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JOHN ROCHE PHOTO

At a groundbreaking ceremony for a new vegetable garden at the Westchester Land Trust's headquarters, the Food Bank for Westchester's food-growing program coordinator, Doug DeCandia, digs in as Christina Rohatynskij and Dan Brady of the Food Bank; Bedford Supervisor Lee Roberts; the Westchester Community Foundation's executive director, Catherine Marsh; Susan Henry, secretary of the Westchester Land Trust's board of directors; and WLT executive director Candace Schafer look on.

Spud farm breaks ground in Bedford Hills

By JOHN ROCHE

Representatives of the Westchester Land Trust and the Food Bank for Westchester broke ground last week on a new garden at the land trust's headquarters in Bedford Hills that will be used to grow sweet potatoes to feed the hungry in the county.

The ceremonial groundbreaking on May 3 at Sugar Hill Farm on Harris Road not only marked the start of potato farming on a quarter-acre of the land trust's four-acre home base, but also kicked off a new partnership between the Food Bank and the WLT.

Doug DeCandia, the Food Bank's food-growing program coordinator, said the goal is to produce 500 pounds of sweet potatoes on four plots at Sugar Hill Farm, where the land trust relocated to in 2008.

All of the produce will go to the Food Bank, based in Millwood, and then be distributed to 200 hunger-relief programs throughout Westchester.

Mr. DeCandia and Eileen Hochberg, the land trust's director of conservation outreach, said growing three varieties of sweet potatoes rather than other vegetables made the most sense because potatoes can be grown with relatively little maintenance, are harvested once, are healthy and can be

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prepared in a variety of ways. "The importance of growing good, fresh food organically is that it contains more nutrients that are not in canned food or foods that people are buying in the grocery store or the gas station," said Mr. DeCandia.

Converting the lawns surrounding the land trust's renovated 19th-century farmhouse at 403 Harris Road into four plots of potato gardens is in step with the missions of both nonprofits, said WLT's executive director, Candace Schafer, who joined the Food Bank for Westchester's executive director Christina Rohatynskij and its special projects coordinator, Dan Brady, along with Town of Bedford Supervisor Lee Roberts and Mr. DeCandia in breaking ground last Tuesday morning.

The land trust's headquarters is one of five sites where Mr. DeCandia will grow vegetables for the Food Bank. Crops at other spots will include dry beans, greens and winter squash. In to-

tal, Mr. DeCandia will farm two-and-a-half acres at the handful of locations in Westchester, with hopes of harvesting 10,000 pounds of fresh produce to feed the hungry.

Representatives said the Food Bank has seen a 30 percent increase in requests from seniors, families and other county residents in recent years. Last year, the Food Bank and the programs it works with distributed 6 million pounds of food to Westchester residents in need.

Mr. DeCandia, a 25-year-old graduate of John Jay High School who grew up in Lewisboro, last year joined the land trust's new Farmers Match program, which pairs local farmers with property owners willing to turn some of their open space into vegetable gardens. This marks the first time that one of WLT's own properties will be part of its Farmers Match program.

Bedford's supervisor welcomed the new partnership between the two

groups as well as the vegetable garden at the Harris Road farm. "It is wonderful that the Westchester Land Trust has made their beautiful grounds available for Douglas DeCandia to farm on behalf of the Food Bank for Westchester," Ms. Roberts said. "This project not only supports local farming but also provides nutritious food for those who need it and showcases the opportunities to do just that in our own backyard. We salute their efforts."

In its efforts to preserve land and promote sustainable agriculture, the WLT has protected more than 7,500 acres in 28 communities, according to its deputy executive director, Tom Anderson. Of its 184 conservation easements, 30 protect or allow agriculture, preserving a total of 900 acres since it was formed 23 years ago, Mr. Anderson said.

Among the other guests at the brief ceremony was Denny Haight, who lived with his sister and parents in the house on Sugar Hill Farm from 1937 through 1954. "When we lived here, we had a garden that provided plenty of fresh vegetables for not only my family but for many of our neighbors," Mr. Haight said. "It's nice to see part of this property being used in that way again."