only Pennsylvania has such a program. The Growing New Farmers Project is working to encourage more states to participate in this program or others to provide financial assistance to beginning farmers.

Some community-based economic development organizations offer small business loans. For example, in Hampshire County (MA), the Valley Community Development Corporation offers loans to small businesses, including agricultural businesses. Coastal Enterprises, Inc. in Maine, has a program devoted to agricultural lending and business development.

A survey of farmers in western Massachusetts several years ago revealed (or confirmed) that established, larger and more conventional farmers do not experience much difficulty in obtaining credit. But start-up and non-traditional farm businesses more often rely on “family, friends and others”, personal credit cards or line of credit from a home mortgage for loans. The New England Small Farm Institute experimented with a “peer lending” program for start-up micro-loans, in trying to fill the gap in small loans for start-up farm businesses. In fact, the Farm Credit Foundation, an arm of the FCS, recommends that a micro-loan program be developed, perhaps by the federal government, in response to this identified need. The Growing New Farmers Project is fostering the development of several community-based lending models. With the existing programs and some exciting new ones under development, diligent and prepared new farmers will find it possible to meet their credit needs.

While most farm businesses borrow money at some point for operating or to purchase land, equipment or livestock, debt is a slippery slope. Our entire agriculture is built on a model that encourages farmers to get deeper into debt by getting bigger — acquiring more and bigger equipment, more acreage, more inputs just to try to stay even. Farm entry models that minimize debt, such as renting instead of purchasing land right away, or using your own and family labor instead of fancy equipment and other inputs, should be encouraged. Smart planning will help you make the best decisions about the role of credit for your farm enterprise.
The CRAFT of Farmer Training
by Casey Steinberg

The CRAFT (Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training) program offers many opportunities for young farmers to gain valuable experiences in sustainable agriculture. This morning, the crew here at Brookfield Farm in Amherst, Massachusetts has stopped our daily routine to travel to today’s workshop. On any other morning, my coworkers and I would get up early and harvest greens while they are still cool from the night air. We would take an hour for breakfast and return to the farm to continue the harvest. On any other morning we would know the day would be spent in our own beautiful corner of the Pioneer Valley. This morning, however, is different. It is Saturday morning, a “CRAFT” morning. The shop is set up for distribution and I have my breakfast in hand, tea on my lap, and an excited but bleary-eyed co-pilot decoding the usual cryptic directions to today’s host farm. We are looking forward to seeing yet another corner of our agricultural community.

CRAFT is a program designed by an evolving community of organic and biodynamic farmers in the Pioneer Valley, the Hudson Valley, and the Berkshires to create educational opportunities for their farm apprentices. Every two weeks from April through October, a different participating farm invites the apprentices from all the other farms and provides a tour and overview. They also speak more specifically about one aspect of their operation. These specific topics include: rotational grazing, seed saving, greenhouse management, cover cropping, tractor maintenance and safety, orcharding, mechanical weed control (cultivation), tillage methods, compost making, dairying and livestock, planning and record keeping, marketing, budgets and finances, value added products, CSA management, and getting started on your own farm.

CRAFT has its roots in the excitement and dedication of a handful of influential farmers who were committed to and joyful about their work. They were also very concerned about who would train the next generation of farmers. In 1994, Jean-Paul Courtens and Dave Inglis called a group of farmers together to discuss ways to train their apprentices. By the end of 1994, a core community of farmers formed. Some of these farmers included Sam and Elizabeth Smith from Caretaker farm, Michael Droescher, once an apprentice herself, facilitated a seminar, and Stephen Williams from Threshold Farm, Rachel and Stephan Schneider from Hawthorne Valley Farm, and Christa and Martin Stosick from Markristo Farm. The group decided to cover the “essentials” of a farming education and set it to a schedule that worked for the growing season. The schedule has been revised over the years, based on feedback from participants, but fundamentally it has remained what it was started to be: a series of on-farm workshops during the growing season which serve to collaboratively train all the apprentices in an efficient manner. The farmers meet once in December to evaluate the past season and plan the new one. Administration is kept to a minimum and the farmers do all work for the program on a volunteer basis. The program is meant to be simple to manage and effective in its training of apprentices. The energy of this original group continues to be contagious and the network of CRAFT farms has grown. In addition, there are now other CRAFT groups in Eastern Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and California (and maybe more we don’t even know about!)

Today, we are visiting Roxbury farm in Kinderhook, New York. It is a large, well-systemized CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) with 675 shareholders and a large wholesale account. The fields are spread out around the wooded rolling hills and down to the flat Kinderbrook creek flood plain. The focus of the workshop is “farm systems”, of which each apprentice is assigned specific responsibilities. Roxbury’s well-honed systems reach from seeding to washing and distribution. Apprentice Todd Niemeier demonstrates how seeds are planted into flats with a vacuum seeder and placed on trays, which can then be moved around on custom made metal frames. Land is prepared for transplanting and direct seeding using equipment that provides a beautifully clean, smooth surface.

Tod Niemeier dazzles the group with the vacuum seeder.

Pete Lowry shows us the various cultivation tools he uses to keep the weeds to a minimum. Irrigation is streamlined and efficient. Alyson Taylor takes us into perfectly straight, plastic covered rows of tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, and summer squash, all irrigated with a drip line system. A large traveling reel is used for most other crops, removing the wonderful task of hauling pipe or troubleshooting stubborn sprinkler heads. Erica Marzak, the assistant harvest manager, explains the harvesting/washing system. They harvest into handled lugs, load them onto a truck which in turn takes them to the washing area where they are placed on roller tracks, dunked in super cooled water, and rolled right into the walk in cooler.

We also learn about Roxbury’s covercrops system, a topic of which farmer Jean-Paul is very passionate. He and the Roxbury crew show us beautiful fields in various stages of production and rest. As Jean-Paul speaks the overall goals for this land become more clear, as well as the importance of the right covercrops to achieve them. Though many of the systems here are familiar, others are new and inspirational and I will certainly use them in planning my own operation.

Earlier in the season we visited Ol’ Turtle farm in Easthampton, Massachusetts. Farmer Eileen Dreescher, once an apprentice herself, facilitated a well-organized, thorough presentation on getting a
Looking for a farm on which to apprentice can be dizzying. How do I know when a farm or farmer will be a good match for me? Will this farm teach me what I need/want to learn, or will I simply be a laborer? What am I willing to risk to be a farmer? Will this farm provide a low risk setting for me to make some mistakes? Many of the apprentices in the CRAFT program have addressed these questions again and again, and decided that a CRAFT farm will be committed to education as well as hard work. If a farm is involved in the program, it is a strong sign that they are committed to teaching new farmers. Sam Smith says that having access to all of these farms broadens your horizons because you can pick and choose aspects of each when designing your own operation. Elizabeth Smith says the program provides the farmers another way to give back as much as they receive from their apprentices. She adds, "The best way to learn/teach is to work shoulder to shoulder".

When asked about the program, Brian Strom, one of Sam and Elizabeth's apprentices, says all farm visits were beneficial in some way. I asked if he had had any epiphanies while in the program. He responded in his usual candid way, "Does epiphany mean 'sore back' in Latin?" We can’t all be so lucky. Dan Perkins of Caretaker farm says that CRAFT added to his overall learning experience, and gave him many new ideas. Chris Cashen of The Farm at Millers Crossing in Hudson, New York, says, "When you take advantage of the CRAFT program, the value of your apprenticeship is realized. If you don’t, it’s just hard work and low pay". It provides many sources for future placement, consulting, and general networking. Most importantly, it provides community. It provides a structure for the next generation of young farmers to connect on a social level as well as an academic one. This year’s group has become close, often gathering after workshops to swim, play music, celebrate a birthday, or venture to a local pub to escape the urge to talk about farming. We were even fortunate enough to help celebrate the marriage of two of the apprentices. Congratulations to Andrea and Brian!

