

## Special Focus - Land Access

### My Back Yard, Equity Concerns, and Land Grant Truth-Telling

By Charles Geisler

I live on land in upstate New York awarded to Revolutionary War veteran, Izaac Doty, for his military service. I also live on traditional homelands of the Gayogohónq' (the Cayuga Nation), a member of the Iroquois Confederacy that predated the Revolution. I purchased my land with income from Cornell University, a Land Grant institution. I tend to think I own this parcel free and clear, yet it is laden with equity issues and moral contingencies that require further truth-telling.

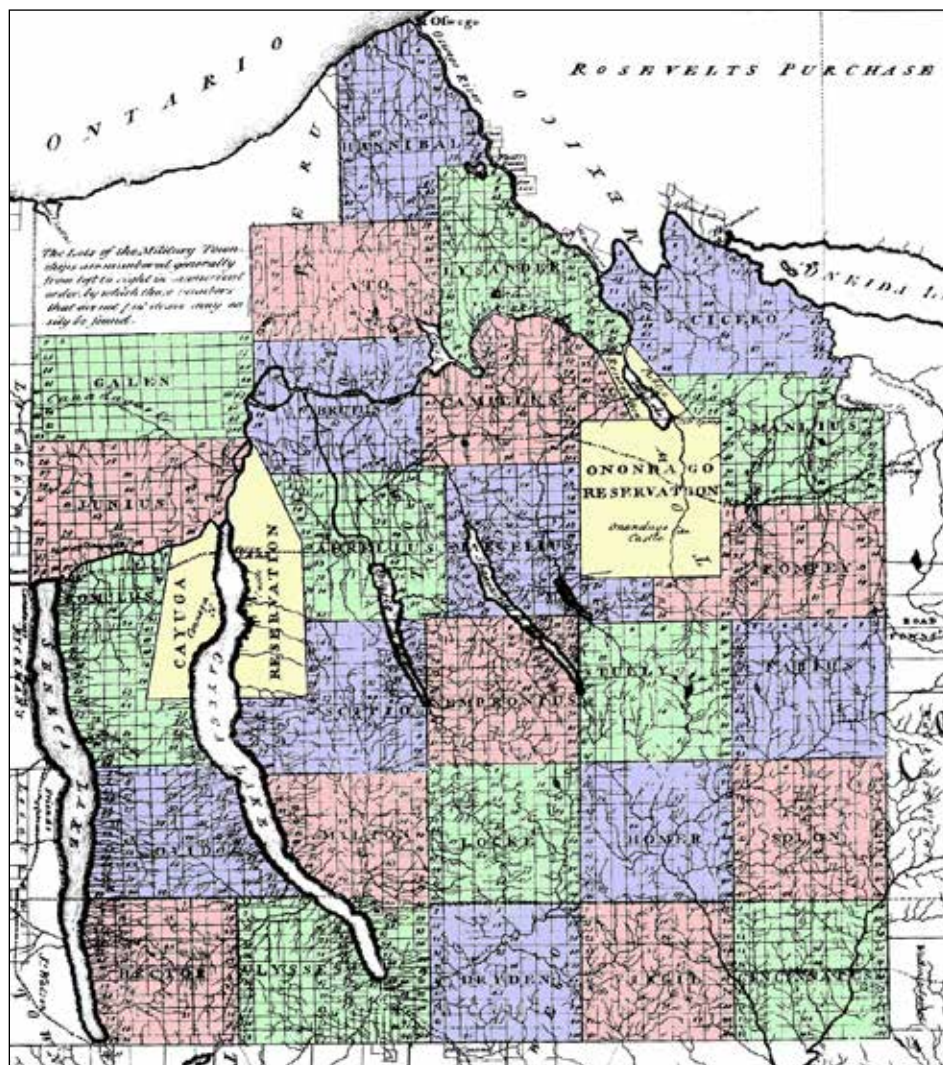
Not infrequently, our land belongs to us because our ancestors claimed territories belonging to its Indigenous inhabitants. In pursuit of profit, power, and dominion, Europeans annexed what they found. In dispossessing others they thought uncivilized, most of our settler forebearers believed that they were doing the right thing. But were they?

In this piece, I'll comb through the deeply vexing side of land ownership as we practice it. Not many generations ago, Indigenous people partook in a robust spiritual tenure with all quarters of this continent and strong possessory ties of their own making. A lifequake occurred when European culture met theirs. We gradually took their territories and used law, religion, military brawn, and sustained conceit to turn justice into a juggernaut. I will summarize, all too briefly, the settler occupation that unfolded piecemeal across the United States. This will include recent reporting about Cornell University and its sister Land Grant Universities, accused of complicity in a government land grab extending to almost eleven million acres of Indigenous homelands.

#### Pulverizing Indigenous Lands

The original British colonies sought and gained independence from the motherland in 1783. Thereafter, they mimicked in many ways what had been Royal Charters, land grants, treaties, Euro-centric notions of property and 'discovery' as justifications for usurping 'vacant' land incidentally occupied by Indigenous people. Despite occasional dissenters like Roger Williams, who founded the colony of Providence in what became Rhode Island and acknowledged full Native entitlement, such land was endlessly coveted by new waves of immigrants. According to Cornell historian Jon Parmenter, in the process of civilizing and pacifying new dominions between 1776 to 1900, the United States purchased, appropriated, or conquered approximately two million square miles of Indigenous land, or two square miles per hour throughout this period.

Land hunger and land speculation were constant artifacts of settler expansion. Speculators included presidents, generals, members of Congress, Supreme Court justices, and Quakers. When Indians were strong in numbers and powerful early in the 19th Century, treaties minimized warfare. Between 1778 and 1871, Congress authored 360 treaties, often on its terms. Treaties were, as stated in the Constitution, "the Supreme Law of the Land." But as Indians were weakened and displaced by betrayals and forced removals, treaties were disregarded,



Map of Central New York Military Tract compiled by Simon DeWitt in 1792 or 1793. Source: commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=876328.

illegally altered, or, so glaringly in the case of California, never ratified by Congress despite the good-faith compliance by Indians. As the tables turned numerically in favor of the settler society, treaties were renegotiated under terms unfavorable to Native peoples and, even then, breached time and again. Meanwhile, Supreme Court decisions hollowed out the meaning of Indian sovereignty and further diluted Indian negotiating status.

Well before the Homestead Act of 1862 transferred so-called public land from Indian to non-Indian denizens, the Continental Congress and its sequel used endless bounty warrants to recruit settler-soldiers to its military causes with the lure of 'free land.' Some military warrants, like that on my parcel, were allocated on traditional Indian lands in the east. Others were designated in the then 'Northwest Territory,' Kansas, Louisiana, and beyond. Veterans from the Revolution and the War of 1812 were granted 8,000,000 acres in the Northwest Territory alone, often billed falsely as fertile farmland.

These military land grants, in tandem with the Land Acts of 1785 and 1787, spelled doom for Native inhabitants. The 1785 law established the Federal Land Survey so that land could be sectioned and divided, while the latter established rules for future statehood. Its Article 3 humbly stated: "The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the

Indians; their land and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity, shall from time to time be made for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them." Indian distrust over land encroachments spawned a decade of warfare led by Little Turtle. Ultimately, General Anthony Wayne met and defeated Little Turtle in the Battle of Fallen Timbers, resulting in the Treaty of Greenville, Indian pacification, treaty-making, and land cessions.

The Civil War period, famous for its north-south strife, included tragic east-west bloodshed for Indians. The Homestead Act of 1862 transferred 270 million acres of Native homeland to non-native settlers and speculators, though it hardly ended land speculation. Large acquisitions occurred after its passage. William Chapman alone bought over 1 million acres in California and Nevada; Henry Sage and John McGraw, benefactors of Cornell University, entered 352,000 acres of timberland in the Midwest and the South; Francis Palms and Frederick E. Driggs bought nearly half a million acres of Wisconsin and Michigan timberland; and, as Cornell historian Paul Gates meticulously documented, an era of speculator feeding frenzy overcame Wisconsin.

After the Civil War, Manifest Destiny grew more militant and anti-Indian sentiment mushroomed. Former Union troops strung forts across the west and marched Indians to reservations. By 1871, treaty-making unilaterally ended along with treaty pretenses. Henceforward, no tribe would be recognized as an independent nation, obviating the need for new treaties (existing treaties were left in place, along with their loopholes and abuses). Lands granted to Indians were now subject to Congressional whim and that of lobbyists committed to remaking western lands.

Alas, Indian land loss was far from over. In the 1880s, reservation lands were subjected to aggres

Alas, Indian land loss was far from over. In the 1880s, reservation lands were subjected to aggres

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## Seeds and Their Stories: A Beet Story

*A plant-person companionship through research, recovery, and reimagining*

By Solveig Hanson

This started as an article about beets. During my doctoral research in plant breeding and genetics, over the course of five years, I led a participatory breeding project, during which I co-selected five flavor-identified beet cultivars with farmers, chefs, and consumers in the Madison, Wisconsin area. The project started with questions about geosmin, the substance that confers earthy aroma to beets, and it ended (satisfyingly) with some answers and a new set of more complex questions. Two of the beet varieties – and the questions embodied therein – are now being offered by Fruition Seeds, in Naples, NY.

Stories are inherently shaped by authors, even as authors are shaped by the events that compose their stories. So I'm going to start with the conditions under which beets and I found one another, and then describe the way we shaped one another. Beets helped me sharpen my questions, pay closer attention, measure in meaningful ways, and also relax into the complexity of growth. Beets were with me as I learned to take up space; simultaneously, I helped these particular beets to find a space in seed packets, gardens, kitchens, and mouths.

So, going back in time for a bit: Beets were my companion as soon as I started graduate school in 2015. I'd come to the University of Wisconsin from a product management position in the seed industry, before which I'd been a vegetable grower in Iowa. As a farmer, seed seemed wondrous; I was smitten with the hope and classification schemes of seed catalogs, and I loved that on my farm, seed varieties had both personalities and jobs. On my farm and later, as part of the seed industry, seed was something I'd experienced as supplied by seed companies, then bought, observed, and transformed into food on farms. Even as a product manager evaluating the performance of varieties, I didn't know much about the transformations that had brought about the seed itself. I came to grad school to find out, and hopefully to share what I learned.

The beets that prompted this story grabbed my attention because they had been bred with flavor in mind. Specifically, these beets had been selected to be either very high or very low in geosmin, the simple twelve-carbon molecule that gives soil its distinctive earthy aroma. It's long been known that beets have an earthy character; some people call them "dirt candy" while others say they just taste like dirt. Of the flavor components identified in beet, earthiness is the one that people most often dislike, so my doctoral advisor, Dr. Irwin Goldman, had wondered: If we bred a beet with less geosmin, would more people like it? And more deeply: Do beets contain geosmin because they grow in the soil, and perhaps associate with the soil microbes that are known to produce geosmin? Or do beets produce their own geosmin? Either way, can we dial geosmin up or down in beets?

When I came to the beet project, (now Dr.) Lynn Maher had uncovered some of these answers. For both high and low geosmin populations, she had carried out recurrent selection over three years. Each year, she selected the beets highest (or lowest) in geosmin and intermated them to make a new population. Sure enough, geosmin in beet was heritable, and that meant we could manipulate geosmin to create beet flavor profiles that people hadn't experienced before. Cool! And even better, these populations were unfolding into beautiful arrays of color, as Lynn's only selection criterion had been geosmin concentration. So I set out to ask: Will people like beets with very high or very low geosmin? Will they associate geosmin with earthiness, or with 'signature beet flavor'? And finally: Is geosmin the characteristic that determines how much people like beets?

I decided to use a participatory plant breeding ap-

proach since it would allow us to select the beets in their target environment (organic farms in Wisconsin) using farmer input, and then engage chefs and consumers in tasting throughout the selection process. I used two participatory models, one of which involved farmers, chefs, and consumers through the UW-Madison Seed to Kitchen Collaborative, and the other of which was centered on the farmers, staff, and CSA members of Tipi Produce in Evansville, Wisconsin. These approaches make good sense, in terms of creating regionally adapted and marketable varieties, and they also make space for creativity, person-to-person learning, and (don't tell) fun!

So I started the beet project curious and motivated... and also just starting to recover from a restrictive eating disorder that had accompanied me for most of my adult life. Food, obviously, had been at the center of my work growing vegetables, but in the midst of trying to do a lot of things right – grow vibrant, nutrient-dense food using organic methods, provide it to our local, largely rural community at affordable prices, and build authentic connections with customers – I had lost sight of my own need for nourishment. My body had become a performance art piece for the transcendence I was trying to achieve, a case study in my efforts to do more with less. When I met my beets, I was just starting to allow myself to rebuild strength, respond to hunger, embrace my needfulness, and indulge a bit.

And the beets fed me. Literally, of course, as I took home bags of 'eaters' from our research plots, but also in that they provided tangible evidence of iterative choice, consequence, and learning through time. For the first two cycles of selection, I eliminated beet families doing poorly in the field, and then I composed 'beet groups' for chefs and farm staff to taste. After they narrowed the choices to two high geosmin groups and two low geosmin groups, consumers got to choose a favorite for each geosmin class. After two cycles of selection, we'd come up with two white-rooted beets, two zoned (concentric striped) beets, and one red beet (or so we thought, take a peek at Evansville Ember's vivid diversity!), each with defined levels of geosmin. Once the beets' preferred appearances were set, we carried out two more breeding cycles, selecting only for horticultural traits, and we focused on characterizing the beets' flavor.



*Colorful diversity of the organic Ember Beets.*  
Source: Fruition Seeds.

After four seasons, the beets had changed the way they took up space. The original populations had varied in color, disease resistance, propensity to crack, ranginess or tightness of top attachment, skin smoothness, taproot taper, and more. During the course of selection, they had become varieties with defined color characteristics and much less variability in the other traits that farmers had prioritized. The beets had defined levels of geosmin, but two years of taste testing taught us that people didn't prefer high geosmin or low geosmin beets. They also didn't associate geosmin with earthy flavor or signature beet flavor. What people did like were sweet, non-bitter beets. Sometimes they liked beets they perceived as earthy, but those weren't always the ones higher in geosmin. So, we had an answer: No, geosmin is not the flavor component around which beet liking is organized.

But in answering this question, the beets prompted us to ask many more. For instance, people liked the appearance of pigmented beets much more than white beets...but after tasting them, they liked the

white beets (one of which would become Blushing Not Bashful) as much or more than the colored ones. This invites questions about the role of expectation in flavor perception and liking. If people expect little flavor – as is often the case with foods low in color – could the surprise of intense flavor make white beets even more pleasing? Both of this project's white beet varieties were selected by chefs – people who craft both food and expectations around food – and I suspect that their intuition was at work here. So does breeding for flavor have as much to do with manipulating appearance as flavor compounds?



*Organic Blushing Beet Bundle.*  
Source: Fruition Seeds

As I became better fed – by literal beets, by the (at times excessive) feast of ideas and information that graduate school offers, and by the relationships I formed over my beet-centric years – I started to take up space differently too. I realized that my undernourishment had been an effort to feel self-efficacy during very difficult life circumstances, but it was also an effort to shake off the excess privilege I could feel but not name. I felt overfed just by showing up as a white, upper-middle-class, educated person in America, and in an effort to reject my privilege, I rejected having what I needed.

During the time when my official work was selecting beets, learning statistics, and designing taste test experiments, my heart-work was learning how to inhabit my whole, real self. My work was learning how to stand in myself as a settler on the land I loved, as someone with an over-big footprint (due to my skin color, the choices of my ancestors, and dumb luck) but who still has needs, wants, and a whole entire body and soul to fill up while I can. I learned that I have to embrace all of the parts of myself, not because I like all of them but because they all need love. And I learned that authentic complexity is way more satisfying than attempted transcendence.

For me and my beets, the answer is that things are more complicated, more nuanced, and more delicious than binary responses will allow. The answer is that we're still changing; the Evansville Ember didn't stay red! The answer is, of course, to live into more questions, like: How can I inhabit my space well? How can I think about the body, home, or land I call 'mine' in terms of belonging rather than (or in addition to) ownership? What plants will I help to put on the land? What farming systems will they support? What imagination will they support? What relationships will they support?

It's my honor to invite you into these beets' stories. They are brilliant co-authors; I wish you delicious and courageous tales.

*Solveig Hanson is now a postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC, where she co-manages the Canadian Organic Vegetable Improvement (CANOVI) program in collaboration with the Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security. Solveig is presently co-writing with radicchio, rutabaga, carrot, and a wonderful team of humans; she can be reached at solveig.hanson@ubc.ca.*



## Planting Roots at Providence Farm Collective

By Kyle Semmel

### Life in Refugee Camps

Although Abdullah “Abdi” Sundi’s family had farmed in Somalia for years, Abdi never learned how. In 1991, when he was just a boy, a bloody civil war broke out in his homeland. As a member of the Somali Bantu people, an ethnic group descended from Bantu tribes in Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania who were enslaved and brought to Somalia, Abdi and his family were considered second-class citizens. During the war, Somali Bantus were systematically stripped of their land and forced to make a dangerous trek across the border to Kenya to live in crowded refugee camps. What followed was an exodus of people tramping the barren, dusty landscape in the scorching heat, some for hundreds of miles; many succumbed en route, compelling mothers and fathers, sons and daughters to leave their loved ones behind. It’s the kind of life event that leaves lasting and irreparable scars.

In the camps, instead of practicing the traditional farming methods that had sustained them for generations, Abdi and his family had to rely on donations of food from the United Nations World Food Programme. The camps offered no opportunity to grow the types of delicious staple crops they were accustomed to, such as African maize, a nutrient-rich variety of corn that is hardier than its American cousin.

Abdi and his family lived at Dadaab Refugee Camp on the flat, windswept border of Somalia and Kenya. Their stay at Dadaab was supposed to be temporary, but it turned out to last more than a decade, when they were moved to another refugee camp—Kakuma in northern Kenya. While living in leaky, makeshift huts with iron sheets for roofs, he discovered how difficult life in camps can be with minimal medical aid, little water, no electricity, and no firewood to cook the all-too meager supply of food supplied by the United Nations Refugee Agency. To this day, the UN’s World Food Programme warns that more than 400,000 refugees still living in Kenya’s refugee camps face chronic food shortages.

Like many of his generation, Abdi’s formative years were spent in these tough conditions. Since the Kenyan government does not allow refugees to leave the camps to settle in Kenya, camps have become de facto prisons for people who have committed no crimes. Refugees are able to find work doing odd jobs, but it’s a hardscrabble life. The only solution is to find a way out.

When the United States named the Somali Bantus a priority group for resettlement in 1999, it paved the way for people like Abdi and his family to come to America to start a new life.

