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LATE SPORTS

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LIFE & STYLE

Farmers find a **MATCH**



Farmers find a **MATCH**

Westchester Land Trust program thrives as growers and landowners help each other, chefs and the community

Photos by Xavier Mascareñas/The Journal News

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Last winter, the Westchester Land Trust launched a Farmers Match Program to pair up would-be farmers who have no land with landowners willing to let them come in and grow food on their property.

So far, seven sets of farmers and landowners have joined hands to give it a go and see if they can make this agricultural experiment work. With one growing season behind it, the program looks like a fantastic success, a win-win-win situation for everyone: First, farmers have been able to grow tons of produce to sell at farmers markets — and to local chefs eager to set their tables with the freshest possible food from nearby growing fields.

Next, the owners of sometimes very large parcels of land that were laying idle are now gentleman farmers, giving the fruits of their fertile soil back to the community.

And lastly and perhaps best of all, Lower Hudson Valley residents are now able to buy more fresh, super-local produce at their markets and favorite restaurants — and keep these farmers right here at home. What's more wonderful than seeing farm animals and growing fields woven right into the rich fabric of suburbia?

"It's been a much bigger success than we thought it would be," says Tom Andersen, deputy executive director of the Bedford Hills-based Westchester Land Trust. "We

didn't expect to get seven matches the first year — that's been amazing to us."

And while last year was hugely encouraging, the Land Trust is anticipating an even bigger Farmers Match Program this year. It may be the dead of winter, but interested landowners and would-be farmers are encouraged to join the program now — and not wait until spring, when everyone is reaching for their shovels and seed packs.

"We're looking to keep the ones (members) we have and add seven new ones — at least five, and 10 would be great," Andersen says. "If people are interested, they should get in touch with us."

Born to grow

The Match Program grew out of the Land Trust's 100-member Local Land, Local Food Farmer Network, which was launched last winter to bring together the many players in the burgeoning local food movement. At the networking meetings it became clear there were a lot of would-be farmers with nowhere to grow.

Deb Taft, who spent last summer tilling and harvesting nearly an acre of growing space at Steve and Patricia Beckwith's 6-acre home in Waccabuc as part of the Match Program, remembers walking into her first networking meeting last winter. "To feel the number of colleagues I had right in my own community was great," says Taft, the former garden director at Rainbeau Ridge, Lisa Schwartz's farm in Bedford Hills. "It became clear in those meetings that there were other people like me who wanted to farm but didn't have the land."

In a county with wildly expensive land and the highest taxes in the country, we now have thriving farmers like Taft who would never have been able to stay here on their own. For the landowners, this program allows them to feel like they're doing something very worthwhile and community-oriented with their land — and they certainly don't mind the gift baskets overflowing with just-picked produce that are often left on their doorsteps.

"Everybody has been very happy to have me here," adds Taft. "Steve has been extremely generous. Not only with the land, but he also went to town meetings with me and helped out with the paperwork — he clearly wanted it to happen."

The Beckwiths remain modest about basically turning their scenic front yard into a muddy growing field that adds another vendor to the nearby weekly farmers mar-



Deb Taft farms on Steve Beckwith's land in Waccabuc. She says of her farming experience: "It still shocks me that seeds actually work — it's just ridiculous. It's fun!"

ket at Gossett Brothers Nursery in South Salem. "We're generally interested in promoting healthy eating for the community," Steve says. "It's not a wave-the-banner cause for us, but it's just generally a good thing to do."

Among the most successful farmers participating in the program are Mimi Edelman and Eileen Zidi, who grew every vegetable you can think of last summer — including 1,000 tomato plants and 35 heirloom varieties — on 5 acres in two locations in Bedford, on large parcels of land owned by William Louis-Dreyfus and Bob and Beth Mancini. Some 90 percent of the produce

from their I & Me Farm (the name comes from their nicknames) went to chefs in northern Westchester and Putnam restaurants such as the Bedford Post Inn in Bedford, Dish in Mahopac and Peter Pratt's Inn in Yorktown Heights.