The program is constantly evolving and growing, in its apprentices as well as its farmers. Treesha Litzotte, a farmer at Still Point Community farm and former apprentice of Brookfield Farm, says CRAFT will connect you with others who share your interests. Eileen has been farming for six years, and is wrapping up her fourth year on her farm. Andrea and Brian!

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Looking for a farm on which to apprentice can be dizzying. How do I know when a farm or farmer will be a good match for me? Will this farm teach me what I need/want to learn, or will I simply be a laborer? What am I willing to risk to be a farmer? Will this farm provide a low risk setting for me to make some mistakes? Many of the apprentices in the CRAFT program have addressed these questions again and again, and decided that a CRAFT farm will be committed to education as well as hard work. If a farm is involved in the program, it is a strong sign that they are committed to teaching new farmers. Sam Smith says that having access to all of these farms broadens your horizons because you can pick and choose aspects of each when designing your own operation. Elizabeth Smith says the program provides the farmers another way to give back as much as they receive from their apprentices. She adds, “The best way to learn/teach is to work shoulder to shoulder”.

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Beginning Farmers in Vermont: Priorities for Action Identified at a Beginning Farmer Forum

summarized by Vern Grubinger, Director, UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture

Background. Over the last century Vermont has been slowly changing from a rural to a suburban and urban society. Today, only few percent of the population is engaged in farming and according to the agricultural census the average age of farmers is slowly increasing and now stands at 52 years. Yet, nearly 6,000 farms remain in Vermont, stewarding almost 1.3 million acres of land, and farming continues to play an essential role in rural economic development, food security, and the maintenance of open space for tourism, wildlife habitat and recreation. To assure a bright future for agriculture in the state, it is critical that efforts are made to encourage new entrants to farming and to help them succeed.

The good news with regard to beginning farmers is that the lifestyle and working environment associated with farming are attractive to many young people as well as to people seeking a change of careers. Despite the relative un-attractiveness of farm versus non-farm earning opportunities, anecdotal evidence suggests there is an ample pool of people willing and eager to enter into farming as a business if they can overcome the initial obstacles. The bad news is that these obstacles can be significant, and they include: access to financial capital, access to land, access to markets and access to farming knowledge and information.

Farm businesses have relatively high capital requirements. A new farmer can use their own money, have it provided by others, or borrow it. Many people that aspire to start a new farm or take over a farm are not eligible for the loans they need, despite their good character and experience, because they lack sufficient financial assets to secure these loans.

In places like Vermont, where land prices are steadily rising and development is slowly reducing the amount of available farmland, finding an affordable place to farm is a serious challenge for beginning farmers. Sale of development rights has been helped some beginning farmers acquire land, but funding is limited and the smaller parcels desired by many new entrants to agriculture are not usually attractive to land trusts.

While commodity market prices pose a serious challenge to most farmers, including beginning farmers, opportunities abound in specialized wholesale markets and direct markets if a producer can identify their niche and provide premium quality products along with customer service.

A beginning farmer must rapidly acquire information about how to farm, how to manage a farm business, and how to adhere to regulations. Those who grew up on a farm can obtain much of this specialized knowledge from their family and experience. For others, this expertise must be acquired through a combination of hired work on farms, internships, education, and technical advice. Technical advisors and trainings are relatively plentiful, but beginning farmers often struggle with locating the resources that address their specific needs.

Types of beginning farmers. Beginning farmers are a diverse group. They include recruits (people with an aptitude or interest in farming that have not considered it as a career option); explorers (those actively researching farming as a career option); aspiring farmers (committed to becoming farmers but haven’t started commercially); start-up farmers (in their first few years of commercial production); re-strategizing farmers (in their first few years and in the process of reassessing their operation); establishing farmers (well on their way to stabilizing production and marketing). Programs and services need to be clear about which type of beginning farmer they are targeting.
Identifying Priorities for Action. On March 13, 2002, a forum was held to identify and prioritize actions that would promote the success of beginning farmers in Vermont. Funding was provided by the Northeast SARE program and UVM’s Robert P. Davison Memorial Endowment. Seventy people attended; about half were farmers and half were representatives from public and private agricultural organizations (Farm Service Agency, Intervale Foundation, New England Small Farm Institute, Natural Resources Conservation Service, NOFA-VT, UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture, UVM Extension, Vermont Land Trust and Yankee Farm Credit). Presentations about access to loans, land, markets and technical assistance were given by both beginning farmers and agricultural service providers.

Participants generated the list below, and at the end of the day these actions were prioritized.

Top Priorities:

* Beginning Farmer Program Coordination. Develop capacity to advise and counsel individual beginning farmers; facilitate communication among agencies that serve beginning farmers; educate agencies and organizations about beginning farmer needs; compile resource lists of programs and services available for beginning farmers; enhance linkages between technical advisors and beginning farmers.

* Low Interest / Zero-Interest Loans and Grants for Beginning Farmers. Obtain funding and develop a process for offering financial assistance to promising new farm enterprises.

Secondary Priorities:

* Ongoing Business Training Sessions for Beginning Farmers. Expand the availability of existing programs (NxLevel, Growing Places) and new programs across the state.

* Beginning Farmer Resource Packet. Compile a comprehensive list of programs, services, agencies and individuals that serve beginning farmers; provide contact information as well as brief descriptions.

NOP Overrules NOSB continued from page 1

director announced that the NOP had overruled the NOFA/Mass Organic Certification Program on a case involving a Massachusetts egg producer. The producer, Mathews related, had applied to the Massachusetts program for certification and had been presented with a list of ways in which his operation was not in compliance, including that the farm did not provide adequate access for the chickens to the out of doors. The producer came back with corrections to all the other points, but not the access one. Instead of coming into compliance on that issue, the producer appealed it to the NOP. Mathews said that, based on advice he received in a letter from a poultry expert, he decided on a “compromise” — to require the farm to provide access to the out of doors only in the months from May through September. He also said the NOP/Mass Organic Certification Program needed to certify the facility in question or lose accreditation for three years.

The farm in question, The Country Hen, in Hubbardston, Massachusetts, had been certified by Quality Assurance International for several years. Owner George Buss has actively promoted his view that outside access for hens is, in many cases, detrimental — including to the health and safety of his 67,000 birds. In May of this year he testified at an NOSB hearing on animal access. He made three arguments:

1) he cited a recent outbreak of avian influenza in Virginia which killed 2.2 million birds and argued that danger from such infection is greater in a range-reared flock,

2) he explained that he has only 13 acres of land and his birds produce over 80 tons of wet manure a month, thus reasoning that allowing them outside would produce environmental damage to the surrounding watershed, and

3) he calculated the cost of land and buildings which would be required to adequately rotate his birds so as not to pollute and arrived at a total of over $5,000,000.

The question of organic eggs takes on a larger significance when one realizes the importance of eggs in virtual food from chapter members’ farms. Among the USDA controlled term “organic” to be allowed to drive out family operations as they have in conventional agriculture? The NOFA/Mass Organic Certification Program certifies several organic egg producers in Massachusetts, but none on the scale of The Country Hen.

Although The Country Hen has not been granted certification by the NOFA/Mass Organic Certification Program, the company’s eggs have been on the market for weeks in local stores in boxes that bear the notation: “Certified Organic by NOFA/Mass”. When questioned about this an official of the NOFA/Mass Organic Certification Program said it was likely that Mr. Buss believed his eggs were certified, given his appeal to the NOP.

NOP/Mass has not yet taken any action against the egg facility, hoping for a positive resolution of the certification dispute. But the organization is concerned about the situation because of its larger implications. According to the association’s president, Jonathan von Ranson, “If NOP can, this early in the program, usurp the authority of the NOSB and flout basic rules about fairness and objectivity, then public trust in the value of the organic label may be permanently jeopardized.”