### A New Beginning

When Abdi arrived in Buffalo in August of 2004, he couldn’t speak English and had little formal education. But he possessed something that had been missing in his life—hope for a better future. He was soon joined in Buffalo by other members of the Somali Bantu community, including, in December of that year his mother, Mageney Mukoma.

For Mageney, the hardest part about moving to Western New York was the weather. Imagine you’re a woman who’d spent her entire life in a dry, sun-baked region of Africa who suddenly finds herself in Buffalo—in December—as a heavy lake effect storm buries the city in piles of



Abdi and his family, along with Mo’s son Ibrahim (tugging on shirt). Credit: Brendan Bannon

cold snow.

Before she’d been forced into refugee camps with her family during the Somali civil war, like nearly all Somali Bantus, Mageney had been a farmer. She could leave her house and pluck fresh, tasty vegetables from her own garden and eat them on the spot. She grew African maize, cabbages, green peppers, kale, onions, and other crops to feed her seven children. In Buffalo, however, she lived in small apartments with no place to grow anything. This is a common refrain for nearly all of the approximately 50,000 Somali Bantus scattered in cities throughout the United States: lack of farmland. But in Buffalo, all that began to change in 2017 when the community banded together with a singular vision.

### A Farm Takes Root

2017 was the year, more than a decade after many of Buffalo’s Somali Bantu community arrived, that a number of individuals within the community led a grassroots effort to get back to their farming roots. Since then, that movement has grown to encompass refugees from multiple nations as well as members



Hawa Makumbira and her youngest child, Fatuma, at the farm. Credit: Brendan Bannon

of the Black community, and it has spawned Providence Farm Collective (PFC), the only non-profit farm offering education and secure, long-term land tenure to immigrant, refugee, and Black farmers in Western New York.

Two of the nearly two dozen Somali Bantu voices in the grassroots effort are Mahamud “Mo” Mberwa and his wife, Hawa Mukumbira. They arrived in Buffalo in 2006 with two young children after spending the previous fourteen years at refugee camps in Kenya. Though they were grateful to be in the United States, they had no access to land and were reliant on the fruits and vegetables that were trucked to local grocery stores, often from a great distance. Like Abdi and many others, Mo had no experience farming due to his time in the camps, but that didn’t stop him—and the others—from envisioning a place where Somali Bantus living in Buffalo could have access to farmland where they

could grow culturally relevant food, just as they had back home.

Mo, Hawa, and the others thus conceived of the Somali Bantu Community Farm. Designed as a pilot program, it cut straight to the heart of community needs by addressing food insecurity and farmland inequity. When local farmers stepped up and granted them the use of land in East Aurora, south of Buffalo, the pilot program took off. Soon, members of Buffalo’s Somali Bantu community—hungry for a place to grow their own food—were getting up early in the morning and, for the first time, planting and cultivating crops in Western New York’s rich soil. Such was the importance of access to food and farmland that, even as community members carpooled, as many as 20 cars were parked at the farm on any given day. (Thanks to a grant from the United Way and General Mills, a 15-person van has shuttled PFC farmers to and from Buffalo since 2018.)

The benefits Mo has seen include getting fresh vegetables and earning money to support the Somali Bantu’s after-school program. “The health benefits have also been important for our community,” Mo says, “Many of our elders work at the farm. They do not stay home but now spend time outside farming. Everyone is eating fresh vegetables that are important to our traditions.”

The venture has been so successful that, in 2020, PFC moved to a 37-acre site in Orchard Park, NY that they lease from a board member for only a dollar a year. This site has room to grow. In fact, PFC is partnering with the Western New York Land Conservancy—the largest land trust in Western New York—on a joint \$2.3 million capital campaign to “Plant the Future of Farming.” If the two organizations are able to meet their fundraising goal by the end of this year, Providence Farm Collective will purchase the farm, add needed facilities, and sustain it into the future. The Land Conservancy will place a conservation easement on the farm, protecting it forever. PFC farmers will then have a permanent location to grow their crops and raise goats and chickens.

### Expansion

Today, the vision of a self-sustaining community farm championed by a group of Somali Bantus has grown to serve Buffalo’s Black community and refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Liberia, providing food security for a wide range of Western New Yorkers and bolstering the local economy in the process.

Rosa Meh and Soe Reh were born and raised in Burma, now known as Myanmar, as members of the Karenni people—a distinct sub-group within

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sive privatization (allotment) under the Dawes Act. Private allotments were carved from reservation holdings in the name of farming and assimilation, “unallotted” lands being purchased by the government and placed in trust. Rip-tide losses of reservation lands followed. Within several decades, the Indian estate plummeted from 130,000,000 to 48,000,000 acres. The proceeds from unallotted land sales, according to plaintiffs in the landmark Cobell v. Babbitt litigation a century later, were grossly mismanaged and withheld from individual Indian trust funds by the Department of Interior, perhaps in the amount of \$150 billion. In 2010, President Obama signed legislation authorizing a \$3.4 billion government settlement for individual Indian trust fund holders and a Native Scholarship fund.

This brief account omits countless transgressions that pilfered Indian lands, often by design. The Trail of Tears, associated with the violent dislodging of the Five Civilized Tribes from the southeastern United States to Kansas and Oklahoma Territories, would be reenacted many times for Indian inhabitants and render them, in United Nation’s terminology of today, internally displaced people. But, when Indians became U.S. citizens in 1924, was their land not immune to unlawful government seizure under protections of the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution?

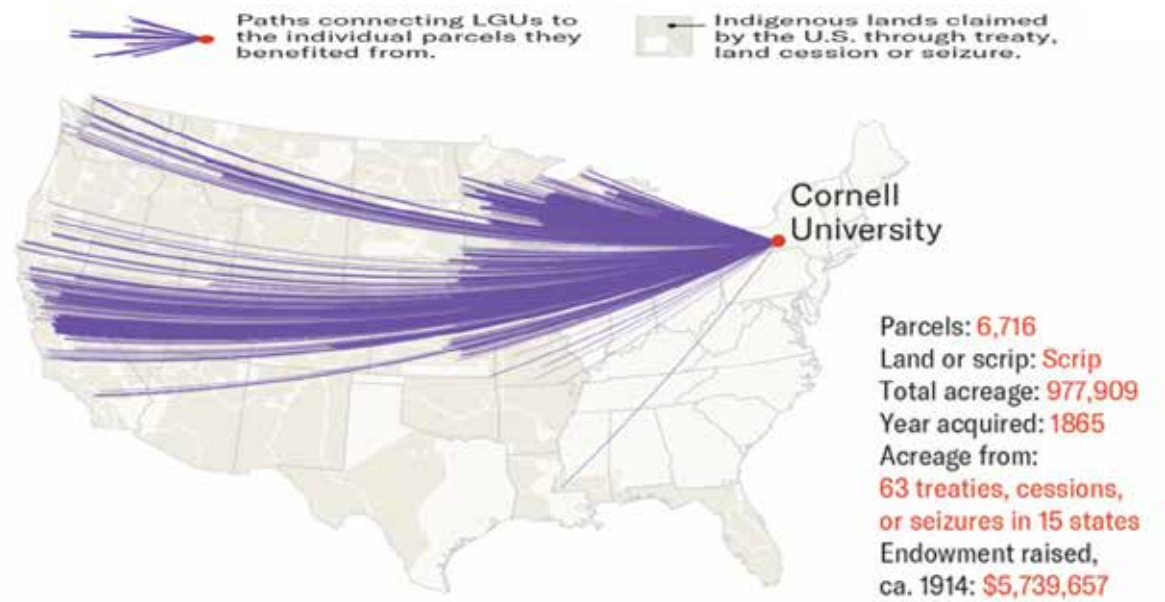
The answer, according to Indian legal scholars, is yes and no. It is true that until the mid-twentieth century, courts recognized that Indian and Alaska Native property rights were within the Constitution’s guaranteed protection of private property. But in its *Tee-Hit-Ton v. United States* decision of 1955, the Supreme Court created a new legal rule, concluding that the Constitution does not protect lands held in aboriginal title (title by actual, continuous, and exclusive use and occupancy for long durations). Those Indian and Alaska Native lands recognized in treaties, statutes, or executive orders are constitutionally protected from governmental taking. In other words, Native lands do not enjoy the blanket of protection accorded to your back yard and mine, which, as I hope has become clear, have shape-shifted from Indian hands to ours thanks to the continuing bombardment of hostile government policies.

### Land Grabs of Another Kind

According to the Morrill Act, passed in the same year as the Homestead Act, states holding federal lands could claim and then sell this land to underwrite new Land Grant colleges. New York lacked such lands and, following a federal formula, received certificates (“land scrip”) sold to parties who could acquire ‘uninhabited’ public land further west. The bearer of the scrip would invest the proceeds of land sales and generate revenues for new institutions offering instruction in agriculture, the mechanic arts, and military training. In 1863 the New York legislature, of which Ezra Cornell was now a part, moved to sell scrip totaling 989,920 acres to establish its Land Grant institution. Cornell hastened this action by donating \$500,000 to buy scrip for his namesake university along with his Ithaca farm as a potential campus site.

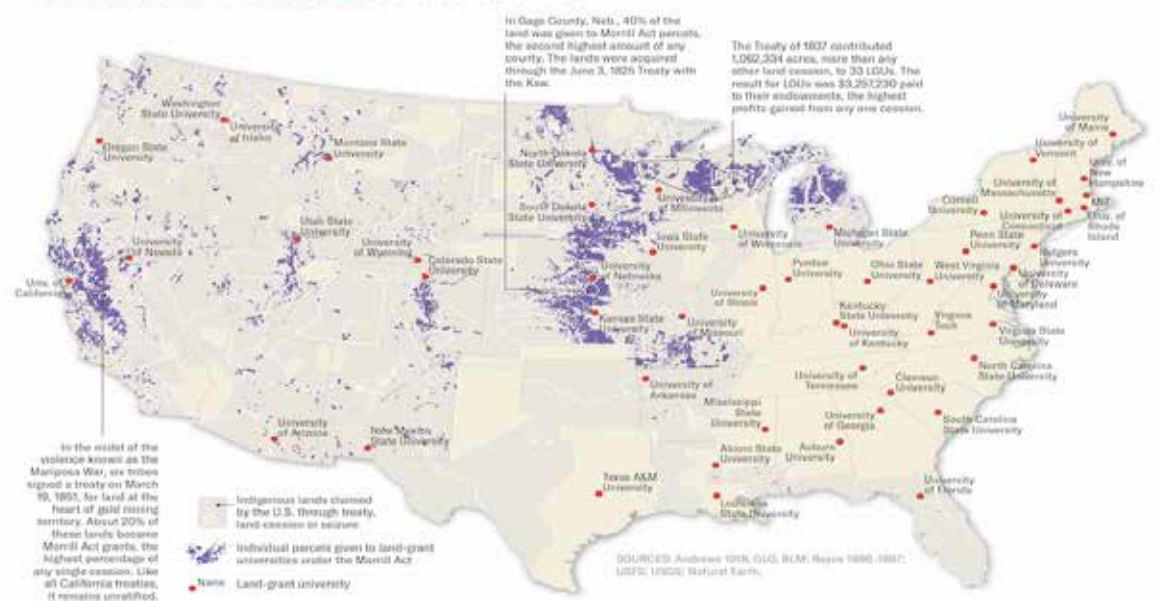
Income from the 1862 Morrill Act gave Cornell University a commanding endowment, one that surpassed those of any sister land grant university. Using his business acumen, Ezra Cornell acquired vast acreages of land deemed “public” by Washington in what would be 15 future states. By 1914 Cornell University enjoyed an estimated \$5.7 million in revenues from its land grants or approximately \$148 million today. Through Morrill legislation, Indian lands taken by the government were monetized and repurposed for redistribution to state-based post-secondary education. Cornell’s considerable endowment earnings were fulsome, bearing fruit for the Cornell community across generations and for generations yet to come.

Was this a land grab or a gift of free land from the government enabling agricultural education on a continental scale? Is a land grab limited to outright land seizure or does it include wealth wrung from such land and transferred to a third party? As the



*Cornell Received almost 1 million acres of land in the Morrill Act, more land than any other Land-Grant University. Source: Robert Lee and Tristan Athone, reprinted with permission from High Country News.*

The Morrill Act gave 79,461 parcels of Indigenous lands, totaling about 10,700,000 acres, to 52 land-grant universities (LGUs) to fund their endowments.



*Reprinted with permission from High Country News.*

High Country News authors who thoroughly investigated the matter put it, “The Morrill Act worked by turning land expropriated from tribal nations into seed money for higher education.” High-minded though their mission may have been, the Land Grant recipients of this largesse were complicit in accepting what were spoils of war, of abrogated treaties, and of fraud. Indirectly but undeniably, Indian homeland loss helped to capitalize our 1862 Land Grant institutions.

In the latter half of the 19th century, nearly 11 million acres of former Indian homeland would transfer from government hands to those of land agents and speculators anticipated by the Morrill Act. The territories were taken from 240 tribes in 24 eventual states. In 1890, more Land Grant institutions were added, these being colleges for Black Americans denied admission to the Morrill Act schools in Southern states. A century later, in 1994, another 34 Tribal colleges obtained Land Grant status. These 1890 and 1994 colleges received diminished endowments because the great American commons held by its aboriginal inhabitants was long gone.

In founding Cornell, according to Paul Gates, Ezra Cornell relied on western associates for clues to available “public lands.” Much of the Wisconsin land he purchased was former Ojibwa land, ceded under duress through treaties prior to Wisconsin statehood. These treaties were ambiguous, ignored conditions posed by the Ojibwa, offered minimal annuities, and threatened military eviction if breached. The 1837 Treaty alone yielded over a million acres of available land—cessions that went to Cornell and other budding Land Grant universities. Cornell’s land acquisitions in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota and 12 other states eventually translated into nearly one-third of the total Morrill Act Land Grant revenues.

Over time, Cornell teaching, research, and extension have fueled agriculture among the decedants of immigrants and unintentionally fallowed it for Native Americans. No pardons have been extended nor in

vestigations made, until recently, into the magnitude of this imposition. Much the same can be said of Cornell’s failure, until 2020, to acknowledge former Indian tenure of the 17,000 acres it owns within New York State. Most of these in-state lands were not acquired outright with Morrill Act scrip. Yet they could not have been acquired in the absence of the endowment and good fortune bestowed by the Morrill Act.

### Obligations and Opportunities

Cornell’s land-grant mission states that a land-grant university should be “expansive, endlessly adaptable, and always relevant.” In 2020 and again in 2021 a group of one hundred faculty and alumni wrote letters to the Cornell Administration about its Morrill Act land history, urging reconciliation with affected American Indian tribes. Hundreds of Cornell students signed a petition with their own demands, and the university’s American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program (AIISP) embarked on a faculty-led “Cornell University and Indigenous Dispossession Project.” In its initial response, the administration publicly acknowledged that its Ithaca campus is historically part of the Cayuga Nation’s homeland and averred that Cornell’s Morrill Act land grant was “accompanied by a painful history of prior dispossession of Indigenous nations’ lands by the federal government.” In terms of action, senior administrators have been cautious. Proposals for new academic programs pertaining to Indigenous studies have been devolved to individual college deans for consideration and there are nods towards better recruitment and retention of Native students.

An additional graduate student research assistantship within AIISP has been created, and there is unfinished talk with AIISP about the necessity of contacting Native communities beyond Cornell for insights into new relations and remedial actions. What might Land Grant universities do in response to the collateral damage experienced by Indigenous peoples who unwillingly forfeited ancestral home

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lands for Land Grant benefit? Government land grabs in the 19th century were problematic in the extreme and recycling these lands for non-Indian higher education is cold comfort to Indigenous people. Land Grant leaders must choose between dissimulation and dedicated engagement. In my view, an enlightened pivot is possible, and Cornell can, by owning its full history, become a platform for signature change. Beyond land acknowledgements within New York and beyond, what would this look like? Among many conceivable initiatives, I offer three that, subject to vetting by Indian stakeholders, seem well within reach of Cornell's leadership.

**Alumni/ae Engagements:** When justifying to the New York Legislature the Land Grant institution he was building, Ezra Cornell intoned the words "to do the greatest good." Those words have become the motto of Cornell's 2022 capital campaign and are now before a quarter of a million people. Beyond gift-giving, the motto could as well summon new forms of alumni/ae engagement, agency, and accomplishment.

Cornell alums are not wheel-spinners. Many are skilled at tackling great challenges. They are diverse and include a Cornell Native American Alumni Association (CNAAA) with hundreds of members of its own. Native Alumni/ae are a vault of wisdom, sensitivity, and expertise when it comes to relations with their communities. More generally, alumni/ae are Cornell's working conscience. The majority of people signing the 2020/2021 letters to the administration were alumni/ae and are the tip of a community iceberg committed to "doing the greatest good" on and off-campus.

Cornell alumni/ae sharing this commitment and wishing to uphold their alma mater's reputation for academic excellence could be a muscle of change on this front. Recent research by Donna Feir and Maggie Jones on Native enrollment and graduation rates in Land Grant versus other institutions found that Land Grants have benefitted Native students less than non-Land Grant institutions on both measures. In their words, "Many notions of justice imply that universities whose endowments were seeded by the Morrill Act lands have a greater obligation to current generations of Indigenous students whose ancestors were effectively deprived of their ability to provide opportunities for their children through the taking of their lands without fair compensation." Alums can pose needed questions of where Cornell falls on measures of Native enrollment, graduation, financial support, and racial equality.

A new avenue for such change is in view. In 2021, Cornell launched the David M. Einhorn Center for Community Engagement, dedicated to opening "new pathways for Cornellians to embrace the university's Land Grant mission to improve lives." This is a significant outreach development. The Center aspires to involve Cornell faculty, staff, students, alumni and community partners in efforts at racial justice. Under the heading of "Our team's commitment to antiracism," appear the words "We stand with those demanding the end of white supremacy and those pursuing racial justice — at Cornell, in Tompkins County and across the country. We believe that community-engaged learning can address ongoing violence against and systematic oppression of Black, Indigenous and People of Color."

**Tribal College Engagements:** Cornell students and faculty would benefit from cooperation with Tribal colleges in states where Cornell exchanged scrip for former Indian land. These 1994 Land Grant institutions improve career opportunities for Native youth through research, education, and extension programs, often focusing on food, environment, and natural resource challenges. They are tribally controlled and serve populations in underserved communities. In the spirit of Einhorn Center community engagement, Cornell could reach out and explore memoranda of understanding and exchange with Tribal Colleges in states whose public lands profited Cornell's endowment.