At the height of the growing season, Edelman and Zidi put in 12 hours a day — planting, weeding, watering, staking and harvesting — and often seven days a week. "You try to give yourself a half day off," Zidi says. "It's just the two of us, doing all our own packaging and deliveries, too."

"We don't take lunch and we don't go to the bathroom," Edelman adds with a laugh.

"You're tending a living thing, and you can't just leave it alone."

Through it all, Zidi manages to hang onto her job as the Friday night bartender and sometime waitress-hostess and all-around helper at Peter Pratt's. In fact, both women have culinary backgrounds — Edelman was executive chef at La Grange at the Homestead Inn in Greenwich — as well as many years of farming experience at Cabbage Hill Farm in Mount Kisco. "Between the two of us, we have over 20 years of organic farming experience," Edelman says.

To stand out from other growers and gourmet food purveyors, Zidi and Edelman grow lots of unusual and heirloom varieties of vegetables such as French breakfast radishes, Italian squashes, white and golden beets and purple heads of cabbage and broccoli — along with bouquets of fresh flowers and herbs, including nine kinds of basil.

"We try to grow unique varieties and then make unique blends of things, too," Edelman says. For their bags of salad greens, "we'll do a mix of bitters and sweets, textures, aromas — you want some color — and we'll throw herbs in and we use a lot of edible flowers."

So far, none of the participating landowners are charging any rent.

"It's really a gentleman's handshake, especially with Mr. Dreyfus," Edelman says. "We have felt so embraced by him. He's been a wonderful partner."

They also love selling food to their neighbors at local markets such as Table Local Market in Bedford Hills and Mount Kisco Seafood. "It's great fun to meet your customers," Edelman says. "They want to

look you in the face, ask questions, feel like they can trust you."

Green acres

Protecting farmland has long been a vital part of the Westchester Land Trust's mission, and it now holds conservation easements for more than two-dozen properties that allow agriculture. And the new Farmers Match Program is a natural outgrowth of that mission.

"We hope it will give us an introduction to landowners who have land that's suitable for farming, but they don't have a conservation easement yet — and then we can talk to them about getting one," Andersen says. "In other words, the (Farmers Match) program would lead to more preserved land."

"We also want to make it easier for farmers in general, so they'll be less tempted to sell out to a developer," he adds.

Since it was founded in 1988, the nonprofit Westchester Land Trust has helped protect — and keep out of the hands of developers — 7,200 acres.

The Land Trust encourages landowners to take advantage of federal tax laws that allow them to deduct the value of development rights for land they convert to conservation easements. These easements are binding agreements that forever limit development on land earmarked for environmental protection.

"The large majority of the conservation easements are donated to us, and the conservation easement essentially extinguishes the development rights," Andersen says. "We certify to the IRS that there's a real environmental benefit we're protecting, and the landowner gets a charitable tax

reduction." Examples of protected land include active farmland, vulnerable property in the New York City watershed and parcels with scenic views and wildlife habitat.

Start 'em young

Andersen says he's thrilled to have a young first-time farmer — Doug DeCandia, who grew up in Katonah and graduated from John Jay High in 2004 — as part of the Farmers Match Program. Last summer, DeCandia partnered with Hall Gibson, who owns part of Ryder Farm in Brewster, to grow 17 long rows of organic vegetables on just over an acre of open space at the farm.

"I wanted to bring back what I've learned," DeCandia says. "There wasn't much going on in Westchester. Younger people are not coming back to farm, let alone to live."

He sold produce to the public all summer at his Digger's East Farmstand on Starr Ridge Road in Brewster (his mom called him Digger) and on Wednesdays, he operated a self-serve farmers market at the Katonah Yoga Center. And his email-based Buyers Club offered organic onions, lettuce, kale and Swiss chard, tomatoes, snap peas and squash for most of the season, depending on weekly availability.

"It's been quite a successful year for me," DeCandia says. "All of our food here has either been sold or donated (to food banks)."

"I've found restaurants that say bring whatever you have and everything you have," he adds.

DeCandia is also raising a colony of bees and two unbelievably cute 9-month-old goats — Hazel and Hickory.