The NOFA/Mass board voted to provide financial and staff support in this dispute to its certification program — which is now administered by a separate organization, composed of long-time NOFA/Mass members, known as Massachusetts Independent Certifier (MIC). In a move which shows the concern with which the group views this conflict, the board also voted to research and publicize other options than the use of the USDA controlled term “organic” to market food from chapter members’ farms.
Learning on Five Acres

by Jack Kittredge

The Finger Lake region of New York is prime agricultural land. Its rolling hills are gentle enough to work with tractors and seldom does one encounter a rock capable of enforcing a detour from the straight line. Yet the region is far enough from urban areas that development pressure is low and open land is available for farming.

On 5 acres in Tyrone, NY, west of Lake Seneca, new farmer Hector Tejada is learning his craft. Using land of a beekeeper friend, Hector pays just enough to cover the property taxes on his acres of mixed vegetables. During my visit in late July he was harvesting cucumbers and squash. The first tomatoes were turning orange. Melons and eggplant looked good while the beans, garlic and corn were still small.

“It was a cool spring,” he explains, “but now we’re getting heat. There are a lot of ripe tomatoes coming in from Jersey and Pennsylvania now, but not yet that many from New York.”

Tejada does a lot of heirloom tomatoes and squash, which he feels attract ethnic buyers at his table in New York City’s Greenmarket. He grows most of his crops on black plastic, which gets the ground warm earlier, as well as keeping in moisture from his trickle irrigation system.

Hector laid down the plastic mulch with borrowed equipment last spring. Unfamiliar with the tractor and mulch layer, he had trouble getting some sections covered with dirt. In those areas the plastic has blown away and weeds have given stiff competition to the crop plants.

His lack of the proper machinery has been a burden too. There are a lot of ripe tomatoes coming in from Jersey and Pennsylvania now, but not yet that many from New York.”

Tejada has become a reasonable mechanic out of necessity. “I can fix things a bit,” he says, modestly. Not too much electronic, but if it’s mechanical I can see how it works. I have a 1942 tractor! But I keep it working pretty good.”

Being located next door to a sheep farm, Hector uses sheep manure plus fish emulsion for fertility. He’s used rotenone for trouble with striped beetles in his cucurbits, and flea beetles in his cabbage. But managing five acres by hand organically, he admits, is more than he can take sometimes.

“I feel bad about having five things going on at once,” he sighs. “And then I have to go to the market. If I don’t go, nothing is going to happen! Everytime you go there it’s a day — a long day! It’s hard to make it up the next morning. I can’t get sick. I get kind of tired. At this time I would like to have a vacation!”

Tejada sells in New York City’s Greenmarket twice a week. He picks on Monday, leaves Monday night for New York, and gets there early Tuesday. He sells all day Tuesday, then comes back Tuesday night. Picking again Wednesday, he leaves Wednesday night for Thursday sales. Not a driver himself, Hector pays a friend to drive him the 4 and a half hours each way in a pick-up truck.

“When I get to the market each week,” he says, “I check the prices. We all try to keep the same prices. In the Greenmarket you can’t buy stuff in. You have to raise it or work for the farmer. Some other markets don’t care. Sometimes an independent farmers market will be organized by a merchant for a parking lot, or a school back yard. But the Greenmarket is the biggest one, with 28 markets throughout the city. They’ve been there 26 years.”

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With the greenhouse he built in the background, Hector stands by his tiller, holding some of the heirloom tomates he does well with. Most of his work he does by hand.
**Hector grows okra, as he does many of his crops, with black plastic mulch to prevent weeds and conserve moisture.**

musician and also have a paying job. You have to be available to go with the band.

“We got occasional jobs,” he recalls, “but we couldn’t count on that to pay the bills. You can spend your whole life just doing that. But I have a son and have to treat it like a business.”

Then, in 1997, Tejada started working at a farmers market selling fish for two days a week. He found he liked to talk to the buyers and worked there for a year and a half. Then he met an Amish farmer at the market who offered him a job.

“He’s a big farmer and also has a bakery and makes cheese,” Hector says. “His farm is in Pennsylvania but somebody drives him in. He saw me working for his neighbor, the fish guy. He told him I was honest, he never missed his money. The Amish guy did many markets and was always looking for people. So he asked me to work for him at the market in the summer. I did that, and the next year he asked me if I would like to work for him at the farm. He said he had a lot of work at the farm.”

“When I went to Pennsylvania I liked it,” he continues. “It was a change. I was in New York City for a couple of years, and it’s hard to live there – too many people. Pennsylvania had open space. It was hard work, but I liked it. I learned a lot from him about farming.”

Tejada used to take care of the Amish farmer’s tomatoes. Most of the farm’s help were girls; he says, who were great at planting and picking, but had a hard time doing heavy work. The farmer taught Hector how to put in poles and tie tomatoes, when and how to water them, how to keep too many tomatoes from developing at once, so they will all be good size.

Ultimately, however, the drive to be his own boss pushed Hector to try farming on his own. He took beekeeper Dewayne Newcomb up on his generous offer to farm on Dewayne’s land in Tyrone, NY. He first came to the land last fall to look at it and get someone to plow it. Then he came back in late February to live – to put together the greenhouse and get the seeds, equipment, drip irrigation and other inputs necessary for a farming venture.

Tejada used his savings from work to get started, and also borrowed money from his mother back in the Dominican Republic. He bought the greenhouse and raised virtually all his own seedlings there. He was planning to use his savings from work to get started, and also bought tractors and gas and everything else he would need to make that land productive.

The NFDP hopes to identify individuals, often immigrants with backgrounds in agriculture, to replace the area’s retiring farmers. Offering market assistance through the Greenmarket is the NFDP’s major incentive, but they also have mentoring programs and can find small financial assistance in the right circumstances. In Tejada’s case, they got him his Greenmarket locations, helped with the paperwork involved in accepting WIC coupons, and gave advice on selecting a greenhouse.

While appreciative of the program, Hector realizes the constraints that govern such opportunities. The NFDP has a little fund to help farmers in emergen-
cies. “A few weeks ago,” he says, “I had a big beetle problem. I was starting in the market and I didn’t have any money. I called and they said the lady that signs the checks was on vacation! They said: ‘We have the money, but you can’t give it to you.’ I said: ‘But I’m going to lose my cucumbers.’ So I called my extension agent. He bought me some rotenone. He’s a nice guy!”

Asked what would make it easier to get started in farming, Tejada said: “Money! Or the things that money can get you – machines, equipment, supplies. And Markets — good markets where you can get good prices for your stuff. I checked around here. Farmers have an auction in Penn Yan. It’s not much, man, what you can do there. The prices are way down. At least I’m familiar with the Greenmarket!”

Hector uses organic methods, but he has a hard time doing heavy work. The farmer taught him how to plant tomatoes, when and how to water them, how to keep too many tomatoes from developing at once, so they will all be good size. Ultimately, however, the drive to be his own boss pushed Hector to try farming on his own. He took beekeeper Dewayne Newcomb up on his generous offer to farm on Dewayne’s land in Tyrone, NY. He first came to the land last fall to look at it and get someone to plow it. Then he came back in late February to live – to put together the greenhouse and get the seeds, equipment, drip irrigation and other inputs necessary for a farming venture.

“IT took me longer than I thought it would to put the greenhouse together,” he reflects. “The Amish farmer I worked with had five of them, but I never put one together with him. Companies came and put them up.”

Instrumental in helping Hector get started farming on his own was the New Farmer Development Program (NFDP) of New York City’s Greenmarket.

**The Natural Farmer**

**Winter, 2002-03**

Hector with his International tractor (which he uses only for harrowing)
A New Farmer 10 Years Later

by Tim Belknap

In 1992, I bought a house and barn in central Vermont on 20 acres that had been the upper pastures of a farm that folded in the 1950s. A decade later, my little Millimont Farm is taking shape as a little dynamo of a working operation. I would like to share my successes and mistakes with those considering taking up farming with limited means but big dreams.