There are precedents. The first Morrill Land Grant University, the University of Kansas, has an M.O.U.

with Haskell Indian College in the fields of science/technology/engineering/mathematics (STEM), and provides STEM training opportunities for Haskell faculty. Michigan State University has National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) funding to do collaborative extension work with Bay Mills Community College, a Tribal College. In 2020, UW-Madison, in partnership with Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe College and the College of Menominee Nation, received NIFA funds to foster Native paths from secondary to postsecondary education and incorporate Indigenous knowledge into STEM curricula. In late 2021 NIFA invested \$7 million in an array of 1994 Land-grant colleges to enhance student recruitment and retention and do joint research on climate-smart agriculture and forestry on Tribal lands. "Other projects aim to ensure food and nutrition security and support healthy Tribal populations through improving bison herd productivity, uncovering the ways traditional plants can impact diabetes, or controlling invasive species."

The convergence of Cornell's interests and those 1994 Tribal Colleges is obvious and could take many forms. Faculty and student exchanges would be mutually beneficial. Imagine Cornell students returning from a "semester abroad" in Indian Country and enriching their classes, clubs, and fraternities with their discoveries. Imagine the growth in racial understanding across the Cornell community if Einhorn Center engagements opened revolving doors at Tribal colleges. Consider the contribution of Cornell's 80 Alumni Clubs "doing the greatest good" by teaming up with 1994 College alumni/ae on projects of mutual interest. Cornell encourages continued learning via internet classes among its alumni/ae; the same infrastructure could serve this population at both Land Grant institutions in authoring, among other things, a dedicated land curriculum—how land is colonized, distributed, owned, shared, preserved, and sustainably used.



**Law School Engagement:** The legal concerns of Native Americans, given their encounter with profound discrimination, land theft, and near genocide, are interminable. Top law schools must hire, teach, and train outstanding legal minds equipped with legal tools to resolve the unfinished business of Indian justice. Cornell's Law School should not minimize its related responsibility as a Land Grant entity nor underestimate the opportunities at hand. In 1976 the first Native students enrolled in the Law School, and a chapter of the National Native American Law Students Association (NALSA) is well established. Its Native graduates enjoy growing prominence. Among the many is Kansas Congresswoman Sharice Davids (who attended Haskell and the University of Kansas before earning her Cornell law degree).

As well, and in tandem with Yale Law School, Cornell's Law School offers a multi-year Federal Indian Law Practicum. Participating law students represent Tribes and Tribal members in cases across the country. Their source materials include treaties, congressional statutes, tribal codes, executive orders, regulations, federal case law, court decisions, and the Constitution itself. Encouraging as this is, unjust laws still prevent Indian people from recovering their homelands and related livelihoods; how

can the whittling away of Indian lands, still occurring, be stopped?

Cornell Law School must deepen its engagement with Indian law and people. It must help the larger university and its Trustees come to terms with the legalities of Land Grant origins and broadened fiduciary thinking.

And there are salient questions needing attention in a truly engaged legal curriculum. Can public land titles be defective where impropriety, disproportionate force, annexation, and deceit are clearly evident? Are land titles of Land Grant institutions, which would not exist but for the forced removal of prior inhabitants, encumbered by the terms of good-faith treaties and trust obligations? As fragile as international law is, what applications has the United States stood behind (e.g., crimes against humanity, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid) that warrant fuller consideration with respect to domestic aboriginal populations? Similarly, how might *jus bellum* (Latin for just war) doctrines be made legally relevant on Native American soil taken militarily to expedite nationhood? Equally important, what about *jus post bellum* ("justice after war") and winner responsibility to rebuild when hostilities end? The "windfalls for wipeouts" paradigm from planning law (land value capture to compensate land value lost) comes to mind as we come to terms with relevant Land Grant windfalls and Indigenous wipeouts.

Such engagements by Cornell may or may not conform to what Native people want. Their wishes are paramount. Private landowners such as myself, along with diverse public owners and non-profit groups devoted to land conservation, would do well to revisit their land titles, the entitlements they afford, and the origin stories in the shadows of both. Should vast territories be returned to Native

Americans to steward, as the distinguished painter/explorer George Catlin proposed long ago? How might non-Natives become more reliable co-trustees of the land with Native Americans? How can we best inhabit the cultural intertidal zone of those who, on so many historic occasions, showed hospitality even as we encroached on their living spaces? My back yard and perhaps yours need amending with generous applications of what Native Americans call "good mind."

*Charles Geisler, Emeritus Professor, Global Development, Cornell University, has devoted himself to research new forms of ownership in society and the conditions that generate or suppress them.*

#### Resources and Links:

High Country News Article, [www.landgrabu.org/](http://www.landgrabu.org/)

Cornell Land Dispossession Page, [blogs.cornell.edu/cornelluniversityindigenousoffense/](http://blogs.cornell.edu/cornelluniversityindigenousoffense/) Paul W. Gates, *The Wisconsin Pine Lands of Cornell University*, 1943. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.



# One Million Acres for the Future

by The Young Farmers Land Team

Young farmers and ranchers play a key role in stewarding natural resources, advocating for policy change, and supporting food security. However, access to affordable, quality farmland—the key resource that these growers need—remains deeply inequitable and out of reach for far too many. Access to land is the number one challenge facing the next generation of farmers in the U.S. Land values in the Northeast are some of the highest in the country, and land-seeking farmers in the region face increasing competition from non-farmers who purchase land as an investment or seek refuge in rural spaces due to the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Black, Indigenous, Latiné, Asian, and other farmers of color encounter many of the barriers young farmers face in accessing land more acutely, as these challenges intersect with structural racism.



2017 National Young Farmer Survey, uncovering the most pressing challenges and brightest opportunities for our nation's young farmers and ranchers. Source: [youngfarmers.org/resource/building-a-future-with-farmers-ii/](https://youngfarmers.org/resource/building-a-future-with-farmers-ii/)

Public policy—and in some cases the absence of policy—has created and upheld the inequities in our food system and must be a part of the bold, systemic change required to tackle these challenges. The 2023 Farm Bill will dictate farm policy for the next decade. This is a pivotal moment to invest in the individuals who will steward agricultural land and grow food for our communities into the future.

## Farmers need equitable access to land now

Millions of acres of farmland are on the verge of changing ownership, and young farmers are leaving agriculture because they cannot secure land. Land access was the top challenge cited in the 2017 National Young Farmer Coalition (NYFC) survey, which included input from 3,517 current, former, and aspiring U.S. farmers under 40 years of age.

Finding secure access to high-quality farmland is more complex than just negotiating a sales contract or a lease—it encompasses a web of interlocking obstacles that vary depending on your vantage point. For example, farmers in arid parts of the U.S. must navigate complex management structures to secure necessary water resources. In urban areas, farmers grapple with zoning barriers and contaminated soil.

Part of the reason finding secure access to farmland is so complex is that farmers are not simply searching for land to grow on; they are looking for land to build a life upon. Furthermore, land often changes hands without ever coming into the formal real estate market, presenting a serious challenge for young farmers in particular, many of whom didn't grow up in farming and aren't connected to networks of landowners.

Generational wealth-building and inter-family land transfer presents yet another challenge for land-seeking farmers. In 2014, the USDA predicted nearly 91.5 million acres would change hands in the next five years, but only a relatively small percentage was expected to be sold to non-relatives. With 75 percent of young farmers not coming from farm families, this represents a significant disadvantage.

An additional factor underpinning the challenge of land access is land loss. According to the American Farmland Trust (AFT), farmland is lost at a rate of

2,000 acres per day. The land that is paved over and turned into housing developments is disproportionately high-quality land around urban areas—precisely where young farmers want to grow. There is simply not enough land.

These factors all intersect with the affordability of the land. The prospect of saving enough money for a down payment while employed in agriculture is an elusive promise. Paradoxically, gaining the skills to run your own farm business often puts that same dream out of reach. For many farmworkers—especially those who have traveled to the U.S. to work—language barriers, legal obstacles, and ingrained systems of oppression in farm labor mean that the dream is even further removed from possibility.

Ultimately, while it may be possible to find available land to grow on, accessing land where a farmer can have the security that they need to invest in the land and their business can prove to be a nearly insurmountable barrier. For many, land ownership will forever be out of reach and leasing might be the only option. Land ownership has a cumulative effect on farm viability. When farmers own land, they can leverage that land to capitalize on further land purchases, infrastructure investments, or other forms of saving that benefit future generations. The effects are clear: in the 2017 NYFC Survey, the average farm size of respondents who came from farm families was 87.25 acres compared to 12 acres for those from non-farming backgrounds.

Young farmers of color face additional, unique barriers. BIPOC young farmers experience many barriers more acutely as these challenges intersect with structural racism and discrimination. For example, while student debt is a challenge for many young farmers, students of color often have no choice other than to borrow and are more likely than their peers to take out larger loans, struggle with repayment, and default on their student loans. The inherited wealth gap between white and BIPOC individuals is particularly challenging in agriculture, which is a capital-intensive career dependent on access to land.



AFT's multi-year effort to advance cutting-edge solutions for farmland protection. Source: [farmland.org/project/farms-under-threat/](https://farmland.org/project/farms-under-threat/)

## Land, Policy, and Power

Land has been tied to controlling access to political power ever since colonial land laws prohibited non-white ownership and restricted voting to those who owned land. Once in power, those individuals proceeded to enact policies designed to perpetuate their control of land-based resources.

The underlying reason for the challenge of accessing land to grow food is our system of property rights, which is based on an extractive relationship with land. Land as an entity that can be bought and sold is a construct introduced to North America through European colonization. This construct has been deployed to dispossess Indigenous people of their land for centuries and is tied to ongoing discrimination against Black, Indigenous, Latine, Asian, and other people of color. The fact that land is a limited resource, alongside the impacts of generational wealth-building, further exacerbates the challenge. The result is deep inequity—98 percent of farmland in the U.S. is owned by white people and 95 percent of farmers are white.

In the face of this history, there is an equally strong narrative of resistance and innovation from communities of color. Many of the farming practices we call sustainable, regenerative, and organic in

fact come from farmers of color. Strategies such as land trusts, community-supported agriculture, and critical policy advocacy that advanced civil rights in the face of land-based discrimination have been led by communities of color. This history of resistance is equally important and forms the framework upon which we will learn and build our current resistance and dismantling work.

Once the system of land ownership that privileged white male landowners was established, tax laws and programs that provide government dollars to landowners have continued to benefit these owners without explicit statements of discrimination. These strategies have played out through executive orders, legislative action, judicial rulings, and administrative implementation. These tools of oppression can be turned to tools of liberation, but dedicated advocacy is required.

## Policy Advocacy and the 2023 Farm Bill

The upcoming farm bill will dictate farm policy for the next decade. As millions of acres are predicted to change hands in the coming years, there is a critical opportunity to work towards land justice, reparation, and more equitable models of land access that put land in the hands of young, diverse farmers.

Last fall, the National Young Farmers Coalition launched the One Million Acres for the Future campaign. With a coalition of partners, Young Farmers calls on Congress to invest \$2.5 billion in the 2023 Farm Bill to facilitate equitable access to one million acres of land for the next generation of farmers. Farmer voices are at the heart of the campaign, and through a Land Advocacy Fellowship resources 100 young farmers, growers, and land stewards from across the country to advocate for equitable land policy in the 2023 Farm Bill.

The Land Advocacy Fellowship, which launched in March 2022, centers around advocacy skills, political education, and telling farmer land access stories to advocate for federal policy change. The program supports advocacy through media training and helping fellows to connect with members of congress. The Fellowship includes a November 2022 fly-in to Washington, D.C. and a stipend of \$3,000 per year.

Young Farmers will work together with partners to cultivate legislative champions, hold meetings with USDA, and bring the grassroots power of farmers directly to members of Congress.

The One Million Acres Campaign prioritizes Congressional action to:

- Coordinate federal land access initiatives;
- Eliminate inequities in land ownership and access;
- Invest in voluntary, community-led farmland protection that keeps land in the hands of growers;
- Expand access to credit and help farmers compete in the real estate market;
- Support and incentivize farm transition;
- Support farm viability for young farmers and farmers of color;
- Invest in data collection, reporting, and research on farmland tenure, ownership, and transition.

We need bold, systemic change to address the land access issues farmers face and avoid a future where we have sacrificed a meaningful and reciprocal relationship with the land for short-term profit. We must see land as a vital resource on which our collective future rests, rather than a commodity fueling economic growth. There is no time to wait.

For farmers struggling to access land, we hope you see that the forces working against you are pervasive and long-standing but that we have an opportunity to push for bold, systemic change. Tell your story: your voice is critical and powerful.

Read the 2020 Land Policy Report and about the One Million Acres campaign: [youngfarmers.org/land/](https://youngfarmers.org/land/)

Join the One Million Acres for the Future Campaign to advocate for equitable land policy: [p2a.co/6TaLlaN](https://p2a.co/6TaLlaN)



(PFC - from B-5)

Myanmar that faces discrimination by the ruling military regime. It's a sadly familiar story. Under the constant threat of terror, the Karenni people were forced to flee to the Ban Nai Soi Refugee Camp along the border in neighboring Thailand. This isolated camp is located deep in the dense jungle, and it's cut off from the main electrical grid; the small bamboo huts are wedged in tight, yet they house thousands of people. When she left Myanmar for Ban Nai Soi in 1989, Rosa Meh was an eighteen-year-old medical student, and though she put her studies to good use while serving as a camp nurse, it was a difficult life. When she was pregnant with her three children, for example, she



Mo and his son Ibrahim with baby chicks.  
Credit: Brendan Bannon

was forced to work nights, and she was never given any time off—even when her kids were sick. In 2009, she was finally able to leave Ban Nai Soi for Buffalo.

Soe Reh arrived in the United States in the same year, after similar experiences at Ban Nai Soi (though Soe Reh and Rosa Meh never met while in the camp). Back in Myanmar, Soe Reh's family grew rice, peanuts, peppers, pumpkins, cucumbers, and eggplants, but in the camp, their ability to grow food was severely limited. Like Rosa Meh, due to a language barrier, he struggled to find a good job in Buffalo, and they each relied on government assistance to scrape by. Although they both have jobs today—Rosa Meh in a warehouse, Soe Reh in a bottle recycling plant—they have found a different kind of home at Providence Farm Collective, where thanks to PFC's Community Plot Program they grow many of the same crops they did back home: pumpkins, chilies, eggplants, green beans, and cucumbers.

Local, state, and federal funders have added to the farm's success. This past year, PFC applied for and received the highly-competitive Farmers Market Promotion Program grant for \$477,000 from the USDA to create a farmers' market in Buffalo's west side, where many of PFC's farmers live. The market will provide a location for PFC farmers to sell their niche, traditional crops—including African maize, amaranth, roselle, hot peppers, and African and Asian eggplants. During the course of the summer, PFC farmers will even receive additional training and technical assistance to promote and sell their produce to lower-income communities with little access to fresh food. This is a victory for everyone.

Although they've overcome tremendous obstacles to get here, PFC farmers are planting strong roots in Western New York—and doing so as their own change agents. They strive to make a positive difference, for their communities, their families, and future generations. With a little assistance from donors, PFC farmers may soon get to watch their roots grow permanently in soil they can call their own.

Donate: Help Providence Farm Collective and the Western New York Land Conservancy reach their \$2.3 million capital campaign, donate at [wnylc.org/donate](http://wnylc.org/donate) or call 716-687-1225.

*Kyle Semmel is a writer, translator, and communications manager of the Western New York Land Conservancy.*

## What Legal Personhood for U.S. Rivers Would Do

By Kayla Devault

In mid-March of 2017, New Zealand officially recognized the Whanganui River as a living entity with rights. The river, which the Maori consider their ancestor, is now offered protection through the New Zealand legal system against any human or human-led project that threatens its well-being. It is a critical precedent for acknowledging the Rights of Nature in legal systems around the world.

The communities seeking protection for their natural entities through this approach are operating from a non-Western, often indigenous paradigm that holds a spiritual reverence to homelands and natural systems and an urgency to protect their natural resources. These values are not held in the laws of colonial governments like New Zealand, Australia, Canada, or the United States. But that does not mean they cease to exist, and, in fact, we are seeing a revival.

In response to the Standing Rock Sioux battle against the Dakota Access pipeline, the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin amended its constitution to include the Rights of Nature. This is the first time a North American tribe has used a Western legal framework to adopt such laws. Some American municipalities have protected their watersheds against fracking by invoking Rights of Nature.

***Physical injury to the river could result in a lawsuit. Altering or confining the free-flowing nature of the river could be considered trauma.***

Operating from a Lakota paradigm, the oil pipeline damage to Standing Rock sacred sites and threats to the Missouri River are an infringement on spiritual connection. Consider the irony of a Western paradigm that gives corporations the rights of people while government agencies give insufficient protection to the actual people affected. What if these waters—connected to the Creation Stories of the Lakota communities—were given legal personhood?

Here's how New Zealand did it. After more than a century of legal battle, the Maori Iwi secured protection by forcing the New Zealand Crown to honor their practices, beliefs, and connection to the Whanganui River. As a result of the Te Awa Tupua Bill (Whanganui River Claims Settlement), the river has the legal rights of a person and is represented by two individuals. In passing this legislation, the New Zealand Crown also committed to protecting the customary practices of the Iwi regarding the river, and offered apologies and financial redress for historical wrongdoing.

If the Te Awa Tupua was able to correct the gap in Western and indigenous paradigms in New Zealand, surely a similar effort to protect the Missouri River

### Providence Farm Collective provides self-sufficiency by:

A 3-year **Incubator Farm Program** provides farmers the opportunity to start their own farm and develop a business. Each farmer receives a 1/4-acre fenced and fertilized farmland and access to workshops, technical assistance, marketing opportunities, tools and supplies.

A **Community Organization Plot Program** provides community organizations building food security and increased access to traditional foods with 1-acre plots of prepared farmland and access to resources and educational opportunities.

A **Demonstration Plot Program** offers training and program income generation throughout the growing season. The plot sells to wholesale outlets focused on serving communities in need of fresh foods.

[providencefarmcollective.org](http://providencefarmcollective.org)

could be produced for the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River nations by the American government.

How would that work? After defining the Missouri's personhood, the collection of nations that hold cultural connection to and physical reliance on the river would next agree on the values that would govern its treatment. Under a joint agreement with the federal government, legal representatives for the river's personhood would be appointed.

If the Missouri River had this kind of status, the Dakota Access pipeline would become a much different battle. Construction of the pipeline would first have to be approved by the river. Physical injury to the river could result in a lawsuit. Altering or confining the free-flowing nature of the river could be considered trauma. In combination with the risk of future chemical spills, these harms to the river should be enough to halt any Army Corps of Engineers permitting. Any negotiation would require legitimate consultation and consent from the river's representatives. Consent might require royalties paid by Energy Transfer corporations to the river's account. This account could be used to compensate those harmed by the river's floodwaters and other natural disasters.

The Navajo still defend assaults on surrounding waters. The Winnemem Wintu work to recover the salmon that the Shasta Dam destroyed. And what about the mountains? The Gila River Indian Community and other O'otham groups continue decades of opposition against the Arizona state Route 202 extension that would cut through South Mountain, a sacred place to the people who have inhabited the Phoenix area since the beginning of their times. As construction begins this summer, many are scrambling to prevent irreversible destruction to the mountain and, by extension, the culture.

