

Community Farms Outreach Newsletter

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

240 Beaver Street, Waltham, MA 02452 • 781-899-2403 • www.communityfarms.org



Winter 2006

Prime Farmland

by *Amanda Cather, Farm Manager*

“[Prime farmland is] land that is best suited to and available for the production of food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops. It can be cropland, pastureland, rangeland, forestland, or other land. It has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture needed to produce high yields of crops each year economically, if managed according to acceptable farm practices. Prime farmland produces the highest yields with minimal expenditure of energy and economic resources and does so with the least damage to the environment. Of the 334 million acres of prime farmland, 216 million are in cropland use, according to the 1992 national resources inventory.”

— <http://www.agriculturedictionary.com>

The work that we do at Community Farms Outreach is deeply engaging and exciting for those of us who are fortunate enough to take part in it on a day-to-day basis. The connections that we create between people, land, and food through our education programs, hunger relief partnerships, and community-supported agriculture project during the farming season are incredibly rich. They are forged in real time through hard labor, good conversation, flashes of insight and slow-growing awareness. These connections persist into the winter months in the form of relationships among people, partnerships between organizations, and, most essentially, our deepening communal bond with the land that we work at Waltham Fields Community Farm.

Community Farms Outreach is fundamentally an agricultural organization. Learning from the land is what we do. The land is the foundation and the starting point for all of our other activities. It is the stage, the classroom, the container for all of the experiences and relationships that are the intangible products of our work. It is the source that brings forth the tangible—that is, edible—harvest each season. Its enduring health is, as farmer-poet Wendell Berry reminds us, one real product of our year’s labor.

Still, I don’t find myself in a position to talk or think very much about our farmland during the busy season, when our work is actively playing itself out against its backdrop. Or maybe I’ve misspoken: I don’t find myself in a position to talk or think about very much other than our farmland during that season, so much so that I often

don’t have the perspective or energy to reflect upon it—a sad case of not being able to see the soil for the dirt.

When the harvest season ends, and the winds that sweep our fields every November clear away everything but the fundamentals, the land comes sharply back into focus for me. I look forward to taking a break from the knotty problems of crop planning in the office to walk around the fields on a quiet day and note the growth of the cover crops, the cracks and heaves in the soil where it’s frozen and thawed, the progressive decomposition of last year’s crops. The activity of meadow voles, hawks, and the few insects that are left in the fields draws my eye to field edges and hedgerows. The passage of migrating geese and the arrival of nuthatches, cardinals and bluejays, as surely as the slanting light, signal the nearness of winter. I enjoy experiencing the land when nothing on it needs my attention. In some ways, this is the time of year when I pay it the closest heed.

I also take some time during the off-season to further my own knowledge about soil fertility management, to take seriously Berry’s task of ‘making the world a better piece of ground.’ It was during this process this fall that I learned a fact that shouldn’t have surprised me: all of the soil types in our fields are classified as prime farmland, the best possible agricultural soils, by the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

At a workshop on vegetable growing at a conference I attended recently, a farmer described the rocky, thread-bare land on which she was growing her crops. She said that she could not grow beets on her farm at all without first screening each section of soil that she planned to use to clear out all the rocks. The moderator, a very experienced farmer, gazed sympathetically at the speaker and then turned to the rest of us. “When you get ready to buy your own farmland,” she said very seriously, “don’t buy that farmland.”

By contrast, the farmland that we are fortunate to have here at the Waltham Field Station and the Lyman Estate—Haven silt loam, Scio very fine sandy loam, and Sudbury fine sandy loam, all with minimal slopes—are glacial soils that are as good as it gets for agriculture in New England. They are soils which were created over geological time with a combination of pH, moisture, temperature range, erodibility, permeability, soil rooting depth and rock fragment content that provides the best possible substrate for growing crops in this region. This is farmland that, if you were fortunate enough to be looking to buy it in the

continued on page 3

Community Farms Outreach 2006 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Board@communityfarms.org

Martha Creedon (Waltham)
President

Judy Fallows (Watertown)
Vice President

Kathy Diamond (Watertown)
Secretary

Matthew Grygorcewicz (Somerville)
Treasurer

Gretta Anderson (Arlington)

Liz Fuller, (Waltham)

Ellen L. Gray (Waltham)

Mairead McSweeney-Shutt (Waltham)

Chris Yoder (Dover)

STAFF

Amanda Cather
Farm Manager



newsletter@communityfarms.org

Community Farms Outreach, Inc.

Our mission is to promote, support, and manage community farms and farms in the community. Community farms are farms that are charitable and educational: growing produce for soup kitchens, shelters, and food pantries, educating children and adults about how and where their food is grown, and generally to preserve the open space and beauty of farms.

Community Farms Outreach, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable corporation.