First, about those dreams: If you travel down the Champlain Valley along Route 22A in Vermont, you will pass one magnificent dairy farm after another. In the foggy early mornings on my weekly commute out of state, they seem like starships—clusters of lights amid the vast, mist-blanketed pastures and fields. Some of the newer structures, each housing hundreds of cows, look more like Magna assembly plants than barns, but so be it, nothing need be locked in time.

I’ve visited some of those farms with a friend of mine making his rounds as a U.S. Dept. of Agriculture loan officer, and fascinating places they are, the farmers as handy with a laptop computer as with any of their other machines. Some of the more prosperous families are Dutch—not old Dutch stock but immigrants who came over in the 1950s for affordable land.

Should any of these industrious folk visit my tiny operation, they might well laugh to themselves and mentally add quotation marks to the word farm. After all, where’s the acreage, the machines, the credit line, to say nothing of the endless work-weeks? “Commute” and “hobby farm” might be two terms that would come to mind. Alas, I have debt just like they do, and I don’t have their potential subsidies. (Not all of them accept subsidies, unless you count milk prices as inherently subsidized.) But at least I have a business model that will be debt-free in spring 2004, when I anticipate ending all startup outfits. Am I in business just as much as they are down in the valley? Nope, I’ll admit, since only a small fraction of my income comes from the land. But no one is going to define for me what farming is and isn’t these days. The way I look at it, whether you’re milking 400 cows, as the flatlanders are, or, as I am, trying to perform a raised asparagus bed, producing food is a serious endeavor.

I grow apples to make cider, keep bees for honey and pollination, and raise asparagus. One reason I picked these products is that I find all three delicious—a prerequisite to effective marketing, I figure. It makes me my own best critic and makes friends and family a handy test group. Besides, I already had wild apple trees—young and old—on the property as a start. Wormy-looking wild apples added to cultivated apples—obtainable initially at local orchards, later from planted trees—can make a good cider into a great cider. As for the bees, their attraction is that they don’t require much room, nor really all that much labor. Asparagus has two pluses: Even in central Vermont, it can be harvested as early as late April, and it doesn’t require fencing, since deer and other animals seem to have no appetite for it—important when you border wild tracts, as I do. But some of it—literally tons of it—would involve weekly Saturday trips to the dump for the next two years. Pulling that junk, often half-buried, out of the puckerbush was a warming for the hard work of clearing.

If you follow the same path I did, you will be doing gritty land-clearing labor the likes of which most Yankee farmers haven’t experienced in two centuries or more. Just tell your doubting friends it’s like a visit to the gym—for free! The primary tools I started out with were a pickup truck, shovel, shears, a crowbar and other levers, handsaws, and a piece of what is now barely mobile scrap metal that deserves a place in the Wheelbarrow Hall of Fame. Soon after came a chainsaw and eventually a four-wheel-drive tractor with front-end loader and brush hog.

But for a year, I relied on just the wheelbarrow, hand tools, and insect repellent. Plus, an old power mower I used as a brush hog by doing wheelies and using the blades vertically. (Tip No. 1: Buy hand tools in high-visibility colors or paint them that way. Nothing worse than misplacing a crowbar only to find it three years later with your brush hog.)

Another tool I recommend is a camera. Photograph your acreage before you start, not only as a historical record but as a great boost to morale when, after a year or two, you may be astonished to see the visible progress of your labors.

I’m not kidding when I talk about historical record. You should log all activities daily in a datebook, year after year, and eventually make notes about harvest figures, weather, and anything affecting the farm. It will be of great help in planning seasonal activities and rationing out your most important asset: time. Also, find out as much as you can about the previous activities on your land—setbacks and triumphs, what worked and what didn’t. The previous owner told me he tried everything from poultry to potatoes, and his most profitable venture turned out to be rabbits. His father before him tried sheep, cows, and wood-cutting and never made a go of anything, remaining a subsistence farmer. Forget about a folkay New England family farm: The land was bought on contract from a man who specialized in seeing families go broke, then keeping both their payments and the land. This was common practice until surprisingly recent times and was often broken only by having family members toil off the farm. Knowing this background serves as a cautionary tale: Small-scale farming is no pursuit for dilettantes.

Get to know every square foot of your property intimately before you do anything major or make...
any big decisions. Think of what would go best where in terms of sun, drainage, predation, and ease of access. If you don’t want to rush decisions—the master scheme will fall in place eventually—I suggest working on clearing the most marginal, dubious part of the acreage. Instead, I took some of my most prime land and planted and fenced in vegetables there, only to figure out later that that was where the heart of my orchard should be.

Take all advice with a grain of salt. That’s because no one else faces the same problems you do. Farming is very, very localized. You have your own little climate, your own little ecosystem (or two or three). You will in very short order be the world’s leading expert on your piece of property. That’s not to say that Web sites and small-farming guides aren’t useful. Better yet are cooperative extension agents and the like who agree to visit your land and give advice. Workshops are good, too—as much for what you pick up informally shooting the breeze as for formal instruction.

First, I cleared around the house, expanding what was little more than a horse-chewed clearing into a lawn and ringing it with about one-quarter mile of stonewall—thinner than it was in one-quarter of it underground to mitigate frost mischief. New England’s reputation for growing fine rocks is well-founded. I got back in the kind shape I had been 20 years earlier working construction. The stone-walls turned out to be a great idea, although they only really look good if the grass below them is hand trimmed—nothing else I’ve tried works. For one thing, the walls turn into garter snake conduits in the warm months, which keeps the mice population down and thus keeps apple trees alive, among other benefits. Also, they make great borders for strips of berries that can then be easily picked and thinned. Or you can just pile the rocks like the old New Englanders often did later. Later, they can be used to line ditches, protect culverts, and insulate raised beds from both temperature and weeds. Waste not, want not.

This even goes for another byproduct of clearing: brush piles, which quickly can become house-sized. At first, I made the mistake of just locating them where it was most convenient, figuring I’d get around to burning them in due time. Trouble is, big brush piles don’t burn that easily, especially when there’s snow on the ground, which is the only time often either wise or legal to burn them without a special permit. Nor do they dissolve into the landscape after a few years, especially hardwood slash. On the plus side, they make fine trellises for berries, and a long-term supply of kindling, and they discourage sun-blocking growth (although some trees will make it through, and good luck trying to reach them anytime soon.) Also, wildlife love them, which may or may not be desirable. So take great care locating brush piles. I used them to visually screen off two neighbors houses, then screened the piles off in turn with a line of quick-growing white pine. Other piles I hid in low spots behind contours.

For two winters, I worked on the barn, from roof to floor, although, unlike the land, the barn had been in fairly good shape to begin with—just minor repairs and major cleaning, since the previous owner had dabbled in rabbits, chickens, and turkeys, sometimes while drunk, judging from the turkey tracks inscribed in the cement floor like a poor man’s Hollywood Celebrity Sidewalk.

While I worked, I thought. Despite its reputation to the contrary among some people, farming is very much a thinking person’s pursuit. Actually, thinking through every task, big or small, comes naturally when the work is belt-tightening hard. Not only does your body demand that your brain figure out all shortcuts but also that each task, if possible, serve more than one purpose.

This intensity of effort brings up an essential matter. Other than your own mindset, there is only one thing that will dash all your dreams of farming: a serious accident. Do not work with dangerous equipment—for me, the chainsaw and the tractor—when you’re tired or up against a deadline. Do it first thing, when you’re fresh and alert. If you have a close call, stop. Analyze what went down—hard to believe how you just did something so stupid. Brain fade comes from being too tired or too hurried and overconfident. Never do anything with dangerous equipment if you cannot visualize what will happen next—where the tree will fall, what will the tractor do if the boulder shifts in the bucket as you go over a bump. And what will you do if your best guess is wrong? Have an escape plan in mind. If you’re too tired or too busy to go through this thought process, well, there’s always some harmless task that you can do instead.