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### Resources:

More about personhood for nature, [theconversation.com/](http://theconversation.com/)

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## Land Justice, Not Speculation

By Doug Hertzler

Access to land has become the number one issue for aspiring young farmers in the United States, who come from many different backgrounds. Secure relationship to land is a matter of sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples and social justice for local communities, particularly Black and Brown communities that have experienced displacement and land dispossession. During the next 15-20 years approximately 40-70% of US farmland will change hands. Unless something is done, much of this land will end up in the hands of an ever-smaller number of wealthy people, destroying opportunities for rural livelihoods and access to locally produced foods, while deepening environmental and land injustice.

We are witnessing a takeover of farmland by financial speculators that has some unexpected leaders. The largest manager of farmland in the world is the Teacher's Insurance and Annuity Association (TIAA), a trillion-dollar for-profit firm managing retirement funds for employees of colleges and universities, as well as a large number of hospitals and non-profits. TIAA owns over 2 million acres of farmland and about 1 million acres of timberland. TIAA's largest assets in farmland are in the United States, while its most numerous acres of forests are in Brazil, and it also owns land in seven other countries.

TIAA is also the industry leader in publishing documents and brochures to make farmland speculation and unsustainable agribusiness seem respectable. The company has convinced many public pension funds to contribute to its pots of money for buying farmland. Public pension funds that have partnered with TIAA to buy land come from Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden and the United Kingdom, along with public funds from New Mexico, New York, Texas, Vermont and Washington.

TIAA has focused its most recent US acquisitions in Mississippi Delta, a region with a large rural Black population and a long history of Black farmer displacement. In Brazil it has used shell companies to evade Brazilian limits on foreign land ownership and acquired thousands of acres from land-grabbers who have illegally titled commons lands belonging to peasant communities of Indigenous and Black heritage with a long history and culture of living in the Cerrado forests and savannah. TIAA's business partners like SLC Agricola are among the major deforesters in the region. Despite a recent "no-deforestation" pledge, forests have continued to burn on TIAA owned lands.

TIAA claims that by acquiring and consolidating large commodity farms it is helping the United Nations reach its Sustainable Development Goal of Zero Hunger. As an anti-hunger organization, we at ActionAid USA know this is a lie. Hunger is not caused by inadequate food production, but by a lack of access to that food, by poverty and the concentration of food production power in fewer hands. TIAA's large farms undermine rural livelihoods. Smaller, more diverse farms have long been shown to provide more livelihoods and produce more food on less land without creating the kind of climate damage involved in industrial agriculture and food systems.

TIAA's latest showcase for "sustainable agriculture" is a 12,000 acre farming business in Ohio with which it has had a land leasing agreement for a number of years helping the company grow in size. TIAA's promotional materials show a warehouse and a fleet of chemical fertilizer trucks and make vague allusions about moving towards sustainability. TIAA's measures of sustainability include criteria like whether or not a farming business conducts soil testing and owns equipment that can be adjusted for variable spraying levels. Their corn and soybean farms are not required to have cover cropping and leave tilled soil vulnerable to erosion over winter.

TIAA's leadership in global land speculation is encouraging a host of similar investors who seek pieces of the farmland pie, many using similar rhetoric about feeding people and being sustainable. Some are wealthy individuals, like Bill Gates and Melinda French Gates, but many public pension funds which should be responsible to citizens are continuing to join the wave.

One of the more recent entrants into TIAA's land funds is the Vermont Pension and Investment Commission which in 2019 committed 100 million dollars, expected to be spread across acquisitions in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Chile, Poland and Romania. This kind of speculation in land has formed a new wave of colonialism which makes land justice for Indigenous Peoples, Black farmers, and local communities less attainable, and makes land access for new farmers everywhere more difficult.

Representatives of NOFA, Rural Vermont and the National Family Farm Coalition joined ActionAid, Friends of the Earth, and the Network of Social Justice and Human Rights in Brazil in meeting with the Vermont State Treasurer and the Pension Commission on two occasions to express our alarm about these investments. The Commission said it was too late to withdraw their commitment but that they would relay our concerns to TIAA. Then they stopped returning our messages. We have not given up; instead, we have turned to organizing a bigger movement.

With the exception of those who have bought into the "get big or get out" farmland contest, many farmers throughout the US understand that the relationship to land, to food, and the freedom to make their own decisions about their work, are parts of the identity of individuals, families and communities engaged in farming. Many understand why land justice is crucial to Indigenous Peoples and to communities that have been displaced from the land.

When we engage in conversation with university and non-profit employees who are clients of TIAA, and with the public employees served by pension

funds, they also readily understand why this kind of speculation in farmland is bad for the future and morally bankrupt. Such conversations have led to more than a dozen resolutions passed against TIAA's land grabbing and climate harming investments. However, many workers across the country remain unaware of how their money is being used. Many financial managers are in denial about the unsustainability of this land grabbing and the future conflicts they are setting up.

People who care about farming need to spread the word about this unfolding crisis and pressure companies like TIAA to change their investments. We also need the state and federal governments to regulate the large-scale acquisition of farmland and make sure that young farmers have secure access to land and that there is land justice for Indigenous peoples and displaced communities.

There are multiple steps that organizations and individuals can take:

- Sign and circulate the petition calling for TIAA to divest from land grabs and climate-harming investments. [stoplandgrabs.org/en-us/take-action](http://stoplandgrabs.org/en-us/take-action)
- Email the Stop Land Grabs Campaign at [nolandgrabs@gmail.com](mailto:nolandgrabs@gmail.com) to organize a local petition delivery.
- Research the farmland acquisition activity of university endowments and retirement funds, and public pension funds in your region and share the information.
- Write letters and pass resolutions demanding land and climate justice (see action link above)
- Ask your state legislators and Congresspersons to take steps to regulate the large-scale accumulation of farmland by investors.

*Doug Hertzler is a Senior Policy Analyst at ActionAid USA, an organization that works to support climate justice and human rights, including the right to food. He was raised on a family farm in central Pennsylvania that has transitioned to organic agriculture. His retirement funds are managed by TIAA and he is tired of their land-grabbing deceptions.*



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## Escaping Private Property: A Long-Term Alternative to Farmland Ownership

By Elizabeth Henderson

In the US, the ideal for most farmers is to have their own farm and to hold it as private property. With farmland prices rising beyond what the sales of farm products can possibly cover and the financialization of farmland as a favored investment opportunity grasped eagerly by the likes of Bill Gates and TIAA, it is time to reexamine this ideal. Farmers of Color have led the way - from New Communities, the very first community land trust in the 1960s founded by Charles and Shirley Sherrod, to the recent formation of the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust (NEFOC). The whole concept of private property was foreign to Native peoples. US law, however, limits alternative ways of holding land. So let's look at what is possible and start talking about the advantages and disadvantages of escaping private ownership of farmland.

For a farm to be sustainable, secure tenure is necessary. Building healthy topsoil, nurturing diverse annual and perennial plantings, developing a team that works well together and establishing reliable markets with supportive community relations all require long-term investments. Over the past twenty years in the US, a few organic farmers have sought alternatives - long-term, inheritable leases on land owned by non-profit land trusts or conservation easements held by land trusts. Under US law, these arrangements are as close as you can come to turning private property into community property. The farms function as private businesses, but the broader society has the opportunity to invest in the farmland, reducing the financial burden on farmers while guaranteeing the preservation of this essential resource.

The high cost of land in densely populated areas in the US has made it difficult for farmers to acquire adequate amounts of quality farmland. Many small-scale farmers lease land from non-farming owners who benefit from the reduced rate of taxation on land used for agriculture. Often these leases are

short-term and when the owner decides to sell, the farmer is left with no choice but to leave. Partnering with Conservation and Community Land Trusts can make farmland affordable for the long term. *Holding Ground: A Guide to Northeast Farmland Tenure and Stewardship* documents some of these experiments and provides case studies, sample leases, and checklists. Land for Good, a not-for-profit based in New Hampshire, offers resources, advice and workshops on farmland access, tenure and transfer issues.

Private ownership of land is one of the most fiercely entrenched rights in the U.S. As Robert Swann, founder of the Schumacher Center for a New Economics and a leading voice in the Community Land Trust movement put it: "Built into the very core of the U.S. Constitution, written as it was by landowners, is the proposition (although not explicit) that property rights take precedence over human rights or ecological realities. The notion of ownership of land and national resources in private hands and for private profit was incorporated into the Constitution, thus perpetuating the myth of divine rights in ownership first promulgated by Roman law. Only the American Indians, the original inhabitants of this soil, dared to question the supposedly divine right of kings to bestow legal title to land. The Indians did not claim ownership, but rather they questioned the notion of ownership of land and resources which, in fact, had no place in Indian culture.

In the late 60s, Swann worked with civil rights activists Shirley and Charles Sherrod to establish New Communities in Georgia, modeled after Israeli kibbutzim. Founded as a collective farm, New Communities is widely recognized as the original model for community land trusts in the US. In *The Courage to Hope: How I Stood Up to the Politics of Fear* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), Shirley Sherrod tells the heart-wrenching story of how racist discrimination at USDA forced them to lose their land in 1985 and of their participation in the *Pigford vs Glickman* suit against USDA and the eventual settlement in 2009 that enabled them to buy a 1600 acre former slave plantation and start over by transforming it, in Shirley's words, into "a place where we could both farm the land and also nurture the minds of people."

The Schumacher Center for a New Economics and Equity Trust, two small non-profits, have been helping farmers acquire secure tenure without owner-

ship. To make sense of their approach, one needs to understand that under US law land ownership amounts to a cluster of rights, any of which can be sold to someone else while keeping the others. For example, a farmer can sell the right to mine for gas on a farm and continue farming while a gas company sets up gas wells on the property. By placing a conservation easement on a farm, the farmer gives up the right to develop the land but can go on living there and farming. Non-profit land trusts or public entities such as towns and counties can legally hold conservation easements. There are two kinds of land trust in the US: conservation trusts and community land trusts. Typically, the conservation trusts raise funds to buy or accept gifts of conservation easements in order to preserve open land in perpetuity. The community land trusts buy or accept gifts of the land itself and then lease the properties to people to build houses or to farm, and highlight in their mission keeping the land affordable.

In 2004 when Rebecca Kraai, the owner of the 18 acres my partners and I were renting, offered to sell us the entire 140-acre farm (formerly the Humbert dairy), instead of going to the bank for a mortgage, we decided to contact our local land trust. At that time, we had a 5-year rolling lease with the Kraai family, a medium-term and moderately secure form of tenure. We renewed the lease every year, but the owners would have to give us 5 years' notice to leave. With the chance of buying the land, we approached the Genesee Land Trust (GLT), a conservation trust, with a proposal that they accept a conservation easement on our farm, Peacework Farm. GLT's Mission is to "preserve and protect waterways, wetlands, farmland, natural and unique habitat, scenic and recreational lands." We hoped to replicate what the Decaters had done at Live Power Farm in CA.

In 1995, Chuck Matthei of Equity Trust guided Gloria and Steve Decater of Live Power Farm through a set of complex maneuvers. The Decaters purchased the land they had rented for many years at its value as farmland while the members of their CSA purchased the development rights and donated the conservation easement to Equity Trust. In consultation with Equity Trust, the Decaters wrote the conservation easement requiring themselves and

(continued on next page)



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(Escaping Private Property - continued from B-10)

all future farmers on that land to earn at least 50% of their living from farming it, to use organic or biodynamic methods, and put limitations on the resale price of the land to prevent market forces from driving the price above what a farmer could afford.

We thought we could ask the members of our CSA to finance the purchase of an easement so that we could buy the farmland at its agricultural value. We knew that farmland in our area was selling for \$1000 to \$1200 an acre and that the development value constituted about half the price. To our surprise, the land trust agreed to depart from its usual practices by purchasing the farm and leasing it back to us for a very long-term. In doing this, the GLT took the innovative step of functioning as a community land trust. Our farm business purchased the improvements on the land, a barn and packing shed, but not the land under them. To buy the land, the members of our CSA, together with the land trust, engaged in a fundraising campaign – “Preserving Peacework.”

The old Humbert dairy farm is a rich and beautiful place with 88 acres of tillable prime soils and 50 acres of woods and wetland areas with rare wildflowers. My partners Greg Palmer, Ammie Chickerling and I did not want to finance our retirements by selling this farmland, as U.S. farmers so often are forced to do. We could have obtained a conventional mortgage to purchase the land as our own private property. But, by GLT owning the land, it would remain affordable for future farmers. We wanted to make our farm business solid enough financially that we could provide living wages, full benefits and retirement without selling the land. Without the financial burden of a mortgage, the total investment in the farm business would be smaller, allowing younger people to become full partners through sweat equity over a few years. With a lot of support from our CSA members, we were able to realize this vision for ourselves. Succession, however, did not work out as we had hoped, but the land is securely preserved under organic management.



Aerial view of Peacework Farm 2008. Credit: Elizabeth Henderson.

Greg and I founded Peacework Organic Farm in 1998 on 15 of these rented acres. The 5-year rolling lease gave us reasonably secure tenure, but we were aware that, with or without the legal agreement, our remaining on the land depended on maintaining good relations with the owners. Greg and I, and starting in 2000, Greg’s wife Ammie, grew organic vegetables and herbs, most of which we provided to Peacework Organic CSA, a buying club in Rochester, New York (formerly named the Genesee Valley Organic CSA), in its 32nd year in 2021, and to Abundance Cooperative Market.

The Peacework CSA dates back to the winter of 1988-89 when I first moved to Rose Valley Farm in Wayne County. Alison Clarke, Politics of Food founder, recruited a retired Xerox engineer to brainstorm with my farm partner and me – we decided to ask everyone who purchased a share to participate in the farming and distribution and in setting CSA policy. This model worked well for over 20 years. In 1989, the CSA started with 31 shares for 29 households. Gradually, we expanded – 45, 90, 130.

When Greg and I left Rose Valley in 1997, the CSA came with us and helped us find the Kraai land for our new farm.

With technical assistance from Equity Trust and Rochester lawyer George Parker, we negotiated a land lease with the GLT. The members of the land trust board shared our conviction that this land is worth preserving in perpetuity. Few of them, however, had any experience of organic farming and none of them had ever engaged in a deal of this kind. Some of them did not understand why a long-term lease was so important to us until we explained how long it takes to regenerate the soil and how heartbreaking it can be to do perennial plantings and then not see them mature. It also made sense to them that we could not afford to make the investments needed to upgrade the old barn unless we could be sure to use it for many years.

(continued on B-15)

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think chefs will love its opportunities for exotic presentations)

**Magic Molly** (another purple-purple that keeps its color, some call it a fingerling, but it is really an oblong variety)

##### Red skin, white flesh

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##### Red skin, red flesh

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**Lehigh** (high yielding, attractive pale gold color)

##### Purple skin, yellow flesh

**Peter Wilcox** (superbly flavored yellow-fleshed tubers, but with a purple skin)

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## Expanding tree tapping through sap harvesting tenure agreements

By Mike Rechlin, Ph.D

Harvesting sap to produce maple syrup is a historic farming activity in many areas of the Northeast and Appalachia. Originally a Native American craft, “sugaring” was quickly brought into the subsistence livelihood of European colonists and then into the market economy of our growing nation. Syrup making is an easy process, involving evaporation through boiling of sap collected from trees. The primary sap-producing trees are maple trees. But what if you don’t have any maple trees, or at least don’t have enough maple trees, or if you were in a position where you could expand your business and make more syrup if you had more trees?

This issue of land access, or more specifically tree access, is as problematic for many maple farmers as it is in other agricultural pursuits. In this article we are going to explore common sap harvesting agreements and look at the economics of a specific example; how West Virginia maple syrup producer Mark Bowers, owner of Bowers Maple Farm works with a neighboring forestland owner, Randy Kimble, to the mutual benefit of both.

*This issue of land access, or more specifically tree access, is as problematic for many maple farmers.*

### Sap Harvesting Agreements

Just like leasing pasture to support a growing herd of cows, maple producers lease trees to support their increased production of maple syrup. This allows syrup producers to expand production beyond the forest resource they have available on their own lands. It has become particularly important as Reverse Osmosis (RO) technology has been introduced to sugar making. With an RO, a syrup producer can concentrate the sugars in their sap from the natural average of approximately 2% to over 12% before it gets to the evaporator. Boiling concentrated sap allows an operation to make more syrup in a given amount of time, thus using less fuel. Depending on the demand for trees to lease, a landowner can expect from \$0.50 to \$1.00 per tree. A good sugarbush can have 70 taps per acre, realizing an annual income to the landowner of between \$35 to \$70/acre. For many landowners, this comes with the added benefit of the tapped area being eligible for agricultural tax benefits. Leasing trees for tapping requires a long-term tenure relationship between the forest landowner and the maple syrup producer. The producer will have to invest in installing a sap collection system. In all but the smallest operations, this means purchasing and installing a tubing system that will have a lifespan of about 15 years. It only makes sense for the syrup producer to make that investment if they have a commitment from the landowner to allow tapping for that period of time.

Another arrangement is where the landowner collects and harvests the sap and sells it to the maple syrup producer. Here the landowner invests in the establishment of the sap collection system and gets paid per gallon of sap delivered to the sugarhouse. The amount paid is dependent on the sugar content of the sap (measured in Brix) and the market price of maple syrup. The Cornell University Maple Program has developed a sap price calculator available at: [blogs.cornell.edu/cornellmaple/buying-and-selling-sap/](https://blogs.cornell.edu/cornellmaple/buying-and-selling-sap/).