Excerpts from the CFO 2005 Annual Report

Ten Years of Sustainable Agriculture at Waltham Fields Community Farm

In 1995 Oakes Plimpton and a group of inspired supporters leased four acres of land to start Waltham Fields Community Farm. With a rototiller and tractor and plow borrowed from a local farmer, they reclaimed fallow land and planted vegetables on it. The farm was entirely run by volunteers whose goals were to preserve urban farmland and grow food for donation to emergency food programs.

In 2005, Waltham Fields Community Farm includes seven acres of land at the UMass Field Station and three acres at the Lyman Estate. It is managed by Community Farms Outreach (CFO), a nonprofit organization that seeks to promote and support local farms, provide fresh and nutritious food to low-income individuals, and teach adults and children about sustainable food production. During the past ten years, Waltham Fields Community Farm has donated over 150,000 pounds of produce to hunger relief agencies in the region.

STRATEGIC PLANNING INITIATIVE

CFO is committed to serving the needs of our communities. Our communities are diverse: children, adults, and future farmers eager to learn about how food is grown; low-income individuals unable to access fresh, healthy produce; neighbors who love the open space and beauty of a working farm. In 2005, the Board of Directors and staff of CFO undertook a strategic planning initiative to help us build the organizational capacity to carry out our mission.

The culmination of phase one of the strategic planning initiative was clarity and consensus of purpose among those responsible for carrying out CFO's mission. Moving into our second decade, we have articulated our vision, laid claim to our values and declared our intentions.

We envision communities in which sustainable agriculture plays a central role in creating universal access to the food and beauty of local farms.

The heart of our mission continues to be the promotion of local agriculture, universal access to locally grown food, and the reestablishment of relationships between land, healthy food, farming and community. In the next three to five years CFO will pursue these broad strategic directions:

- Growing and distributing fresh local food
- Creating access to locally grown food for people of varying economic means
- Reconnecting the community to land, food, and farming
- Demonstrating and promoting sustainable farming practices
- Supporting the preservation of local farms
- Promoting local farmland for food production and for community enjoyment.

FARMLAND PRESERVATION

The 2005 farming season was challenging and productive at Waltham Fields Community Farm. This season, we focused on refining and improving our basic programs in preparation for growth and change following the completion of strategic planning. Capital improvements purchased this season included a tractor-mounted seeder and transplanter. Our CSA grew to 250 shareholders in 2005.

In 2005, we grew vegetables, herbs, and flowers on eight of our nine and a half available acres of land. Our total harvest (excluding flowers and perennial herbs) was valued at \$152,000, or \$19,000 per acre. Our 250 regular CSA shareholders, ten work shares, and seven farm staff and interns received twenty weekly shares. The value of these shares was \$127,333, making the average retail value of a CSA share from Waltham Fields Community Farm \$509.00 in 2005. The total value of produce harvested for hunger relief was \$25,000 as of November 7.

HUNGER RELIEF

In 2005 we continued our efforts to tailor our hunger relief donations to the specific needs of our partner organizations. We provided produce on a regular basis to emergency food programs at the Waltham Salvation Army, the Red Cross in Waltham, and Sandra's Lodge, a local shelter for homeless women and children operated by the Middlesex Human Services Agency. In addition, we donated on a weekly basis to Food for Free in Cambridge and the Greater Boston Food Bank in downtown Boston.

In addition to continuing our work with our hunger relief partner agencies in 2005, CFO connected with a new agency in our community. We partnered with the newly opened Joseph M. Smith Community Health Center in Waltham to provide the equivalent of ten CSA shares on a weekly basis throughout the season to low-income women who were enrolled in the Massachusetts Women's Health Network and received care at the Health Center. This program, which was a great success, will form the basis for an 'organizational share' approach to produce donation in 2006.

EDUCATION

The 2005 season was a tremendous opportunity for us to practice and refine our organization's goal of sustainably linking education with meaningful agricultural work. Because we are a working farm, each group that visits Waltham Fields must engage in productive work in order to justify the staff time that we spend on education. We believe that even the youngest visitors can make a contribution to the work of our farm, and conversely, that even the most hard-working volunteer experience should include an educational component In 2005 we refined our educational offerings based on our experiences last season to ensure that every group that visited the farm had a service-learning experience with us: an educational encounter against the backdrop of a meaningful contribution to the work of the farm. We were particularly successful in our work with several local school groups, who visited the farm on multiple occasions this season, soaking up food and farming know-how while contributing to our production work.

The full 2005 Annual Report is available on the CFO web site: www.communityfarms.org

immediate Boston area, you would jump at the chance to purchase.