Make no mistake, though, a tractor with loader and brushhog is a wonderful tool if you can afford one. It is capable of many, many jobs and will eventually save your back. But it is a tool best used sparingly, especially in the spring, because it leaves big footprints that will soon make your place look like a tank battlefield. And it can’t be hurried without mishap. If you need a field cleared of boulders and stumps, I highly recommend hiring an excavator with a capable operator. For less than $400, I had a pastured cleared and leveled—and the makings of a superb stonewall—in one morning. It would have taken weeks with the tractor, and even then, some of the boulders could not have been removed.

But even if you can’t afford to hire an excavator, let alone buy a tractor, you can achieve much with muscles, willpower, and a little know-how on the use of levers and gravity. Let nothing stop you.

Mowing and brush-hogging is best done slowly and carefully—note where I’m looking and note where the bucket is positioned as an early warning system against stumps and rocks hidden in the grass or brush. This is a fairly well-chewed pasture—brushier areas you can’t go too slowly, and it’s often best to go in reverse. It’s the old story: any job worth doing is worth doing right.
Fallon to Keynote (continued from page 1)

and policy, appropriate technology, food and family, international agriculture, land care, of the spirit and practical skills. Presenters will receive registration and 1 meal per workshop plus a $25 stipend and tip reimbursement of actual travel costs. On site workshops with animals and practical skills/hands on workshops are particularly popular among conference attendees. If you are interested in doing a teen workshop let Julie know.

We have reshuffled our conference jobs a bit and happily welcome the following to the committee as Education Coordinator. We also are welcoming Tricia Cooper on the committee as Fair Coordinator.

We still are in need of a Teen Conference Coordinator. So here’s the scoop: NOFA Summer conference seeks Teen Coordinator. Job responsibilities include:

- Working with a teen on a special project during the conference
- Facilitating a teen workshop
- Organizing and coordinating a teen workshop

The NOFA Adult Conference continues to monitor USDA, testifying that the NOP must have an Organic Integrity Review Panel and ask the USDA to issue the NOP a Peer Review Panel.

The NOP staff is resisting appointing a Peer Review Panel to make its process transparent. At the same time, USDA will have to open a docket for public comment. I urge all TNF readers to be generous in the quantity and volume of comments you submit to the NOP on their performance so far.

To keep the organic label meaningful, the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture Organic Committee continues to monitor USDA, testing and supporting USDA’s peer review panel. USDA must control the legal definition of organic agriculture. Millions of farmers and gardeners all around the world define organic by their values, practices and life styles. The long-term goal of the Organic Committee is to put standards development and accreditation back in the hands of a democratically run movement. This legal petition would take the philosophy of organic agriculture one step further.

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That is the beautiful thing about being human, but that has been set forth for us, Nature will not blink to see us evolve. But if we are to destroy the bounty that has been fertile to allow us to flourish and reach this point in Nature has set forth for us an environment rich and best; that Mother Nature always comes out in the end. It is a concern for the processes put forth by nature, health and well being of the planet as a whole system. It is a much grander vision that includes the lives. It is not just about eating the right foods that organic is a way of life. It is a way of thinking, of living. A brother recently asked me, “what is organic?” Well, organic is a way of life. It is a way of thinking, of being, that considers all actions and their reactions before making a choice as to how we will enact our lives. It is not just about eating the right foods that will be the best for our bodies or our health. It is not just a concern for any one aspect of the planet’s health. It is a much grander vision that includes the health and well being of the planet as a whole system. It is a concern for the processes put forth by nature, and it is a respect for the fact that Mother Nature knows best; that Mother Nature always comes out in the end. Nature has set forth for us an environment rich and fertile to allow us to flourish and reach this point in evolution. But if we are to destroy the bounty that has been set forth for us, Nature will not blink to see us pass along on her surface. We have been given choice. That is the beautiful thing about being human, but that is what makes how we live our lives so crucial to how we will realize our future and the future of our children. Current practices in political policy and industrial agriculture are solidifying a future for our children that includes a scarcity of open land, a lack of understanding of where their entire sustenance comes from, a separation from the earth, the reality of rampant disease and over-medication to combat it, and mass extinctions of species which ensure our system works the way it was intended. As organic farmers, we are concerned with systems. Systems learned from the passage of time and the usage of resources that occur naturally. Conventional agriculture is mostly concerned with plants. Organic agriculture is 100% concerned with soil. Soil is the basis for all life on this planet, and the sun is the energy that feeds it. Organic agriculture feeds the soil, which in turn feeds the plant. Synthetic fertilizers are immediately available to be absorbed by plant roots, but they also are immediately available to be leached out of the soil into the sub-soil, out of the reach of the plants roots, making further inputs of these poisonous chemicals a necessity in order to achieve the productivity threshold they are looking for. Organic farmers have the same threshold, but our way of achieving it is, we feel, more aligned with how Mother Nature intended. In my environmental education classes in Africa, we discussed whether or not synthetic chemicals shows up in the fruit of plants. The answer is simply seen in the reaction of the plant to the chemical. When Miracle Grow is applied to a plant, it grows faster and it produces big fruit fast. Is the chemical then not present in this fruit? And incidentally, the warning label on Miracle Grow does not suggest that the product be consumed. In conclusion, the point I’m trying to get across is that of reverence. Reverence for the Earth. Reverence for the inhabitants of the Earth. Reverence for our children and ourselves. Reverence for life as it occurs over that which we simulate in laboratories. Copies are very rarely, if ever, as good as the original, and in this case, it is a matter of life that makes the difference. I ask you just to consider and be aware of your footprint on the world knowing that your children will have none but yours to live into. What would you have for them?

by Camilla Roberts

Strategic Planning For NOFA: Include Your Voice!

Recently all seven state chapters of the Northeast Organic Farming Association Interstate Council agreed that it is time to undertake a strategic planning process. NOFA’s original vision of a sustainable food system has succeeded in widely popularizing—and commercializing—organic agriculture. Now that the federal government has created national rules that standardize all regional certification, the role of the original state chapters is at a watershed.

We ask ourselves “What next?” This crossroads moment can be liberating of NOFA’s energy, or it can draw us into a morass of confused purpose. How appropriate is either the letter or the spirit of our original vision today? The NOFA Interstate Council is initiating a process with an experienced facilitator to update and refocus NOFA’s vision and develop ideas to channel the wisdom and passion of local people and organizations.

To launch this visioning process we are hereby inviting members to let us know about your vision, priorities, and the actions that are needed for the next chapter of NOFA history (before it is written!) We are asking you to help assess our present focus of activities, emerging issues, and what we need to look at in the next 5 years or longer. The survey responses will help the facilitator to develop the process right from the beginning, to help the representatives from the seven state chapters keep the full picture in mind.

The planning process will culminate in a two-day workshop in February 2003. During that time, representatives from all seven state chapters as stakeholders will review the past, re-examine our mission and structure, assess threats and opportunities, and develop a focused work plan. Because the seven states are widespread, this process is costly, and we are actively seeking funds and grants to support the project. If you are in a position to help, I hope you will do so by sending a donation to the address below.

Contact me, Camilla Roberts, with questions or suggestions at camilla@sover.net or phone 802 457-1531. Please be part of this growth process! Either email your response to me or cut out the survey section, answer the questions and mail to:

Camilla Roberts
1215 RT 11
Woodstock VT 05091

MEMBER SURVEY FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

From the NOFA statement of purpose:

The purposes for which the corporation is to be formed are: To educate its membership and the public about the benefits of natural, organic, ecological agriculture, including the implications relating to the health of all life on earth; to provide marketing and agricultural buying services for growers; to provide educational and informational services pertaining to the natural husbandry of the earth that is permanent, renewable, and sustainable; to promote the growth of local, cooperative farm organizations which emphasize ecologically sustainable agricultural principles; to demonstrate through pilot projects the feasibility and benefits of restoring local and regional agriculture.