In this arrangement, the landowner is the sap harvester who invests in the tubing system, in the time required to install the system, in tapping the trees, maintaining the collection system and often in delivering the sap. Obviously, with this increase in investment comes a greater financial reward. The advantage to the syrup producer is that they are relieved of those duties. This arrangement has the potential to foster a rapid expansion of the maple industry, and it shares the financial benefits among

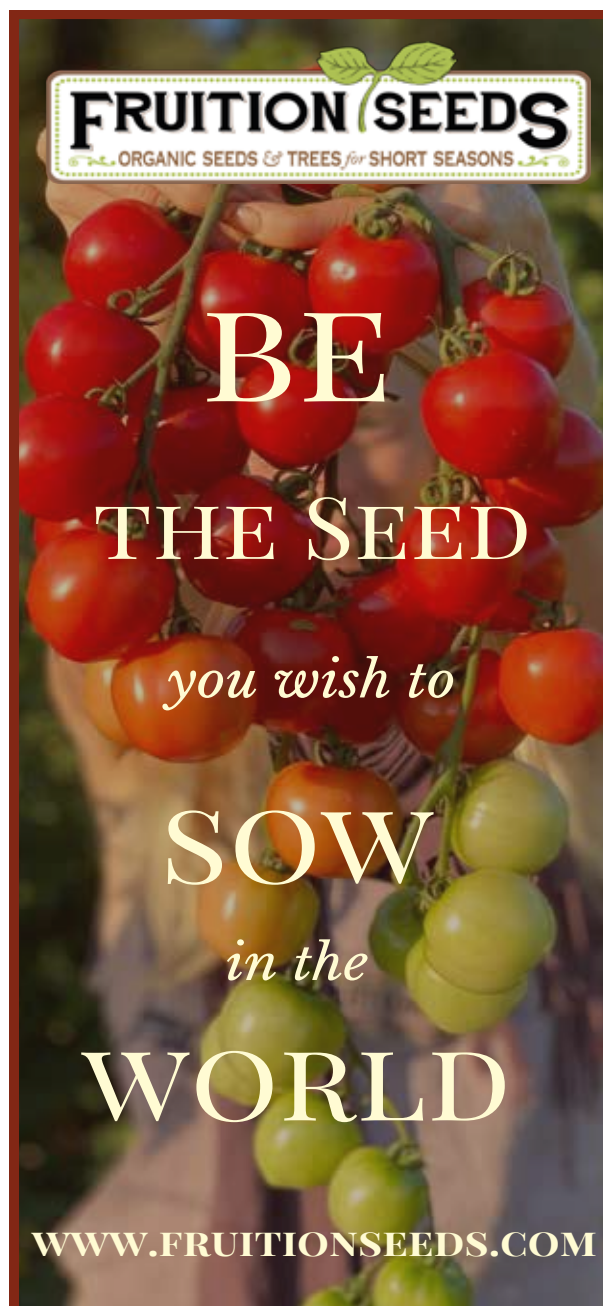
more people. As a business, it is expected that the financial investment in the sap collection system will be paid for by the income from the first year of operation.

### A Case in Point: Bower’s Maple Farm, Petersburg, West Virginia

Bower’s Maple Farm was started by Carl Bowers in 1998. Carl’s son Mark is the present owner. Mark taps approximately 2,200 trees, boils the sap, and in an average year makes 400 gallons of maple syrup. After purchasing an RO, allowing him to increase production, and with an established marketing network, Mark was interested in increasing his production beyond what was possible by tapping the maple trees on his property. Mark approached Randy Kimble, a neighbor with adjoining forest lands about renting some of his trees. During the 2020 sap flow season, Mark tapped 235 trees on one of Randy’s properties. At the end of the season, he paid Randy the agreed-upon sum of \$0.75/tap, totaling \$176. Last season Randy established his own sap collection system and tapped 195 trees. He collected 3,600 gallons of sap from those trees and sold his sap to Mark. When the payment was made, based on the sugar content of the sap, Mark ended up writing a check to Randy for \$1,150; a significant increase over the \$176 Randy made the previous year. Mark processed the sap and made 70 gallons of syrup which he sold retail for \$4,000. Both made out well, and Randy is expanding with plans to tap 450 trees in the 2022 season.

Whether through leasing taps or buying sap, cooperative landowner agreements are a way to increase maple farm production and to spread the economic benefits of syrup making in many rural communities. Through a grant from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, Future Generations University’s Appalachian Program is promoting these land tenure relationships and assisting syrup producers as they increase production and the economic benefits of this re-emerging industry on the Appalachian countryside.

*Mike Rechlin has practiced sustainable forestry and protected areas management in the United States, Nepal, India, and Tibet for thirty years. He has extensive teaching experience and has designed educational programs for many international groups visiting the Adirondack Park of New York State.*



## We Built a Farm on Public Land... That Was the First Hurdle

By Caroline Fanning

Twenty years ago, when my husband and I were apprentices in the Hudson Valley, the world of small-scale farms could be divided into two general camps. One camp included the old family farms struggling to keep the land both in production and in the family. The other included the new, nonprofit farms working leased land. The latter were usually fledgling operations subsidized by off-farm revenue and governed by a board of directors.

Dan and I came up through the nonprofit ranks—we are first-generation farmers from Long Island—but as we grew more hopeful of a future in farming, that route began to feel like a dead end. Being employees offered a steady paycheck, but not the freedom to spread our wings. As we got older, we craved the independence that comes from owning your own land. With nothing affordable on Long Island, however, and lacking the confidence to consider land far away, we kept searching for local opportunities that would provide both land and independence. As it happened, we got lucky.

In 2007, Nassau County issued a Request for Proposals for an organic farm at a park near us. We submitted a bid and won. We were thrilled, but also skeptical of the 3-year Use and Occupancy permit being offered (a U&O grants access to land but no protection from being kicked off). We wanted a lease, but the county wouldn’t consider it. Ultimately, we managed to stretch the U&O term from three years to six. Some people advised against it, but we were desperate to farm, and we still believed it was a horse worth betting on. The park—the Old Bethpage Village Restoration—is a 209-acre living history museum featuring 18th and 19th-century buildings; its fields had been cultivated in the not-too-distant past. An organic farm seemed like a natural fit for the site, and we didn’t fear the possibility of a developer edging us out at the end of our term.

Once we signed the contract, many things fell into place. First, we essentially fell off the Nassau County radar; left alone at the far end of a quiet park, we could make beginner mistakes without a skeptical audience. Second, 2007 was a great year to launch a farm. Local food options were limited, but the movement was gaining momentum, and we had no trouble selling CSA shares. Finally, we had the homefield advantage. Family and friends donated labor, money, and time. We rented a cheap apartment from family and kept multiple off-farm jobs. It’s hard to imagine how we would have succeeded without this network of support.

Fifteen years later, the farm is thriving. We cultivate 5-acres and serve a 120-member CSA and farm stand. We’ve incorporated many of the extra-curriculars we once considered the domain of nonprofit farms—educational tours, small-scale events, etc. We’ve cultivated a pipeline of skilled staff and renewed our contract with Nassau County several times. The 2014-2019 years were rough, when Whole Foods and Amazon emerged as competitors, CSA sales slowed, and staying in business meant frequent pivots. But when the pandemic hit, shares started selling themselves, and the farm blossomed into a hub of activity. It’s been a wild ride, and in the midst of it, we managed to pay off our mortgage, raise two kids (now 10 and 12), and save for college and retirement!

I could end here and say ours is a success story, but what comes next? Building a farm on public land has been great for us as individuals, but what about the bigger picture? Who will fill our shoes when we retire? We want Restoration Farm to thrive long past our departure, yet the very independence that drew us to this opportunity means few people can imagine the farm without us. That is an existential problem

*(continued on next page)*

(Public Land - continued from B-12)

that must be addressed. It's time to begin the process of transitioning the farm away from the private project of two individuals to a communal endeavor befitting a public farm.

As I see it, several things must happen to get the farm on long-term footing. First, there must be a pipeline of future farmers. Second, there must be a specialized team in charge of bookkeeping, payroll, CSA administration, communications, etc. Finally, there must be security in the land itself. While Restoration Farm has never been threatened by development, two fault lines have emerged—the departure of the Nassau County officials who supported it, and a rising tide of groups competing for access to, if not ownership of, the land. In recent years, we've had to contend with a steady flow of film crews, athletic events, and entertainment companies who also rent park space and whose interests often conflict with our own.

While the U&O provides a thin veneer of protection, the real security comes from Dan and myself holding firm. But again, what happens when we leave? "You'll never get a lease," is what one elected official (who happens to be running for New York governor) recently told me. He wasn't saying it to be unkind, just in observance of political realities. It may be that the farm doesn't need a lease, but it does need the public to take on the role of defender. For that to happen, the farm needs to come out from under the radar, take a seat at the table, and make an irrefutable case for why it matters. Driving that message home would provide more security than any lease.

So, how does the farm achieve this? More to the point, who are the key players, and where does the



Chapel, Restoration Farm. Photo provided by author.

money come from for the farm's development? We welcome your ideas! One possibility is changing the corporate structure from an LLC to a nonprofit. For someone who once considered nonprofit farms a dead end, this approach smacks of irony, but if a board of directors can share the work of "defending" the farm, it's an option worth considering. Another option is transitioning to an employee-owned cooperative. Perhaps there are other possibilities as well. Without a roadmap to follow, we'll need all the creative input we can get, but if there's one group we can count on, it's our fellow farmers.

So please reach out with your ideas, stories, and insights. We're proud of what we've accomplished thus far, but there's much more to be done.

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*I've been mulling over this topic for two years, both privately, in conversation, and in the farm newsletter, and this is an opportunity to tap a broader audience for feedback. Caroline Fanning is the co-founder and head grower of Restoration Farm. She can be reached at [caroline@restorationfarm.com](mailto:caroline@restorationfarm.com)*




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*(Escaping Private Property - continued from B-11)*

We had lengthy discussions of the appropriate lease fee. Under the terms of their non-profit status, they could not offer us a “sweetheart deal” on the rental fees we pay. They asked me to research what farmers were paying to rent an acre of land in our county. We were all surprised to learn that the going rate at that time, ranging from \$35 to \$50 an acre, just barely covered the land taxes. As a result, we agreed that the farm would pay the land taxes and all insurance and other local fees, but only pay a small administrative fee to the land trust.

Because the Kraai’s had sold the Humbert farmhouse and only kept the land, there are no houses on the property. I was fortunate to be able to purchase a house right next to the land; Ammie and Greg commuted 30 minutes from another town. We asked the GLT if we could set aside two small corners of the farm to build houses for farmers. At first, the board resisted: they did not like the idea of being landlords and pictured all the problems involved with owning rural housing. A letter from Leslie Reed-Evans, Director of the Williamstown Rural Foundation (WRLF), the land trust that entered into a similar arrangement with Caretaker Farm, persuaded them to see the matter differently: “The WRLF needs to preserve farms. A key to preserving farms is to make the land and the infrastructure affordable to farmers. The Caretaker Farm project gives the WRLF the opportunity to move beyond farmland preservation to farm preservation. This is an important distinction and critical to the survival of small family farms.” The GLT Board came to the realization that only by allowing the construction of homes for the farmers on the land and controlling the future sale price of those homes, could they assure that farmers will be able to afford to farm there.

To raise money to pay for the 140-acre farm, the core committee of Peacework Organic CSA set up a special “Preserving Peacework” committee to raise funds in coordination with the GLT. Including all of the ancillary expenses of land purchase – a survey of the property, a land stewardship fund to allow the

land trust to monitor the land use on an annual basis, etc. – the fundraising goal was \$150,000. Because the GLT is a non-profit organization, members of the public can make tax-deductible contributions towards the purchase price. Since CSA members had a special relationship with the farm, the fundraisers especially targeted them. After describing the purchase and lease work in progress, the Preserving Peacework committee made this special appeal to members: “So, what does this mean to us? It means our CSA is going to benefit by knowing that land ownership costs and the issues around buying and selling land are not going to be issues our CSA has to deal with, nor will the farmers need to worry about a landlord who decides to sell the land out from under them. In short, in addition to reaping the benefit of knowing that Peacework farm – “our farm” – will have a stable home farm, the CSA will also be a partner in the permanent preservation of high-quality organic soils, Ganargua Creek wetlands and floodplains, and hardwood forest land with important wildlife habitat and beautiful wildflowers.”

In only fourteen months, the Preserving Peacework committee raised the money to buy the farm; CSA members pledged \$140,000. The very first contribution of \$25,000 was anonymous and accompanied by this eloquent note:

“I believe that the planet is in a serious ‘people created’ ecological crisis motivated by greed and perpetuated by ignorance. The privilege and good fortune of eating clean local food is mine, due to the existence of the GVOCSA and Peacework Organic Farm. ... My donation of \$25,000 has caused raised eyebrows and not a few gasps. Conventional financial advice dictates ‘saving for a rainy day.’ Dear people, it is raining today, and it has been raining for a long, long time. It is rare that one has an opportunity to participate in such a fine cooperative venture. I do this with complete confidence in the ethics of the farmers, the GVOCSA and the GLT. I participate with joy and hope so that my great-grandchildren will have safe vegetables grown on a beautiful organic farm.”

The GLT completed the purchase of the land in

January 2006 and in March of that year signed a twenty-five-year rolling lease with Peacework Farm. They investigated the possibility of a 99-year lease but decided against it out of concern that NYS would treat such a long lease as tantamount to private property. The requirement built into a rolling lease that it be signed by all parties every year turned out to be a good way to keep the land trust board in touch with the farmers. As board membership evolves over time, land trust arrangements that lack this provision have resulted in boards losing touch with farm realities.

While we are a long way from eliminating private property, organic CSA farms like Roxbury Farm in New York, Indian Line and Caretaker Farms in Massachusetts, and Good Humus Farm in California – all have long-term tenure on land that is leased and preserved. The transactions that led to these happy endings are complex, requiring the cooperation of multiple entities, savvy advisors, innovative land trusts and the social capital that the farmers earned by growing high-quality organic food. Together these farms offer a new model with the interrelated goals of preserving farmland from development while keeping it affordable for people who make their living as farmers. The money to buy these farms came from many small contributions from CSA members and other donors and establish these farms as community property, protected from the real estate market.

**Resources:**  
Robert Swann, “Land Trusts as Part of a Threefold Economic Strategy for Regional Integration,” [centerforneweconomics.org](http://centerforneweconomics.org)

Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust, [nefoclandtrust.org](http://nefoclandtrust.org)

*Alternatives to private ownership are complex to work out. I am always willing to share the documents involved, the lease, the list of rights and responsibilities, etc.*  
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## How One NYS Farmer Found Land by Writing Letters and Making Cold Calls

An interview with Erica Frenay,  
Co-owner Shelterbelt Farm

By Elizabeth Gabriel

We know well that finding land is one of the biggest challenges for new farmers, and even more so for young farmers or farmers of color. Unless you're getting into farming later in life, after having a six-figure career for a few decades - which is not the case for most new farmers - purchasing land listed publicly on the Multiple Listing Service (MLS) is nearly impossible. While levels vary throughout the country, nationally, agricultural land prices today are the highest they have been in nearly a decade, experiencing a 7% increase just in the last year. The highest prices are found on land that's within a reasonable distance to an urban market - where any new farmer wants to be - with all of New England having some of the most expensive land in the country. Farmers have had to get creative about how to buy land or secure long-term land tenure. This issue and upcoming TNF issues will highlight different land access models, from lease arrangements to Incubator Farm programs and crowdsourcing campaigns to community land trusts and cooperative land arrangements. This story of how Shelterbelt Farm got their land is unique and combines inter-generational relationships, neighbor relationships and the beginnings of grappling with white privilege and access.



Shelterbelt Farm's "flerd" (flock & herd). Photo taken by Jono Neiger.

wanted to have a multi-family farm with at least 2 families but ideally 5 or 6. When we started looking for land, we were looking with four other multigenerational families; 2 were similar to us - young with no kids yet - and 2 of the couple were parents of those couples, including Craig's parents.

### TNF: How did you begin your search for land?

ERICA: I don't really remember the beginning actually. I know we intentionally didn't use a realtor. We looked on MLS but everything there was too expensive and was selling too fast for us, often at more than the asking price. We were really trying to rely on word of mouth. We knew we wanted something between 50 and 200 acres because we wanted

During those phone calls we mostly had really nice responses - only one rude person, who we heard is just rude in general, and while we heard mostly "no's", all you need is one "yes".

After three years, we were really starting to think this wouldn't work out. Maybe we needed to change our parameters and give up on some of our ideals. For the property we ended up buying, it turned out that we were contacting the wrong person. The person listed as the owner was not actually the owner anymore, but the ex-husband of the current owner. Luckily, a house went up for sale next door to this property, and by visiting that house, we ended up learning more information about this land and who the correct owner was. When we contacted her, she was on the verge of subdividing the land into 5 lots, but we were able to work with her and our lawyers to sell us the whole 24 acres. We were really fortunate and privileged to have such a good relationship with Craig's parents, who would eventually build a house on the land and so were willing to help purchase it with us.

Another complication of our land search is that we knew we needed access to more land than we could afford, so we wanted to buy a smaller piece of land adjacent to a much larger property that we could lease. So we also wrote to the owners of a 200-acre property next door to the land we were working on buying, asking about leasing their land for grazing. It took several years to build that relationship, primarily by exchanging letters and then an occasional in-person visit (since the landowners don't live nearby). About 6 years ago, we started leasing 17 of those adjoining acres. We started with a 1-year lease, then a 3-year, and now we have a 15-year lease.

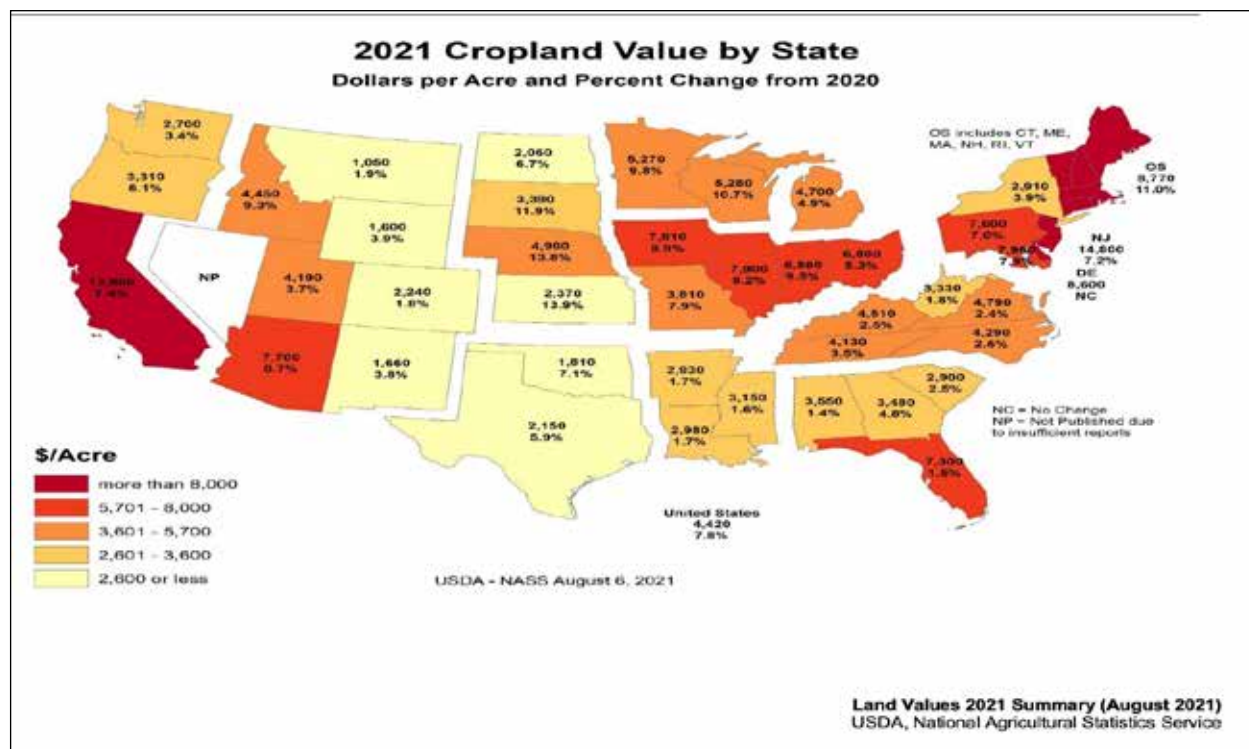
### TNF: What was it about this land, in particular, that was appealing?