Working outside on a couple of nice days later that week, I did some thinking about this. Organically managed soils, most sustainable farming thinking goes, are living systems that are built—or allowed to grow—over years of wise management, not simply a soil type that you are lucky enough to inherit or purchase. Striving to create this kind of well-managed soil system encourages a mindset of sustaining and strengthening what is already present, producing crops almost as an afterthought. From this perspective, our prime farmland is a foundational gift, like an endowment. Our job as land stewards is to accept this gift with the appropriate humility and begin to build it, to live off the interest, so to speak, in the form of the tangible and intangible harvests that our land produces. We aim to build up organic matter and soil life, to enhance moisture holding capacity, to effectively manage weed seed banks, insect pests and disease organisms. We endeavor to build soil that is generous with its nutrients, resilient in times of drought or saturation, forgiving of our occasional missteps. Our long-term goal is to preserve this farmland as healthy, productive farmland, so that all of this work, both geological and organic, will not be lost to others to learn from as we have.

The American Farmland Trust, a highly regarded organization whose mission is to preserve the best farmland in the country, recently completed a study entitled *Farming on the Edge*. This major study describes the threat that unchecked development poses to farmland, illustrated with maps that clearly show—in vivid red—the geographical areas where high-quality farmland and high development pressures are in greatest tension. Looking at the Massachusetts map, I realized that our area of the state was illustrated in gray – as an urban area where the best farmland has already given way to development, where the battle has already been lost.

Of course, our little pieces of prime farmland are very much not lost to development, despite the intense pressures in our region and, more immediately, in our city. We are, however, very definitely 'farming on the edge,' with our fields backed up to neighbors' yards, busy city streets, and baseball diamonds. We are farming within walking distance of tens of thousands of neighbors, within a quick drive or bike ride of many more thousands. Hundreds of these people take advantage of the opportunity to connect with this land each year, with its seasons and stages, with the unending processes of renewal and decay that we try to shepherd here from season to season. Even as we work to sustain it, we are banking on the richness and generosity of this land to draw people in, to provoke and answer their questions, to feed their bellies and their minds alike. As is so often the case, an 'edge' represents an opportunity as well as a boundary. Our prime farmland is growing more than just crops.

Volunteer Spotlight: Annaliese Franz

by Helene Newberg

Volunteer Coordinator Annaliese Franz moved to the area four years ago, from California, and quickly became surrounded by friends who belonged to the Waltham Fields CSA. When not working on farm business, she does lab research and teaches Organic Chemistry as a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University.

What other kinds of volunteer activities have you done?

Although I have been involved with various volunteer activities in college and grad school (especially educational and environmental), I have never been as consistently committed and involved as I am with the farm. I guess in this case, I don't really feel like I am involved as a "volunteer," but rather I feel like I am doing this as a member of a community. I am sharing my passion and excitement about my farm community by helping coordinate other groups to also share and experience the farm. Or, when I work in the fields, I am meeting other farm members or volunteers, and learning more about the members of my community.

What do you do when you're not on the farm?

I am very passionate about my research and science. My research focus is on organic chemistry, with applications to understanding disease biology. I think this makes me more respectful of nature, and a strong proponent of local, organic farming. Most of my time is work/research-

related (even on weekends) since it is a very rigorous field, but my farm involvement is one of my only consistent alternate activities.

What have you liked best of your farm involvement?

I like being involved with different activities, and meeting different people, but my most favorite thing is to actually be in the fields, doing anything where I am interacting directly with the soil and plants. But since I don't have as much time as I would like to devote to fieldwork, I was interested when Gretta mentioned the volunteer coordination position. I was excited about a way that I could help out that would be flexible for my schedule, for example responding to emails at odd hours.

What's your advice for someone who wants to get involved with the farm?

There are many different activities and ways to help—pick an activity that suits your interests as well as your schedule. Don't worry if you can't help on a consistent schedule. Even if you don't think you have enough time, there are still ways you can help, and every little bit can add up to make a big difference. It is great to become involved with your friends and/or family, but you will also meet many fascinating and amazing people that you will learn from and share much in common with. The community spirit and interactions are what make the experience so rewarding.

What's your favorite crop?

I have two favorites: sungold cherry tomatoes and fennel. I think both are intoxicating! 🍅



Annual Appeal Appreciation

Our 2005 Annual Appeal has been a wonderful success. Over 80 households and organizations helped us celebrate ten years of sustainable agriculture by generously responding to our Annual Appeal. As of December 1 more than \$8,700 had been raised. These donations provide essential support to our farmland preservation, hunger relief and educational efforts. We offer our heartfelt thanks to all who supported Community Farms Outreach in 2005.

For information on becoming a 2006 CSA shareholder, see our website,

www.communityfarms.org

and click on **CSA**.

SAVE THE DATES!

Two Spring Events to Benefit CFO!

Family Fling,

Sunday, April 9, 10:00 AM–Noon

....a daytime family fund raiser for the youngest farm lovers and their adults! Children can plant seeds for this year's crops and create beautiful farm and garden signs. They'll have fun while they play a key role in important community outreach efforts.

Spring Fling & Silent Auction,

Saturday, May 6, 7:00–10:00 pm

.... an evening benefit geared toward the adult farm lovers among us. Expect lively music, tasty food and a Silent Auction like none you've seen before!

Go to www.communityfarms.org for more information and to find out how you can get involved in these fun events.