1. What would be the highlights of an ideal Northeast farm/food scene 5 years from now?

2. What are the major blocks and hurdles facing us in the farming/food realm
   a. In the next two years?
   b. In three to five years?

3. What 3 issues are of the highest priority for NOFA as a collective voice?

4. What would you expect a Council of the combined NOFA chapters to do that the state NOFA cannot?

What other comments do you want to contribute to a Strategic Planning process?

__________________________
(name)
__________________________
(phone #)

Include Your Voice!

by Camilla Roberts

Winter, 2002-03
The Natural Farmer

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Reverence for the Future

by Nathan McFall – Assistant Director Natick Community Organic Farm

Organic Food: Is it Organic? What’s in it? Do I want to eat it? Do I want it to be organic? What industry does it support? Is it sustainable? There are a thousand questions that can go into a purchase these days as we weigh all the different options, choices, costs, benefits and everything else there is to consider. But I wonder how many people who support us and our movement to...
Organic Agriculture and Human and Ecological Values

A Report from the 2002 Congress of IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements)

by Kimberly Stoner
CT Agricultural Experiment Station

I went for the first time to this international meeting in order to present the work of the Organic Land Care committee and to see how organic agriculture fits into the worldwide picture of food, land care, and sustainable society. I was not disappointed. Organic agriculture moves forward through the work of a truly worldwide community of organizations and movements. It is not merely a luxury that only the wealthy nations of the world can afford. Indeed, for the cash-poor farmers of the rest of the world (even more than for the cash-poor farmers of the U.S.), avoiding the trap of purchased inputs (synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically engineered seeds) through an organic approach is essential to economic survival. One example of this came from the Philippines. Here organic rice production was compared to conventional production and to a low-input intermediate alternative. In both regions of the Philippines studied, the organic system required less capital and was more profitable, as well as using less fossil fuel energy per ton of rice produced - in one region because the organic rice plants were sturdier and did not lodge, so the harvested yield was higher. The increased profit level here, even though the organic yield was slightly (7%) lower, the cost of production was still 23% lower per ton.

While moving farmers away from expensive synthetic inputs can be a worthy goal in itself, a diversity of speakers from around the world yearned for organic agriculture to strive for more. The social values they hope for organic agriculture to strive for include social diversity, social and local responsibility, social justice, social sustainability, and social accountability. In the actual General Assembly, where decisions are for these values. The advocates of organic farming for rural development outside the corporate trading system. The city of Bona has recognized the importance of IFOAM by granting it 25 years of free rent, worth $1 million, on a new headquarters.

The day before the Congress, Michael Sligh, Richard Mandelbaum and I convened a meeting on social justice in organic agriculture. For three years, we have been working on a document that says social justice would mean for farmers, farmworkers, indigenous people, and children on farms. In Victoria, we expected 19 people to attend. To our surprise, 51 people from 40 countries came.

There are certainly some examples of farms that are technically organic, but do not embrace some of these other values. Factory chicken farms that provide a tiny amount of access to land for huge numbers of chickens can be certified organic under the U.S., as can farms in the dryland of Washington that convert large areas of the endangered wildlife habitat of sagebrush steppe to irrigated farmland. A French scientist studying certain farms in Europe found that as they specialized in grain, they minimized crop rotation and diversification, increased purchased inputs of organic fertilizers and manures, and converted large areas of the lovely city of Victoria, British Columbia. But, I would be interested to know how the principles of the Congress were implemented in the business of the General Assembly.
IFOAM Farmers’ Group

IFOAM structure allows groups of members with similar concerns, such as trade, seeds or farming, to form special groups. Internationally, farmers have an even harder time getting organized than on the local level, where it is hard enough. After a day-long discussion about how to increase farmers’ voices within IFOAM, a steering committee formed. Since I had sneaked off to the beach, the others volunteered to represent me. The group set guidelines on the creation of a new IFOAM Farmers’ Group to facilitate discussions of a series of issues: agricultural policy, certification and standards, education and training, funding, gender sensitization, land and livelihoods, production and processing, seeds and breeds, and trade and markets. If you would like to participate in one of these international discussion groups, please let me know and I will put you in touch with the convener.

The General Assembly

Delegates from 196 of the 750 member organizations attended the IFOAM General Assembly in Victoria to establish policy, vote on certification standards and elect a new World Board. During the two or three years between General Assembly meetings, the World Board governs the organization and oversees the paid staff, which has grown from one to four people. This General Assembly lasted three days to allow time for a visioning process. The two previous Presidents, Herve La Prairie and Linda Ballard, handed the gavel to current President Gunnar Rundgren with the admonishment, “Listen to farmers and listen to women.” After greetings from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Union of Conservationists, and Slow Food, groups with which IFOAM is working closely, much of the assembled group met up with reports from IFOAM staff, committees, and working groups. Executive Director Bernward Geier put together another of his ad hoc groups and named it a “motion bazaar” to articulate the issues that organic farmers face whether they live in the US or in developing countries.

The Public Seed Initiative—2002 update

by Michael Glos

The Public Seed Initiative (PSI) is a 3-year USDA funded collaborative project working with growers to strengthen our regional seed supply. With the reduction in the number of large seed companies, the creation of new regional seed companies, and an ever-growing demand for organic seed, the time is ripe for farmers to learn more about seed production.

On January 24th, 2003 there will be an all day seed production workshop in Albany, NY. This is one of the pre-conference workshops being held in conjunction with NOFA-NY annual winter conference held January 25th-26th. Come learn about Seed Production in the Northeast. In addition to updates on several seed projects in the area, participants will hear from seed growers, small seed companies and researchers on some of the many aspects of seed production. Topics covered will include an overview of our regional seed supply, growing high quality organic seed, the economics of seed production, and regulations affecting seed production. We will also discuss next year’s opportunities for involvement. Check our webpage for a detailed agenda at www.nofany.org.

This year, organic growers from New York and Pennsylvania trialed new unreleased cucumber varieties developed by public breeders at Cornell University. Although these varieties had been evaluated on conventional fields at Cornell they had never been grown under organic conditions. The goal was to determine whether these varieties performed well under organic management and whether organic growers liked them. Over 40 organic growers performed unreplicated trials on their farms and there were 9 replicated trials on organic farms across New York State. Results from all the trials are currently being collected and analyzed. Look for our results at the NOFA-NY conference in January.

The Mobile Seed Processing Unit (MSPU) housed at the USDA-ARS Plant Genetic Resources Unit in Geneva, NY is up and running. It consists of an enclosed trailer full of small-scale seed cleaning equipment—both manual and motor-driven. This includes a clipper cleaner, belt thrasher, wet vegetable seed processor, column blower, velvet roller, and more. The unit travels the state for half-day workshops and then is left at a farm for a week for farmers in the area to clean their seed. Many people have had a chance to see the equipment and clean their own seed. Workshops and demonstrations have been done across the region including Empire Farm Days (Seneca Falls, NY), the NOFA summer conference in Massachusetts, the MOFGA Common Ground Fair in Maine, and Molasses Hill Farm in Nunda, NY. A full day hands-on workshop was just held in Geneva where participants learned about seed cleaning and were able to run their own seed through the equipment. There was also a tour of the New York State Seed Testing Laboratory. On-Farm workshops and seed cleanings will continue this fall and for the next two years.