ERICA: It was on the way to where we used to live and we always admired the lovely view of the valley it has, since it's up on a hill. We also knew it was a project and that was attractive - I didn't quite know how much of a project though! From a design and farm perspective, there was no infrastructure and so, while there were wild flora and fauna - it was a blank slate as far as infrastructure. It was also near dear friends and family, in an area where we had already put down deep roots, which was really important.

### TNF: How was it to start your farm with no infrastructure?

ERICA: For us, it's what we wanted. Since Craig is a builder, he had a vision for the home he wanted for our family. Just like I had a vision for the farm, he had a specific vision for a home, for energy efficiency, aesthetics, and function, and wanted to build it. But it's not something I would recommend for everyone; it really depends on your skills, resources

(continued on next page)



### TNF: Tell us a little about you, please.

ERICA: Erica runs Shelterbelt Farm with her husband Craig and children Rowan and Phoenix in Brooktondale, NY. They direct-market grass-finished beef and lamb, pastured eggs, tree fruits, veggie starts, and value-added products, and they host overnight guests in a glamping tent. They started Shelterbelt in 2010 after searching for land for almost 3 years.

### TNF: Why were you seeking land?

ERICA: We used to have an old farmhouse on 2-acres. While living there, I would dabble in farming - we had some pigs, and grew mushrooms, veggies and fruit - and eventually, we realized we wanted to grow more and feed our community. We really liked the idea of a multi-family farm, which we experienced when we lived and learned at the Bullock Brothers Farm in Orcas Island back in the 90's. That was before we had kids, but watching the resident children run wild on cooperatively managed land was a joy, and that vision stayed with me. We

to raise grass-finished livestock, but also knew we didn't have to (and couldn't afford to) own it all. There was a lot of heartbreak over these years of searching. We would find a place, get excited, make a purchase offer, and then it would fall through. The market wasn't quite as hot as today, but it was a tough market for buyers then too. Also, mineral rights was a big issue then because fracking was still a possibility in the region, so that added to the complexity.

Eventually, the other three couples branched off on their own and found their own properties, leaving us and Craig's parents. We decided to write a letter that included an excerpt of our Holistic Goal (our values, who we are as people and a vision for the farm we wanted to create) and send it to the owners of any properties we were interested in. We drove around identifying properties that met our goals and also that looked unloved or unmanaged, found out who owned those properties by looking at the County Tax office database, made a spreadsheet of who we wrote to, and tracked responses. We sent letters to about 30 landowners and were very specific that we would follow up with a call in a week or two.



## Agrarian Trust and the Agrarian Commons

By Kristina Villa

The Agrarian Trust exists to raise awareness and address the crisis of exceedingly high land prices that puts land access out of reach for many farmers, the abuse of farmland that is depleting the life of our planet, and the agricultural land which is lost to development at a rate of 2,000 acres per day. Our work is focused on providing secure and equitable long-term land tenure to farmers wanting to feed their communities using regenerative, organic, and biodynamic practices that heal the Earth and sustain communities.

With over 400 million acres of land changing hands over the next two decades, the way this land transitions is crucial to the future of people, food, and the climate. Agrarian Trust is focusing on this moment of land transition to ensure that farmland is transitioned not only from one farmer to the next but also from private property ownership into a community-held commons.

The Agrarian Commons, an initiative of the Agrarian Trust, is a bold and innovative approach to land ownership, access, and tenure that is developing in communities across the country through diverse and rich relationships. Each Agrarian Commons has a board made up of one-third local community members, one-third the farmer(s) leasing and stewarding the land it holds, and one-third national Agrarian Trust representation. The board makes the decisions about the land and the priorities of that Commons, including deciding how much the farmer should pay for tenure on the land. Farmers generally receive a 99-year lease to the land (lease length is dictated by state law and therefore varies some state-to-state), providing long-term, affordable and secure access to land to build a farming business that strengthens the local food system. In the Agrarian Commons model, the farmer is able to build equity through payments made into their affordable, below market value lease, through infrastructure improvements, and even by building soil health.

While securing land tenure is a challenge facing farmers of every race in this country, Agrarian Trust knows that land access is a greater barrier for farmers of color, and is centering the work of making affordable land security available to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) farmers. More than 98% of farmland in the U.S. is owned by white people while more than 70% of the farmworkers who seed, cultivate, weed, and harvest the crops that feed us are people of color. This gross injustice needs to change.

In the Northeast, there are several Agrarian Commons that have been in existence since May 2020. The Little Jubba Central Maine Agrarian Commons, which is a collaboration with the Somali Bantu Community Association, a nonprofit that includes 220 families farming individual plots of land for community food consumption, the New Hampshire Agrarian Commons, which holds a farm along the Merrimack River in between the states largest cities and across the street from the elementary school where a for-profit rotational grazing regenerative farm is feeding the region, the Vermont Agrarian Commons, which is collaborating with a mindfulness institute farm retreat center that is focused in creating an agrarian community, and a Commons Rematriation project in Massachusetts with a farm in the Charles River Watershed.

The two newest Agrarian Commons farmland projects are both happening in Virginia, a state steeped in past and present racism. Virginia's agricultural economy and infrastructure were built by enslaved Black people and is currently one of the most agriculturally diverse states in the country. Both the Central Virginia Agrarian Commons and the Southwest Virginia Agrarian Commons are in the process of securing land for Black farmers who have and continue to do the hard and amazing work of growing food and feeding and building community.

The Central Virginia Agrarian Commons, based in Richmond, centers BIPOC control of land for building resilient community food systems. This Agrarian Commons is unique for its vision of the interdependence of rural and urban communities, and has the common challenge of needing to build homes and farm infrastructure on raw land.

The rural aspect of the Central Virginia Agrarian Commons is an amazing story of justice and transformation tied to land with a donation of inherited farmland seeding the commons. This act of generosity comes out of the understanding that generational wealth has been a privilege afforded to some while not to others, and is a step towards reparative justice.

When discussing why she is choosing to donate her farmland to the Central Virginia Agrarian Commons, Callie Walker said, "It seems to me that the very most important thing I have to offer my community in years ahead is to support a collective of food growers. My most long-standing priority, though, goes back to growing up in school here in Amelia County, and that one is to work on bridging the gap between black and white".

The urban aspect of this commons is important because "there are so many people of color who live there without resources and transportation", said Duron Chavis. Chavis, a farmer of the Central Virginia Agrarian Commons, has been developing community gardens, urban farms, orchards and vineyards in the Richmond area for over a decade, and works to coordinate and organize innovative and culturally relevant initiatives around urban agriculture and local food systems. The work Chavis does is crucial to food sovereignty and the health of his community and environment. His garden and farm projects have had to pause, move, and start over and over again due to a lack of land security.

"Urban farming space is central to building food justice. Lack of land tenure has been a real challenge though. So much of farming is just getting everything right so we can grow things – soil, infrastructure, etc. – but urban farming is particularly hard because of development pressure", said Chavis.

Development pressure is also high in Roanoke, the site of the other commons in Virginia. In the Southwest Virginia Agrarian Commons, Cam Terry of Garden Variety Harvests is a Black vegetable grower who has been supplying multiple restaurants and farmers' markets with fresh, organically-grown vegetables each week using only his neighbor's lawns and other various borrowed and leased land throughout the city. Although Terry has been able to achieve so much with this model, it is not ideal for many reasons. Without a centralized farm, Terry's operation requires a lot of driving around to tend to his many gardens, and the lack of long-term security makes it difficult to plan things like crop rotations to meet market needs.

"The hope has always been to get to the point where we can responsibly find a piece of land that we can run the entire farm on without incurring a mountain of debt that we have to figure out how to climb out from under," said Terry. "I don't think small farmers should be on the hook for mountains of debt to be able to feed their communities. The Commons model offers a way where everybody can be invested in the success of a small farm business."

Agrarian Trust was born from a recognition that the future of farming depends on equitable land access. In creating an alternative to private ownership and the commodification of land, the Agrarian Commons model addresses land access, tenure, and equity for all farmers. Because the model is a direct response to the dispossession caused by extraction, consolidation, and speculation, it is especially well suited to support land access for those who have experienced the most violent and persistent forms of dispossession: farmers of color.

Learn more at [agrariantrust.org](http://agrariantrust.org).

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(Shelterbelt - continued from B-16)

and goals. I feel really aware of how much privilege is involved in our story. It's expensive and time-consuming to buy land with no buildings. For us it worked because we were purchasing the land with Craig's parents and Craig is a builder. We couldn't have developed all we have if we needed to hire a builder for it. Yes, it takes longer to do it this way, but we also had the decision-making power to choose where everything goes. If you buy something with water, outbuildings, a house, fencing, etc., you can often get started much sooner than we did, but you also are working with the design (or lack of) that is there.

While a handful of kind landowners offered to give us low-cost access to their fields, those scenarios didn't meet our needs. Particularly since we raise livestock, we didn't want to have to drive to our farm every time we needed to check on things. None of their properties had fencing, shelter, or water systems in place, and we preferred not to have to invest in all that infrastructure on leased land. I know many people feel similarly but it's a huge privilege to be able to build it all as you want it to be.

For years, we've reflected on all we have been able to have and do for our family and this farm and grappled with how to give back, do more for our community and right the wrongs of colonization that have benefited us. We are very much at the beginning of this exploration but are working on some collaborations that we feel excited about, that would lead to a very different future for this land. Some of what we're exploring is giving some land to a non-profit or working with a neighbor who wants to start an incubator farm for Black women, but that's all we can really say about it for now!

**TNF: It took a few years to acquire the land. Do you think there was a way to expedite that journey knowing what you know now?**

ERICA: I don't think so, and looking back, it was probably good that it took that long (even though I was so impatient and would never have said that at the time!) It forced us to continually hone our ideals, our hopes and our vision. Every time a purchase offer didn't work out, we had to reexamine our ideals and think even more deeply about where we were willing to give a little. Even once we bought the land, we didn't do anything directly on it for a full year because we spent time there, to learn and observe. Like so many good designers - permaculturists and the like - would tell you, the first step to a good design process is observation.

**TNF: Do you recommend your approach of letter writing to acquire land?**

ERICA: Yes, I think so, but it's really best used if you have a pre-existing relationship with a place like we did. When we first started looking, we had lived just around the corner for years and knew farmers, neighbors and the community. Craig already ran a small business here. If you come from far away and don't know the people or place and culture, writing letters could potentially feel invasive or disrespectful to the recipients. But when you live in a place first, are active in community organizations and schools, and know people, your letters and inquiry are likely to be much more well-received by a landowner. And it's more likely to work out well for you too because you're not going to end up buying a piece of land in an area where you later discover you don't feel at home at all and don't find a sense of community.

More info: [shelterbeltfarm.com/](http://shelterbeltfarm.com/)



## Building the Organic Neighborhood

By Mary-Howell and Klaas Martens

American agriculture has a serious problem. The average American grain farmer is in their 60's, often lacking a 'next generation' willing to carry forward their parents' dreams, hard-earned success, and, perhaps most importantly, their parents' debt. Generational transfer, especially when there are both farming and non-farming heirs, is a serious challenge when the family property is held in not easily negotiable land, equipment and animals. This can make distributing inheritance equitably amongst all the heirs fraught and perceivably unfair.

Often, this challenge is solved by selling the farm. The entry of massive amounts of corporate/foreign private equity and venture capital money into rural America has resulted in many small independent farms being consolidated into large, absentee-held acreage, with hired farm managers and migrant workers replacing farm families. As small towns empty, the local schools, stores, churches and community services are gutted, leaving behind insidious rural poverty without the support of young families and active tax revenue. It is nearly impossible for us to believe in a future of regained local land ownership and vibrant functional communities once outside investment money buys our farmland.

The absentee landlord-owned farming system has a strong incentive to generate maximum annual income with little to no maintenance or improving the health of the soil. The Midwest is losing on average 2 pounds of topsoil for every pound of corn produced and several times that much soil for every pound of soybeans. Over the past 50 years, nearly every attempt to require basic soil conservation as a precondition for subsidy payments has failed. The biggest crop production subsidies now are buried in the crop insurance system and even there, where good soil conservation clearly reduces long-term risk, the system penalizes many good practices and rewards those who seek short-term gains.

Effectively incentivizing sound land management is far simpler than replacing farmers. The biggest hurdle to changing our modern agricultural dynamic is the ability to replace generations of knowledge, commitment and skill with young engaged farmers.

- How do we develop new populations of farm families willing to support our rural communities, manage our land, and produce our food in an environmentally sound, forward-looking manner? Where do we find young people willing to provide the essential post-harvest infrastructure, the feed mills, grain cleaning plants, distribution hubs, and processing facilities essential to sustain a viable, healthy regional agricultural economy?
- How do we develop a system that successfully recruits and trains young farmers, perhaps from non-traditional backgrounds, to produce a diverse "complete local diet" - vegetables, grains for food and feed, fruits, forage, livestock/poultry production, along with sufficient infrastructure to procure reasonable regional food security and self-sufficiency?
- How do we establish a group of autonomous but cooperatively linked farms, rewarded by the powerful incentives of business ownership, autonomy and self-determination, but working within a larger community for common goals of food security, sustainable land management, shared equipment, education and community?

On our farm, we have been testing a model that seeks to deal with the issues of land access, generational transfer, diversification, and empowering/training young farmers while improving farm biodiversity, environmental stewardship, reliable markets, and regional infrastructure.

We call it our "Organic Neighborhood", and it is still very much a work in progress, but we are much encouraged by what we see so far. We like good neighbors and we want more!

### LAND BASE

Our farm's land base consists of 450-acres of owned land, 1300-acres of leased land, and about 200-other acres that are owned by cooperating farmers, used in conjunction with our directly controlled land. This land is managed mainly now by our older son, Peter Martens and his employees, with frequent valuable assistance from Klaas.

Our entire land base is managed under active conservation and nutrient management plans and is enrolled in NY Ag&Markets' Agricultural Environmental Management Program (AEM) through our conservation district. We have invested considerable money in capital improvements on both the rented and owned land each year. Most of this investment is for conservation structures such as diversion ditches and water/sediment control basins. Contour farming, strip cropping, drainage, stream bank protection, and other soil health improvement practices are used on all the land, regardless of ownership. Most landowners appreciate that we invest in improving their land and are willing to negotiate rental agreements that allow us long-term use of their land so that we can recover the cost of the improvements with provisions to reimburse us for the un-depreciated residual cost of the improvements in the event that the land is sold before we have recovered our investments.

In the United States, many smaller farms have neither sufficient acreage nor the right equipment to do a good job of crop rotation, markets that do not reward diversification and may not make good use of planned intentional soil and land conservation to reduce erosion, improve water management, and enhance soil health. Operating within a larger Neighborhood of farms could provide incentives for better land stewardship.

It is important not to confuse 'land tenancy' with 'land ownership'. In many cases, ownership of the land is not nearly as important as the control of the land. Our son, Peter, has aggressively acquired considerable rental land, knowing that his profit comes not in ownership but in production. Investors interested in purchasing acreage should see the benefits of supporting a Neighborhood model as a means to make their investment perform better.

### INFRASTRUCTURE BASE

In many areas there is a serious deficiency in the infrastructure necessary to buy, process, package, chill, store, pasteurize, weigh, butcher, grind, ferment and market farm products. Regional animal feed mills, food-grade flour mills, seed cleaning equipment, cold storage facilities, slaughterhouses, truck scales, grain bins, transportation/loading facilities, plus trucks, forklifts, and other handling and transportation equipment are essential for the sustainable development and persistence of an agricultural community. Often the actual farming of products is the easiest part - it is the post-harvest handling, transportation, and processing that create the biggest costs, bottlenecks, frustrations and risk.

In the early 1990s, we saw an opportunity to produce organic dairy feed from our corn and small grains and purchased the local Agway feed mill in Penn Yan in 2001. Since then, Lakeview Organic Grain has been managed by Mary-Howell with, more recently, our younger son Daniel. Lakeview buys mostly New York-grown organic grains from local farmers and produces organic dairy, poultry and small animal feed that is shipped throughout the Northeast. Lakeview also sells grain, cover crop and pasture seed, and retail bagged feed for the 'backyard chicken crowd'. Over the past 10 years, the growth of small and midsize organic poultry and small animal feed demand has accelerated enormously as organic dairy feed demand has flattened.

In many ways, Lakeview has been the quiet glue pasting together the financial stability and supply for numerous organic grain and dairy farms in the Northeast for many years. Now, as Mary-Howell contemplates semi-retirement, Daniel and Peter are actively planning the construction of a new feed mill, with modern equipment, automation, and greatly expanded capabilities. Within five years, this new feed mill should be functional,

giving Lakeview the ability to continue as a hub to purchase grain from local farmers, deliver feed to others, sell seed to all, thus providing markets, supplies, grain storage, economic stability, information support, and continuity.

Additionally, Peter and several of his employees have started another stand-alone business called Seneca Grain and Bean which markets high-quality organic food-grade grains and dry beans, both wholesale and retail. The key piece enabling this business to grow is a state-of-the-art grain cleaning facility built on the farm 3 years ago, and a modern grain drying system that allows the purchase of larger quantities of grain at harvest from local farmers. Seneca Grain and Bean is currently selling to several regional bakeries and flour mills, and this spring, our small local artisan bakery will market special sourdough bread of their grain. That is some seriously delicious synergy!

### PEOPLE BASE

Our farm and many other early-adopter organic farms are facing the interesting process of succession to a new generation coming of age in a very different world than we did. This is a world of industrial-scale and global 'organic' farming, imported grain and consolidating markets, vast corporate/private equity/foreign investment in agriculture, internet sales and information, a changing demographic of people willing to farm, increasing costs of land and equipment, challenges of affordable/sustainable energy and agricultural inputs, the emerging science of soil health and non-chemical pest control, and of course, a changing climate. The innocent 'golden' years of organic farming are over. In this fast-paced, demanding world, there is very little room for error, learning or idealism.

Because often young people from non-agricultural backgrounds lack technical skills, financing or equipment, many new farmers choose to grow vegetables, poultry and small fruit instead of grain, tree fruit or large animals. Certainly, the world needs more organic vegetables, but too often these new farmers end up competing against each other for the same limited customer base, driving prices down and threatening a sense of community. Pandemic-induced restaurant and tourist shutdowns have been absolutely devastating for many farmers who direct-market their crops and meats to restaurants, tourist attractions and schools. Intentionally creating Neighborhoods of complementary rather than competitive enterprises would be a significant advantage for these producers.