Cornell’s Public breeding program, Organic research farm, and specialty crop trials were highlighted in September during the PSI Field Day held at Cornell’s Plant Breeding Department of Horticulture Research Farms. The morning tour included Professor Anu Rajan’s heirloom tomato variety trials (over 50) and specialty crops ranging from ornamental basil and bitter melon to nine varieties of Radicchio. Professor Margaret Smith showed Open pollinated Field corn plots and described her SARE funded project being done on farms across the state. Professor Molly Jahn and colleagues showed demonstration plots of new Cornell varieties being grown along side standard comparisons. In the afternoon there was a tour of the breeding research plots for tomatoes, melons, cucumber, and squash. Researchers explained how they were breeding new varieties for many characteristics including disease resistance, size, and taste. Look for workshops in the spring dedicated to on-farm vegetable breeding.

Check the NOFA-NY website (www.nofany.org) for additional information and a schedule of events. We are looking for growers to trial varieties and farms to host the mobile seed-cleaning unit for the 2003 season. Contact Michael Glos (michaelglos@nofany.org or (607) 657-2860) of NOFA-NY if you have any questions.

The Public Seed Initiative (PSI) is a joint project of NOFA-NY, Cornell University, Farmers Cooperative Genome Project, and USDA-ARS Plant Genetics Resource Unit (Geneva, NY). Funding for PSI is provided in part by a grant from the USDA Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems.
The book starts with the importance of mind-set, of thinking about where the opportunities and sinkholes are. Pastured animal products (broilers, eggs, beef, dairy products) market gardens, bakeries, store foods, custom sawmills and U-pick small fruit are among the latter. Frugality, integrity, liking people, and energy are right at the top of Joel’s list of qualities necessary for success in farming.

The bulk of the book is the consideration of key components of a farm and how to manage them. He devotes a chapter each to grass, soil, water, the seasons, labor, and biodiversity. For those who are convinced by his advocacy of animal products, he has chapters on livestock sanitation and mobility. For the business minded, there are chapters on accounting, filing, cost control, complementary enterprises, and pricing.

This is no formula book to follow by the numbers. In fact Joel says that such an approach is inherently doomed to fail. By the time any farming venture has been reduced to the point where it is easy to get in and follow the rules, so many people are doing it that all the profit has gone out. As he puts it succinctly, “...as soon as you see the item addressed in a USDA publication, you’re too late.”

And if you are into farming because you want to get away from people, Joel’s not the mentor for you. Almost all his approaches require direct marketing and other people handling skills. But he believes that there is such a demand for honest, clean, local food and farm products that anyone can produce such products and sell them at a profit if serious enough.

As with all books, Joel glosses over a few hard realities. His number one farm venture – broiler production on pasture – makes it sound bucolic. But in reality the numbers he is suggesting condemn the farm family to hours every week in an on-farm poultry slaughter facility. This is not everyone’s idea of a good time and should be dealt with honestly.

And he makes mistakes. In a comparison intended to show the profitability of animal products compared to fresh vegetables he says that if the average customer spends $600 per year on fresh vegetables you would need 500 of them to gross $30,000 (and says his farm can gross that amount on fewer than 100 animal protein customers.) Fine, except the real number of vegetable customers needed to gross $30,000 is 50, not 500, which kind of destroys his point!

Despite occasional errors, however, Salatin has put together a full and deep repository of wisdom about developing a vision and a philosophy which will work. He’s one of practical boot-strapping: do it now, use what you can, and then you can acquire that magic ‘thing’. Farming is not a ‘thing’. It is a life, and a business...Chances are if you have no desire to grow anything now, you probably never will. You can grow something, even if it is a plant in a window box.”

Basiclly, if you are not already starting out in farming, however small or part-time, Joel is skeptical if you ever will succeed at it. His basic premise is that the crucial thing needed in farming is experience. There are lots of ways of using other people’s land, getting free seed, borrowing equipment, etc. What you can’t really get in any second-hand way is experience. If you can go along with Joel on this basic approach, you will probably get a lot out of “You Can Farm”. You have the right mind-set.

The book starts with the importance of mind-set, of developing a vision and a philosophy which will guide your approach to farming. Joel’s is one of practical boot-strappping: do it now, use what you already have, good enough is fine, reusing something going on a small scale that works, and add to it. He tells plenty of humorous stories to make these points, and he gives wise (from my point of view) advice about where the opportunities and sinkholes of farming are. Pastured animal products (broilers, eggs, beef, dairy products) market gardens, bakeries, custom sawmills and U-pick small fruit are among the former. Breeding stock, exotic plants and animals, horses and pet livestock, confinement animal systems and monoculture crop systems are among the latter. Frugality, integrity, liking people, and energy are right at the top of Joel’s list of qualities necessary for success in farming.
The situation in our region is different in that one suspects most of the land Greg sees is not as overgrown with brush and has less of a forest canopy. Here in many cases, for the first couple of years, cattle would eat the stuff at worst, not doing much. In concert with the landowner, trees would have to be harvested to let in sun. Depending on the state of the land some timber might have a return, but things like immature pine and paper birches would not be of any value and if they have to be removed, might incur too much in costs to be worth it. A lessee would have to emphasize the Timber Stand Improvement (TSI) aspects of Mr. Judy’s thesis. Of course, such a service should lessen the cost of the lease.

His chapter on winter grazing is the one most of us northeasterners might have some trouble with. Greg grazes cattle through the cold months without housing. Where he lives the temperature range is from -20°F to 40°F, averaging in the mid 20’s. Snowfall is anywhere from 10 to 30 inches, snowfall staying as much as thirty days, but sometimes only a week. I asked the author how he got away without putting the stock inside and he replied, “My farms are in rolling hills and most have access to cedar trees for shelter. The last place you want cattle in my area is inside a shelter. Keep that manure out on the pasture where it belongs.” For the few cows I have, I’ve always considered the morning chore of cleaning up the cowpats the least stressful part of the day and less unpalatable. In cold weather cows eat through the bales and leave a lot of manure on them, thus adding to the fertility of the land. They are then moved to another spot and the same thing is done. Most of the winter there is enough grass due to his method of stockpiling that, with a lower stocking rate, keeps the cows going and ready for the compensatory growth come springtime.

His sober tome goes over the top only once. On page 83 he writes, “There is nothing wrong with drinking a cold beer, but 12 hours everyday of your life, I think is excessive.” Really now. I must, however aver that there might have something to do with my failure to be named a Rhodes Scholar as well as the obscene gains of brewery shares during my so-called undergraduate career.

Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America
by Steven Stoll
published by Hill & Wang, 19 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003
287 pages, hardback, $30.00
reviewed by Jack Kittredge
This is a narrowly focused scholarly work by a history professor at Yale, not a general dissertation on 19th century agricultural practices and their influence on our culture. But that said, it does develop a very interesting point. The author’s contention is that some 50 years after the founding of the US, eastern seaboard soils had been farmed to exhaustion. The crisis was widely recognized and two schools of thought emerged as to the proper solution — schools which framed the foundations of American conservationist debate.

The “improvers” stood for rebuilding the soil (largely with carefully collected and managed manures) and developed plant and animal combinations toward this end. They tended to be the more affluent farmers, ones with market crops and proximity to urban areas, often supporting tariffs and national developments like canals, and opposing squatter. They were offended at the title yeoman and often answered to the name of “Whig”.

The “emigrators” felt that remaining on worn out soil was folly when free lands to the west could be had, covered with timber and rich with the fertility from centuries of self-manuring by trees. These farmers were more self-sufficient, wore homespun rather than manufactured cloth, bartered for what they couldn’t make or raise, and were more likely to support Democrats.

The debate did not take place in a vacuum, of course. It took place in a virgin continent, vastly underpopulated and with seemingly infinite resources of land. The same debate had taken place in Europe, where these realities were stood on their head – cheap labor and dear land — and the improvers had won. They enclosed their commons and created manors geared to maintaining fertility and serving the market.

But in the US the improvers ultimately lost. Despite the agricultural journals which they created and labored lovingly to sustain – journals like the Albany Cultivator, the American Farmer, the Farmers’ Register, the Southern Agriculturalist, Niles’ Register and De Bow’s Review (ed: we like to think The Natural Farmer would have been on the list!) – not enough people saw the economic benefits of caring so devotedly for a place.

This debate transcended the growing divide about slavery. There were plantation owners who picked up lock, stock, barrel, and slaves to move to new land in Mississippi or Texas, just as New Hampshire farmers boarded up the door and left for Illinois. Stoll particularly studies Pennsylvania and South Carolina, finding in both places the emigrators and the improvers.

The improvers, as is the case with most folks attached to losing causes, felt they had a moral mission. Not just to return to the soil what had been robbed from it in the few short years of human exploitation, but to build a society content with what could be gathered by reasonable means from nature. No less a luminary than James Madison, father of our constitution and fourth president, retired Jimmy Carter-like with a lot of energy and became a spokesperson for sustainable agriculture. In an 1818 address he strikes some tellingly modern points.

1)”Any system…or want of system, which tends to make a rich farm poor, or does not tend to make a poor farm rich, can only be good… The profit, where there is any, will not balance the loss of intrinsic value sustained by the land.
2)”…ploughing up and down hilly land has, by exposing the loosened soil to be carried off by rains, hastened more than anything else the waste of fertility.
3)”The neglect of manures is another error…the annual exuvae of the trees and plants replace the fertility of which they deprive the earth.”

The improvers, by staying where they were and working locally, also hoped to stave off the impending great conflict about slavery. As any college history student knows, the Civil War was unleashed less by where slavery existed as by where folks wanted or didn’t want it to become established. Various battles in Congress during the 40 years preceding that conflagration centered around the issue of western expansion and whether those states would be slave or free.

The price of western lands, the vigor with which federal troops expelled Native Americans from areas which would ultimately be opened up to settlement, the speed with which new lands became available before older open ones had been settled — all these became contentious political battles. Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton attacked the Foot Resolution, sponsored by Connecticut’s Samuel Foot to limit western land sales, as a “measure for supplying the poor people which the manufactories need. It proposes to take away the inducement to emigration. It takes all of the fresh lands out of market. It…annihilates the very object of attractions – breaks and destroys the [magnet] which was drawing the people of the Northeast to the blooming regions of the West.”

On the other hand, South Carolina Representative George McDuffie put the case opposing emigration well. He saw: “Deserted villages, houses falling into ruin, impoverished lands thrown out of cultivation. I believe of the public lands had never been sold, the aggregate amount of the national wealth would have been greater at this moment.”

There is much to be pondered in Larding the Lean Earth, not just about our past and how we got here, but also about where we are going. We ran out of free land over a century ago (exhausting the “infinite” west in three or four generations) but the debate is as valid now as then. We have, perhaps, replaced the unsustainable place of free land with that of cheap petroleum in the economies of modern day farming. But how we value nature and care for our various places in it is still the central question.
Biotechnology: The Risks to Small Farmers and Gardeners

by Peter Shorette

Every day, millions of people visit nurseries, garden stores, and farm supply outlets to buy seeds for the upcoming growing season. The selection on the shelves offers a wide variety of options for every quality—color, texture, and growth performance. As a result, we as gardeners and small farmers may feel assured that we know what to choose from. But a lot gets left out of package labels. For all of us, it may be worth asking: where do our seeds come from and how were they cultivated?

This is a question that most have not had to ask before. Seed saving has been the hallmark of our nation’s agrarian heritage. Up until the turn of the 20th century, most farmers and gardeners secured annual supplies of seeds through either self-conservation or seed reserves provided by the federal government. Today, much of our seed is produced by a multi-billion dollar global industry, controlled in large part by six multinational corporations—Monsanto, Seminis, Aventis, Dupont, Syngenta, and Dow.

All of these companies share a similar goal for the future: the commercialization of agricultural markets through uniform, high-yield genetically engineered (GE) crops. While this has become the dominant trend in some sectors of industrial agriculture, such changes in the composition of food and plant supplies have only begun to reach gardeners and small farmers.

This is in part because biotech companies are wary of putting their products before a skeptical public. The track record of test-marketing tells its own story. The Flavr-Savr tomato, which Calgene introduced to supermarkets in 1994, was eventually determined to be “substantially equivalent” to non-genetically engineered food. Its safety has been based almost exclusively on acute toxicity experiments.

The primary institution that claims to regulate genetically engineered food and plants—the FDA—has not gone far enough in testing the long-term safety of these products for human consumption. For the majority of GE foods, they have not conducted clinical trials of any sort. An FDA ruling in 1992 determined that genetically engineered foods were “substantially equivalent” to non-genetically engineered foods. Thus, they do not fit within the currently defined powers of the FDA to regulate food additives.

Basic monitoring has also been inadequate. In some cases, GMOs have been released into the environment without any prior approval. It took vigorous inquiries through the Freedom of Information Act for the Center for Food Safety to discover that GM canola seeds had entered the US seed supply without any government oversight.

Nevertheless, biotech seeds have quietly begun to enter into the $63 billion seed industry. A number of backyard plant varieties have entered the latest stages of field trials by biotechnology companies. Two years ago, Monsanto released the Russet Burbank potato, first GE variety targeted at gardening consumers. This variety contains an inserted gene called Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) which produces a pest-controlling soil bacterium.

Bringing these products into your backyard and dinner table could have unforeseen consequences. Genetically modified foods have been shown to cause allergic reactions, as gene transfer often allows allergens to pass from one species to another. Normally, individuals with food sensitivities can steer clear of allergenic risks by reading product labels. But with GE foods, there are no labels of any kind, much less ones that identify the origin of the new genes and proteins.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that genetically engineered crops are more nutritious or better tasting. One of the only peer-reviewed nutritional studies on this topic, conducted on Roundup Ready soybeans, indicated a 12 to 16 percent decline in plant-based phytosterogens, a compound that helps combat a number of diseases and degenerative health conditions. Neither have long-term animal feeding studies been conducted to show the effects of consuming genetically engineered food. Its safety has been based almost exclusively on acute toxicity experiments.

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The truth is, with so little information available, we do not and cannot know the nutritional and ecological effects of GE foods.

With all of the continuing uncertainties about human and environmental safety, it may be wise to think twice before planting genetically engineered seeds in our backyard gardens and farms. Luckily, a movement has developed within the seed industry to meet the growing consumer demand for biotech-free options. Over 100 seed companies, in conjunction with the Council for Responsible Genetics, have vowed to not knowingly buy or sell genetically engineered products. This pledge is available in a number of catalogues, and will soon appear in commercial seed inventories. For more information or to join the Safe Seed Project, visit the Council for Responsible Genetics website www.gene-watch.org or send a self-addressed envelope to: Council for Responsible Genetics, Safe Seed Project, 5 Upland Road, Suite 3, Cambridge, MA 02140.

The Safe Seed Pledge

Agriculture and seeds provide the basis upon which our lives depend. We must protect this foundation as a safe and genetically stable source for future generations. For the benefit of all farmers, gardeners and consumers who want an alternative, we pledge that we do not and cannot buy or sell genetically engineered seeds or plants. The mechanical transfer of genetic material outside of natural reproductive methods and between genera, families or kingdoms, poses great biological risks as well as economic, political, and cultural threats. We feel that genetically engineered varieties have been insufficiently tested prior to public release. More research and testing is necessary to further assess the potential risks of genetically engineered seeds. Further, we wish to support agricultural progress that leads to healthier soils, genetically diverse agricultural ecosystems, and ultimately healthy people and communities.

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Hector Tejada, a native of the Dominican Republic and now a new farmer in Central New York, inspects his heirloom tomatoes. These are what enable him to do well in New York City’s Greenmarket each week. News, features, & articles about organic growing in the Northeast, plus a Special Supplement on

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