In the United States, our 'emotional standard' is the independently-owned family farm but that may not be the best or most likely model for the future. Not only does a family farm limit choices if farmers decide to change careers, but it can also consume all family resources, leaving little room for other choices, flexibility or opinions. A family farm also can be unexpectedly lonely, extremely stressful and even boring, and simply may not be the long-term future that young people want to tightly tether themselves to. At the same time, employees on investment farms often lack the ownership incentive or autonomy so needed to justify and give the 'fire in the belly' necessary for making the sacrifices, time, financial commitment, and risk that farming demands, or the desire to improve and conserve land that is not theirs. The bottom line is that young people need flexibility to learn and decide, and once they do, they need autonomy and the ability to build equity/ownership in the farm to keep going. They need to know they are creating something of tangible value and security for themselves and their families.

In the United States, there are young people who want to farm as their career, but many end up as farm managers, often moving from farm to farm if secure land tenancy is unattainable. The rate of burnout and attrition amongst these people is very high for very good reasons.

For women and for families, farming with small children is difficult without good community sup

*(continued on next page)*



Lakeview Organic Hay bales.

(Organic Neighborhood - continued from B-18)

port and resources. There are additional barriers for People of Color, people with disabilities, people without innate mechanical ability, people with credit/financial limitations, people without partners willing to share the physical work, just to name a few. Too often we assume that if we provide enough information and technical resources, young farmers magically will know how to farm but in reality, there is a real need to learn within a community, to see how and why things are done, ask questions, experiment, and participate.

Our local agricultural community is largely Old Order Mennonite, with strong ethics of both community cooperative work and fierce individual business ownership. However, land is increasingly priced beyond what is feasible for young families, so many Mennonite young folks are choosing other careers in construction, equipment repair, woodworking, direct market vegetables, or diversifying small farms with multiple enterprises. A few of the outward-looking young Mennonite farmers are key pieces in our Organic Neighborhood, bringing mechanical skills, creative energy, and unrelenting work habits that inspire us all.

### THE NEIGHBORHOOD

As our farm transitions to a new generation, our land base is now supporting three dairy farms and three crop farms, each owned and managed independently but working within a larger group of very highly motivated creative young farmers, processors and employees.

Our vision of Neighborhood is to capture the economies of scale and the efficiencies of cutting-edge technology while keeping the management and ownership of the enterprises on a smaller family farm scale. We hope to add additional enterprises to this land base without needing to increase the acreage, thereby making all of the other enterprises stronger by increasing diversity. With Klaas and Peter's managerial experience and energy (especially in the tougher moments), we currently include eight farmers who have the needed skills and motivation. We believe that once we include three or four additional farmers to take over other key enterprises, this will be a self-sustaining system.

Rather than one huge farm with millions in capital investment and central management, labor supplied by underpaid workers and the profits going to one owner, the Neighborhood model is divided into small cooperating sole proprietorships that are essential and complementary to each other. It is similar to a feudal manor system: self-sufficient as a whole but managed by independent entrepreneurs.

The enterprises must fit together in a way that is complementary to each other. Waste streams from one enterprise become essential inputs to another. The dairy farms feed cover crops for forage that grew on the grain fields. Crop residues are grazed after harvest, and byproducts from processing are fed for livestock. Manure from the dairy farms is fertilizer for the grain fields. Tractors that pull tillage equipment in the spring and fall haul manure between planting seasons.

Two of the crop farmers are interested in providing custom farming services as a way to generate income and justify owning newer equipment. Working with others within the group, they will have the assurance of enough income from custom harvesting to pay themselves a decent wage and maintain the equipment. Instead of maintaining separate forage choppers and forage wagons on the three dairy farms, one custom operator with a large chopper

can harvest the same amount of forage in much less time. One new large harvester costs less than three small ones. GPS-equipped European technology makes large-scale organic weed control efficient and feasible, and when distributed over a larger land base, also affordable.

### PAYING THE BILLS

The bottom line is that farms are businesses and therefore they must be profitable to be viable and sustainable. Each farm must make sufficient income and provide a sufficiently satisfying lifestyle to reward the choice. Therefore, all planning we do must use this lens: an Organic Neighborhood must ensure that all the component farms and the supporting infrastructure are adequately profitable. Without that, this ambitious project cannot succeed.

Organic grain is making very good income today at current prices but that is driving the cost of animal feed beyond what is economically feasible for many farms – and the feed mills that serve them! By feeding cover crops as forages and using ‘waste’ materials from grain cleaning and processing, the costs of feeding animals is much reduced.

Farms must have access to capital for improvement and expansion. We are helping two of the farmers in the group qualify for USDA Farm Services beginning farmer loans, plus Klaas and Peter are working with NRCS to approve these farms for major cost-sharing land management and manure handling systems. There is money available to beginning farmers, but navigating the system and make the best use of the money is a hard-earned skill.

Klaas is working with the local Soil and Water program and the county Economic Development Agency to explore the possibility of forming an Irrigation District. Access to irrigation water from our Finger Lakes would be helpful to the dairy farmers to maintain pasture quality, but would also open the possibility of adding a fresh vegetable enterprise to the mix. Klaas is also talking with local solar installers about ‘agro-voltaics’ – elevated solar panels installed in pastures in a manner that makes grazing and energy generation complementary. We have installed solar panels on many barn roof surfaces on our farm, generating much of the stationary electricity we use on the farm, and we have plans to expand this capacity within the next few years.

If we can successfully develop an Organic Neighborhood of cooperating farms and businesses around us, perhaps we can see that ‘food security’ is not just another government program and ‘risk management’ is not just another crop insurance policy. Instead, they are people and enterprises, they are our neighbors, working together in synergy.

### Resources & Links:

Lakeview Organic Grain, [Lakevieworganicgrain.com](http://Lakevieworganicgrain.com) and Seneca Grain and Bean, [Senecagrainandbean.com](http://Senecagrainandbean.com)

*Mary-Howell and Klaas Martens, along with their son Peter, farm 2500 acres of certified organic grain and dairy in Penn Yan, NY. The farm has been certified organic since 1992. Mary-Howell and their younger son, Daniel, operate Lakeview Organic Grain, an organic animal feed and seed operation. ☼*

## Accessing Farmland Together: Strategies and Considerations

By Kathy Ruhf and Jim Habana Hafner

Many farmers are exploring ways to farm together. The idea of being and sharing with other farmers is not only appealing but innately human. The impulse to cooperate is as old as agriculture itself when sustaining one's self and family was a group effort, and individual sustenance was only possible in community. Today this is sometimes referred to as “collaborative farming,” “cooperative farming,” or “collective farming.” When farming as a group, farmers may share resources, assets, knowledge and skills. A group of farmers could share equipment, inputs, marketing and/or labor.

### Farmers could also share land

This article focuses on how farmers access land as a group. The focus is on farmers with commercial aims, although the motivations for, and benefits of “group farmland access” extend beyond economic considerations. It is worth noting that an increasing number of private and public landowners are interested in providing group farming opportunities on their land.

Like many visions about farming, “group farmland access” can mean different things. In this article, group farmland access means two or more farmers using a specific property for farming. A group might also consist of farmers and non-farmers on land together. Group farmland access implies some amount of purposeful interaction among the farmers in the group, on a piece of land. So farmers who rent land from the same landlord but do not interact with each other in meaningful ways would not be considered “group farming.” They would just be independent tenants.

Purposeful interaction among farmers on the same piece of land has both advantages and challenges. Group farmland access requires legal arrangements for holding the land along with structures and processes for group “governance.” The legal and social arrangements for holding land and making decisions as a group vary. Each has pros and cons.

A new decision tool developed by Land For Good for the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network-Northeast (FRSAN-NE) helps farmers examine group farmland access methods, [landforgood.org/accessing-farmland-together](http://landforgood.org/accessing-farmland-together). Ten group farmland access methods are described, based on the type of group and choice to rent or own the land.

In this new decision tool, a group could consist of several farmers who are farming together as a single farm business entity or a group might comprise a few farmers who have their own businesses and want to share a parcel of land. A farmer might farm alongside others on land rented from a training incubator. The focus is on how group approaches to land access could meet the vision and situation of a farmer, a group of farmers, a landowner, or other stakeholders. A method that works for one farmer or group or situation might not be appropriate for another.

### Why focus on group farmland access?

Groups of farmers farming on land together is not a new concept. Throughout history, farmers have shared land by means of formal or informal arrangements. Many Indigenous peoples have worked the land together without artificial boundaries between them. In the U.S., settler colonialism, genocide and slavery (and their aftermath), Western European concepts of private property (and policies based on its sanctity) have undermined group stewardship of land, including many of the values and informal/non-legal norms and customs supporting it.

In 1969, Black civil rights activists including co-

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(*Farming Together - continued from B-19*)

founder Shirley Sherrod formed New Communities Land Trust and purchased 6,000 acres in Georgia. New Communities rented parcels of land to African Americans who farmed and lived there. A decade later, the New England Small Farm Institute began subleasing small parcels of a 400-acre state-owned property to groups of incubating farmer-trainees. Thirty years ago, immigrant farmers from Puerto Rico started *Nuestras Raices* to grow food on shared urban land in Massachusetts. In 1994, the Well-spring Land Cooperative in VT was incorporated as a community land trust to share the ownership, care and financial responsibility of acquired land among the members residing on that land. These are just four examples of how farmers share land. Farmers and communities continue to experiment with how group farmland access can make farmland more affordable and secure and can foster a spirit of sharing and cooperation.

Group land access can address one of the biggest challenges for farmers—especially new and young farmers, and those from groups that are and were historically and are still marginalized due to their race, class, ethnicity, gender—getting onto land. Farmland is expensive to buy. Appropriate land for agriculture is hard to find, especially when housing is factored in. Renting land can be expensive relative to farm profit margins and rented land can be insecure, so it is risky for farmers to make permanent or long-term investments in the operation or the land itself. Plus, farming can be isolating. Pooling resources can make land access more affordable. Sharing land can reduce risk. That said, some group methods bring their own sets of risks.

Often, groups of farmers who share access to farmland will also share in other aspects of farming, such as buying seeds, using wash stations and tractors, and delivering farm products to market. In most cases, farmer and farm labor housing are critical pieces of the land access puzzle. The Decision-Making Tool for FRSAN-NE focuses on land, but many of the considerations apply to shared farmer housing as well.

### Working as a Group

The idea of sharing land with others is attractive to some farmers. A spirit of cooperation, sharing resources and connecting around shared values if not a common vision can improve farmers' chances of production and business success as well as quality of life. Depending on the method, accessing land as a group can be an antidote to the ills of private property ownership and lack of community expressed by some farmers, as well as by some farming and social justice groups. The Greenhorns guidebook *Cooperative Farming: Frameworks for Farming Together* by Faith Gilbert provides a useful introduction and framework for exploring multiple aspects of farming as a group.

There are also challenges to group farmland access. Groups of people can be challenging to manage, regardless of how committed and harmonious they are. Those involved may have a lot of history together or maybe create new relationships. Group composition may change over time. Group farmland access involves a lot more than just getting along or sharing resources. It involves trust, communication, accommodation and accountability in very different ways than going "solo" on land.

Group farmland access relies on three equally important kinds of relationships: interpersonal, legal and management. Interpersonal relationships are social. The legal structures alone will not be effective or enduring tools if the underlying social dynamics are dysfunctional or not a good fit with the legal structure. Social relationships can be complicated. Functioning in a group is very different from doing it alone as a farmer and farm business. Relationship basics such as good communications, managing differences and conflict, and effective decision-making are all essential. Diversity in language, culture, gender and socio-economic backgrounds can add to the complexity - and the opportunity. People and circumstances change over time. Shared values and good procedures help a lot, but that doesn't guarantee success.

Legal relationships are the technical aspects. They focus on the arrangements among the parties and with the land reflected in such documents as deeds, leases, and operating agreements. They are often developed with the guidance of an attorney. While these documents can be very technical, they help make rights and obligations clear. Any arrangement of farmers on the land will involve some type of legal agreement. Even if a group arrangement is based on informal and verbal agreements that are evolving, or a creative combination of methods, the group still needs to get clear about and document in writing the legal arrangements and how it will operate.

Management relationships are the glue between the interpersonal and the legal. They describe how the group is managed and governed. Sometimes these processes are laid out in legal documents. In other situations, group management is less formal but nonetheless needs to be understood and accepted by all. Whatever the arrangement, principles of equity should prevail. This means that all parties should feel assured that the agreements are fair; that each party's rights and interests are fairly represented. There is a lot to learn from the experiences of the cooperative and co-housing movements, and other fields where group dynamics and cooperative management are central.

The group farmland access decision tool invites farmers to consider these key questions:

- Who is in the group?
- What are the legal structures and agreements?
- What documents are required?
- How are social relationships managed?

Then it proposes four steps for farmers, landowners, and other stakeholders to take to explore whether a group approach might work for their goals or situations.

The first focuses on the type of group. The group may already exist, be developing or aspirational. These four group types are presented in Table 1. They are an arbitrary typology as there are variations, combinations, and other options. But thinking about types can help clarify thinking and process. In the one-farm group, a single farm business with multiple farmers buys or rents a property. In the intentional group, separate farm businesses intentionally commit to owning or renting a property together. These farmers may also share equipment, inputs, marketing and/or labor.

In a situational group, separate farm businesses independently rent portions of a property, connected by an overarching mission or framework. An incubator farm run by a nonprofit organization and hosting multiple farmers and farm businesses is an example. Here too, equipment, infrastructure, and labor could be shared among the farmers, with or without the involvement of the host entity that provides the land base. Farmers in a situational group may also share services offered by the landlord organization. A mixed group could be farmers and non-farmers renting or owning (or a combination) a property together. For example, a group of farmers could be members of a community land trust from which they rent land. A mixed group could also describe a situation where some farmers own a property and other farmers rent from them.

The second step is the choice of land tenure: to rent or own the land. Land For Good's Farm Access Methods Guide focuses on the basics of farmland tenure—meaning how farmers hold their land – and provides a framework for understanding various tenure options. Land tenure is underpinned by law and custom, many of which are problematic due to their historic and contemporary inequities. The concept and legacies of land holding, control and use via property ownership are fraught. Some visionaries and social activists (including farmers and farmland owners) advocate for alternatives to land as private property and to treating land as a commodity. Some of the models refer to "community ownership" or "ownership by the commons"—concepts that partially overlap with (but are not the same as) group farmland access. These should not be confused with common property, and readers interested in "the commons" as a form of natural resource governance

are referred to the vast literature on "common property theory."

These approaches are gaining traction and new examples appear with increasing frequency. That said, the basic land tenure methods still revolve around ownership, or the alternative, tenancy. For the most part, group farmland access also faces the same fork in the road: to own or rent property. Farmers could own some land and rent additional land. This is common due to the need to secure a farm with housing, and also acquire additional land to ensure an adequate (and flexible) farmland base. Many farmers move from renting land to purchasing that same property or other land. The same can be true for farmers in some group farmland situations.

Buying farmland, which often includes housing and farm infrastructure, is a big commitment under any scenario. But buying land with others has its own set of risks. Can the group afford the initial purchase and ownership costs over time? Who or what entity should be on the deed? How is equity in the real estate divided and adjusted? How does a farmer get out if they don't want to own anymore? How are differences in investment handled? How do group ownership structures and norms align with other values about, for example, land as private property?

The third step is to explore various methods, based on the type of group and choice of tenure. In the tool, a decision tree graphically lays out ten methods. Real-world examples bring each method to life. For example, a "one-farm group" wishing to own property together has a couple of choices. At Bumbleroot Organic Farm in Maine, four individual farmers formed a farm business, Bumbleroot Farm LLC. They also formed a separate real estate LLC (Limited Liability Company) that owns the land and leases it to the farm business.

Grow Food Northampton in Massachusetts, and Intervale Center in Vermont are nonprofit organizations that own land and rent to multiple (a group of) farmers. In these examples of "situational group" access, the individual farmers have their own businesses and separate leases. The farmers chose this method for the benefits that working and learning alongside others brings to their own businesses. They share infrastructure and abide by overarching requirements from the landlord organization. In these cases, the method is consistent with the mission and goals of the landowning host organizations. A variation on this method is exemplified by Urban Edge Farm in Rhode Island. Here, Southside Community Land Trust rents state-owned land and then subleases portions of that land to several separate farm businesses that cooperate on infrastructure use and marketing.

In Maine, the Somali Bantu Community Association formed a nonprofit organization of farmers, in part to negotiate a long-term lease for land owned by the Little Jubba Central Maine Agrarian Commons, which receives oversight and support from the Agrarian Trust. In this example of an "intentional group," the tenant is one entity with multiple farmers, and the landlord is a community land trust.

Practically speaking, the category of method is less important than the structures and agreements among the parties. Some farmers may think it is all too complicated, too formal, with too much "legalese." They would rather rely on good intentions and good "vibes." Yes, sometimes informal arrangements can be appropriate and sufficient. But without doing the homework, casual agreements and assumptions often result in failure. The point is that good relationships alone can't do the job of sound, well-thought-out, agreed upon and documented structures and agreements. Conversely, all the legalese in the world will not realize a given method if it is not based on strong relationships. The authors know of one group of farmers that was enthusiastic about forming a cooperative to rent land from a state agency. After many hours of meetings and document drafting, it fell apart because no one wanted to take responsibility for the details. In another case, a well-intentioned farm support organization ran into trouble when one

(continued on next page)

## Community Land Trusts as a vehicle for homestead land sharing

By Grace Gershuny

Land ownership is often considered to be integral to achieving the “American dream.” At the founding of this country, only white male landowners could vote. The expansion of European settlements in North America was predicated on theft of land from Indigenous peoples who did not share the settlers’ concept of land ownership, believing that the land and the earth, in general, belonged to all of humanity as the source of life. The converging crises confronting humanity now require a complete rethinking of all our social and political relationships. Fundamental to this transformation is a shift in how we relate to land and its care. Land stewardship must return to the control of the community, for the common good. One way to begin is by creating community land trusts that hold ownership of the land while offering secure tenure to resident land stewards through long-term inheritable leases. This is my story of how I came to become a landowner, and why I am working on such an arrangement for my own homeland that can be replicated elsewhere.

### My land ownership saga

I became a landowner for the first time in 1973. I had just moved to Vermont to be with my first husband, and we had to move out of the rented house he had been sharing with some friends. We found an old farmhouse that we could afford with a few acres of mostly wet land along the Clyde River in West Charleston, VT. That summer we had the only tillable half-acre tilled and harrowed, and I had my first gardening experience. I was totally hooked on growing food and knew that we would need more land to really be able to farm.

In a few years, we found about 100 acres nearby that we were able to purchase along with three other families. The property was located about a mile up a fourth-class road that was not maintained in the winter, but power lines were already there. I envisioned developing a cooperative farming venture of some kind, but there was no cohesive plan of that sort by the group. After a couple of marriage breakups (including my own) and other life changes in the group, the land was divided up and everyone just maintained their own homestead.

A few years later I married into the land I now call home in the southern region of Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom. After several years of farming together, that marriage ended, and I was able to hold onto the house we had built together and then acquired the 10.3 acres of land it occupies. Through the following decades of co-parenting, teaching and working at organic advocacy, more relationship drama, and an abortive attempt at creating a farm-based co-housing community I realized that a longer-range plan for my home place was needed.

At some point in this journey, it became clear to me that I didn’t really want to be a landowner, but had no choice in the current market economy if I wanted to have secure tenancy in my own home. I felt very connected to the land and my community and had no wish to live anywhere else, but with advancing age knew that I did not have the capacity on my own to fulfill my vision of how to properly steward this slice of paradise—or even with the help of a partner who is capable and resourceful, but also well into his seventies. I started talking to my ex about possibly putting our two parcels back together and designing in a couple of more home sites where younger people could be welcomed to build and help create the permaculture paradise that we had envisioned together so long ago. Our grown daughter may have little interest in returning to the land where she grew up, but both of our shares would eventually become hers.

At a NOFA Conference a few years ago I was deeply inspired by meeting Leah Penniman, who offered this advice to white allies seeking to support

the resurgence of Black farmers: “Share your land.” Since that time I’ve talked with friends and neighbors and attended several workshops and webinars on racial equity and land sharing. After a most enlightening conversation with Susan Witt at the Schumacher Center, who had already developed a model farmstead-oriented community land trust for their region of the Berkshires, I began formulating some more concrete ideas for setting up a Community Land Trust in my region.

### Why a Community Land Trust?

The community land trust (CLT) differs in several crucial ways from the more widely known land trust model aimed at conserving working farmland and woodland, as well as unique ecological values. Traditional conservation land trusts are well represented in Vermont, but have little capacity to work with smaller acreage that has no unique attributes such as prime agricultural soils or habitat for endangered species. Landowners are expected to actively manage farmland and woodland, and title to the property rests with the individuals who live there and steward it. The property can be sold at market rates, minus any development potential that has been transferred “in perpetuity” to the land trust.

There are currently around 225 CLTs established in mostly urban areas of the U.S., acquiring dwellings and making them available at affordable rates to low-income communities. The Champlain Housing Trust in Northwestern Vermont is among the oldest of these, initiated in Burlington during the tenure of then-mayor Bernie Sanders. Its mission statement reads: “The Champlain Housing Trust is a Community Land Trust that supports the people of Northwest Vermont and strengthens their communities through the development and stewardship of permanently affordable homes and related community assets.”

Such a mission goes well beyond conservation or even affordability, but addresses broader issues of community well-being and racial equity as well as

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(Farming Together - continued from B-20)

the farmer-tenants on its land exposed the organization to liability from land mismanagement.

That is where a list of guiding questions, step four in the decision tool, can help farmers make choices and stimulate more research.

What names are on a deed or lease, who is the landlord, how can an individual farmer exit from the arrangement and who makes what decisions are factors that can make or break any group farming on land together. For most farmers, considerations about equity, fairness and security are as important as affordability, liability and control.

Farming together is as old as agriculture itself, and has been central to the business of farming for centuries. Contemporary norms and policies have eroded much of agriculture’s cooperative, community-oriented foundations. There are many reasons why interest in group farming—and group farmland access in particular—has increased. We have witnessed this trend over Land For Good’s nearly 20 years of work with farmers, landowners, non-profits, other farm service providers and policymakers. It is our hope that teasing out the dimensions and goals of this growing interest will contribute to more thinking, dialogue and successful decision making around group farming more broadly. We encourage farmers, landowners and others to explore group land access and to share their stories.

*Kathy Ruhf is Senior Advisor and Jim Habana Hafner is Executive Director at Land For Good*

### Resources and Links:

[youngfarmers.org/frsan-ne/newcommunitiesinc.com/](http://youngfarmers.org/frsan-ne/newcommunitiesinc.com/)

The Greenhorns guidebook *Cooperative Farming: Frameworks for Farming Together* by Faith Gilbert, [greenhorns.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Greenhorns\\_Cooperative\\_Farming\\_Guidebook.pdf](http://greenhorns.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Greenhorns_Cooperative_Farming_Guidebook.pdf)

Land For Good’s Farm Access Methods Guide, [landforgood.org/options-for-farm-access/](http://landforgood.org/options-for-farm-access/)  
Bumblers Organic Farm, [bumblersorganicfarm.com](http://bumblersorganicfarm.com)

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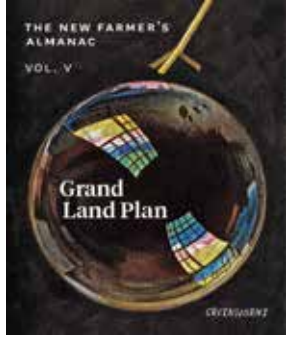
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# Book Reviews



**The New Farmer's Almanac, Volume V**  
By Greenhorns  
Greenhorns, 2021  
400 pages, paperback, \$25

*Reviewed by Kate Spring*

“What kind of nourishment prepares us for bravery?” Severine von Tscharner Fleming asks in her introduction to *The New Farmer's Almanac, Volume V*. As we emerge into summer after a year of COVID-19 lockdowns, social justice uprisings, wildfires and floods, we need to be brave enough to map a new way of being. One that connects rather than separates, weaves rather than dominates.

*The New Farmer's Almanac* is a book of connections. Within its pages, poems, essays, interviews and art weave together stories of farmers, gardeners, teachers and land stewards from across the US and Earth, connecting stories and soil, policy and art, Indigenous wisdom and possibilities of the future. The stories that comprise this book seem to talk with each other, a conversation between the authors as seasons build, and each individual chapter is made stronger for the stories that both precede and follow. An essay on mutual aid and the Black experience flows into the next story on Appalachian Ohio, where Lisa Trocchia writes, “Our most basic instinct as human beings is mutual aid. Survival has always depended on cooperation.”

In “Penobscot Million,” we see how the legal arguments against the Penobscot Tribe’s rights to the river came down to the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of “island.” This leaves one wondering, is it possible to find acknowledgment through the language of colonizers?

Later, in “Beans, Peas, Quinoa, Wheat,” Charlotte Du Cann writes, “Once, we had stories that kept us close to the land ... Can we recover those kinds of relationships? Can ancestral myths and teaching speak to us again?” And we’re reminded that if we look far enough back, every language holds stories of connection and reciprocity, and we can grow our way back to them.

*The New Farmer's Almanac* points the way forward by contextualizing the past, celebrating resilience and upholding imagination as a powerful force. “If we cannot imagine systemic change,” Ang Roell writes in “Radicalize the Hive,” “We cannot begin to end the extractive practices that have perpetuated the oppression of people, land, water, and animals.” While the contributors illustrate the environmental and social harm caused by industrialization, capitalism and colonization, this book isn’t about despair. “Our relationship with our surroundings can be joyful, purpose-filled, and interdependent,” Roell goes on to say, taking lessons from honeybees.

Indeed, this collective work shows the way forward will be seeded with songs, built on stories of regeneration and on relations rooted in interconnectedness. It offers a way to navigate towards an environmentally just and equitable world, doling out creative nourishment that sparks the imagination and stokes the belief that humans can be – must be – part of nature’s balance.

The work ahead requires bravery, and also joy. “Just remember,” writes Shamu Sadeh, Janna Siller and Rebecca Bloomfield, “That you get to laugh while you re-work the global food economy with your bare hands.” In the end, *The New Farmer's Almanac* answers von Tscharner Fleming’s question like this: Bravery is nourished by soil, creativity and connection.



**Rebugging the Planet**  
by Vicki Hird  
Chelsea Green, 2021  
225 pages, paperback \$17.95

*Reviewed by Kathryn Davis*

*Rebugging the Planet* by Vicki Hird is aimed at a wide audience, from those already concerned with the plight of invertebrates to people who didn’t even realize there was a problem. The author is a UK-based environmental campaigner and researcher who brings a vast amount of knowledge and experience to the topic. Her goal is to convince readers of the vital importance of invertebrates to our lives and give us the tools to help support them and ‘rebug.’

The book starts off on a micro level and works its way up to the big picture. Hird begins by asking readers to examine their attitudes towards bugs and how those beliefs are formed. It’s easy to convince people to support cute animals, but the author argues that bugs are just as important and fascinating in their own right. She gives examples of common negative attitudes and follows with some of the many valuable ecological services bugs provide. She mentions some of the more well-known activities like pollination and pest control, as well as lesser-known ones like healing and therapeutic treatments. She also encourages adults to foster a sense of wonder and curiosity towards bugs in their children and to be mindful and intentional about how they discuss bugs with children. Young children in particular are impressionable and any negative attitudes toward bugs exhibited by adults in their lives can be passed on.

The next part of the book touches on the rewilding movement and how these can and should include invertebrates. Large-scale actions, as well as individual choices, are important here. Hird discusses the movement in the UK to create a “superhighway,” essentially a protected corridor for bugs - and other animals - to use in migration. She also encourages people to take individual actions, however small, to help make areas more welcoming and habitable for bugs. From leaving a patch of bare lawn to growing native flowers for pollinators, every small step counts.

In between the large-scale nationwide actions and the small-scale individual choices, there is a lot of room for action at the community level. The author encourages everyone to examine areas in their community that are ripe for improvement, including public parks, community and shared gardens, and meridians and sidewalks with space for plants. Making these areas pollinator-friendly with plantings and keeping them chemical-free will help the community, but also could be part of the larger-scale goal of creating nationwide invertebrate-friendly tracts of land. She encourages people to talk with their neighbors and educate them about bug-friendly practices to use in their gardens.

The book then moves on to the bigger picture and large-scale problems facing invertebrates, including pollution and climate change. These problems can’t be solved by individual action alone, which the author goes into more detail about toward the end of the book, but she does include helpful ‘rebugging actions’ that individuals can take. These include reducing your carbon footprint, eliminating chemicals from your garden, limiting the use of outdoor lighting, and purchasing products produced sustainably. Farming practices are also discussed in this section and Hird encourages readers to support local farmers who are using invertebrate-friendly practices. These include limiting or eliminating the use of chemicals, practicing integrated pest management, leaving hedges or field margins undisturbed, and using cover crops. She also includes responsible grazing practices and using food waste to feed pigs and poultry among these practices. This part was a little oversimplified in my opinion, but the book wasn’t written with a farming audience in mind. The author does acknowledge that there are many farmers who use a combination of both ‘conventional’

and ‘organic’ practices and that these decisions are complicated and have many factors.

The book then explores how our political and economic systems influence invertebrates and the larger environment. The author uses ants and termites as examples of highly complex societies that cooperate within their colonies as well as with other species for mutual benefit and the common good. She argues that we need to make large-scale systemic changes and wrest power back from large corporations that control much of the land and food systems worldwide if we are going to seriously address invertebrate and environmental health. She encourages everyone to get involved in their local and national politics by voting and contacting representatives to urge them to take steps to support invertebrates.

The author ends by painting a picture of what a ‘rebugged’ world would look like and provides readers with resources and groups to connect with if they’d like additional information. Her vision of a world with yards and parks filled with wildflowers and a healthy insect population is appealing. In addition, our society would learn to limit consumption and encourage reuse and recycling as well as ensuring the distribution of resources is more equitable across the board.

Overall, I found *Rebugging the Planet* to be enjoyable and entertaining. I think readers who are looking for ways to be more bug friendly in their own lives will get plenty of ideas from this book. The ‘rebugging actions’ sidebars are particularly helpful for providing ideas of where to start no matter your available time and resources. The portions of the book discussing farming and the economy are intentionally brief for the benefit of a broad audience, but still, provide helpful information to individuals who have limited farming knowledge. I believe the author’s stated goals of illustrating why we should care about invertebrates and providing ideas of how to support them are both worthwhile and this book does that successfully. ⚙️

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*(Land Sharing - continued from B-21)*

ecological sustainability and social accountability. The idea that land is a public good that should not be used as a speculative financial investment is central to the concept, along with a commitment to transparency and democratic governance. According to Wikipedia, “CLTs balance the needs of individuals who want the security of tenure in occupying and using land and housing, with the needs of the surrounding community, striving to secure a variety of social purposes such as maintaining the affordability of local housing, preventing the displacement of vulnerable residents, and promoting economic and racial inclusion. Across the world, there is enormous diversity among CLTs in the ways that real property is owned, used, and operated and the ways that the CLT itself is guided and governed by people living on and around a CLT’s land.”

Bob Swann, the founder with Susan Witt of the Schumacher Center for New Economics, is widely credited with introducing the CLT concept to the U.S. when he advised Shirley and James Sherrod and their associates in the formation of New Communities, Inc. in Albany Georgia in 1969. Swann, et al. describe the concept this way:

“The “classic” community land trust is a democratically governed, regionally based, open membership non-profit corporation that acquires land and interests in land. Through an inheritable and renewable long-term lease, the trust essentially re-

moves land from the speculative market and facilitates use for multiple purposes such as workforce housing, village improvement, sustainable agriculture, and recreation. Individual and organizational leaseholders own the buildings and other improvements on the land created by their labor and investment, but do not own the land itself. The community land trust retains an option to repurchase any building coming up for sale at current replacement value adjusted for deterioration. Leaseholders are able to recoup their equity in any buildings and improvements when they leave, but not the escalating value of the land itself. Rather that land value, created by the common need of others for land, is held in perpetuity on behalf of the regional community. The community land trust resells the buildings at their replacement value and writes a new lease to the new building’s owner.” (Robert Swann, et al. *The Community Land Trust: A Guide to a New Model for Land Tenure in America*).

The Community Land Trust transforms the concept of individual land ownership into one that considers land as the common heritage of the community that obtains food, shelter, energy, water, and other necessities of life that are inherent rights of all people. This heritage must be freed from the dictates of the market economy, which demands that our human heritage be for sale to the highest bidder.

#### Parting Thoughts

Today I am excited to be embarking on a new journey towards the dream I have held since before

moving to Vermont. A recent connection with a like-minded elder who is eager to help pursue the formation of a regional CLT in the Northeast Kingdom has reinvigorated my determination. I look forward to consulting with the vibrant network of BIPOC centered groups, such as the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust, who are working on creating safe spaces and access to land for those who have been shut out and marginalized by the white settler-colonial system that we have inherited. I am especially inspired by the Every Town Project, whose “primary goal is to place at least one parcel of quality land in trust in every town in Vermont to be permanently accessed and stewarded by Black, Indigenous, and all People of Color.” The time seems to be right – If not now, when? If not us, who?



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*A beautiful bundle of colorful beets at Fruition Seeds. Photo provided by Fruition Seeds, Naples, NY.*

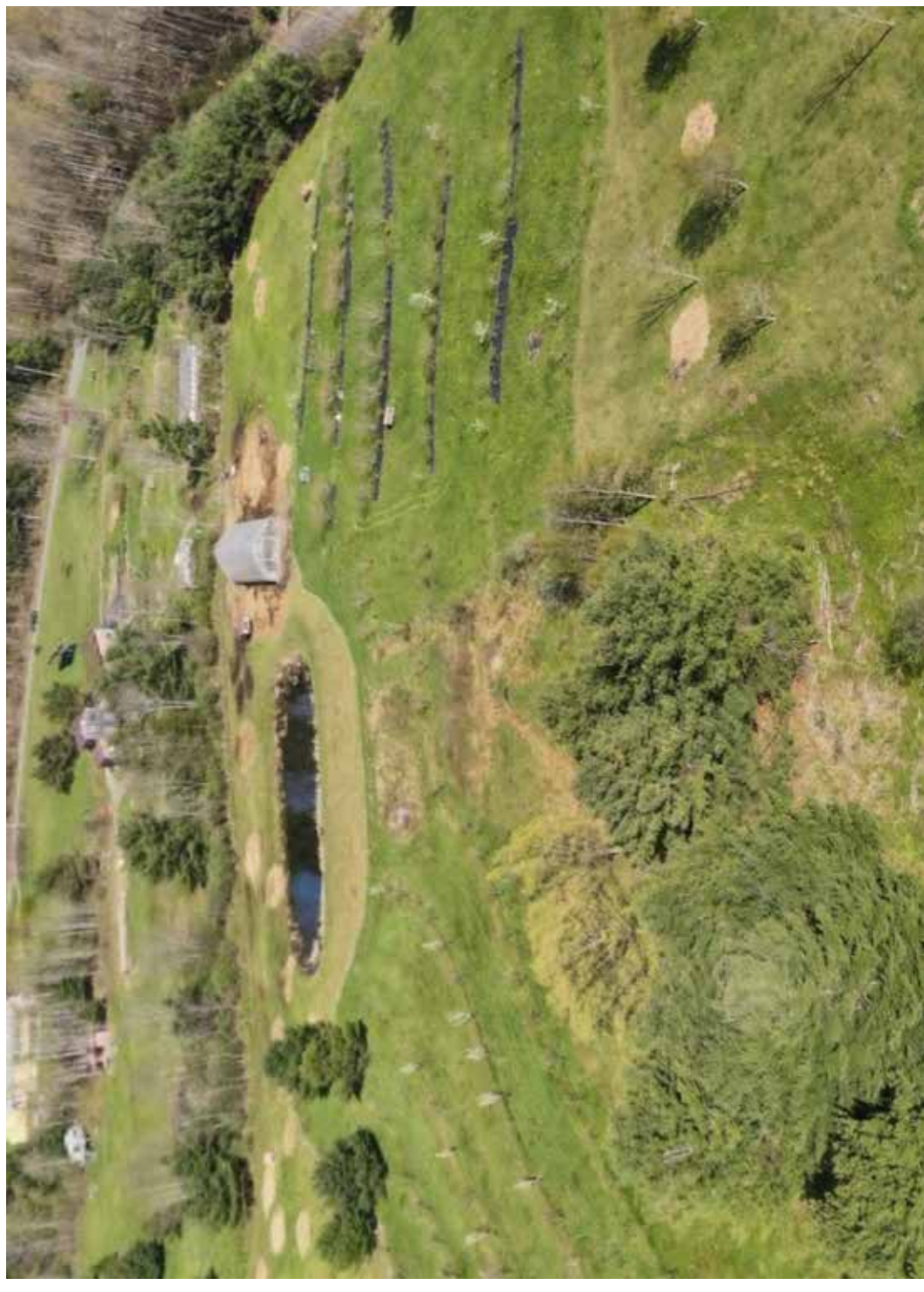
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