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Inch by inch, row by row, community farm takes root

By Nichole Dupont

Thursday, April 27

NORTH EGREMONT - The life of a farmer is not an easy one, and working the soil in New England can be a particularly grueling challenge. Downpours, harsh winters (or a mild one), sudden May cold spells, blazing heat and unexpected rain contribute to the daily obstacles.

Despite these challenges, Laura Meister of North Egremont marches onward, her head bent against the unpredictable Berkshire elements. Meister is the innovator and operator of Farm Girl Farm, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm on Pumpkin Hollow Road. Now in its second season, Farm Girl Farm has already secured a wide client base, including many local residents and restaurants.

With 45 members awaiting this season's harvest of tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, garlic, peppers, herbs and potatoes, Meister said she was confident the season would be a productive one, once again.

"We've found a niche here," she said last week. "We saw a need for smaller shares in the area - less expensive shares for single people, couples without kids, small families, single moms. Now everyone can take part in a CSA without feeling like they're wasting food or that they're getting too much or can't afford a huge share."

A share for many CSA farms is designed to provide larger families with fresh fruits, vegetables, herbs and flowers throughout the growing season (June to November). The cost for a "conventional" share is about \$500.

A share at Farm Girl Farm is "best suited for one to two adults," Meister said. For instance, by the end of June, shareholders at the farm can expect one head of lettuce, one bunch of carrots, one bunch of scallions, a half-pound of braising greens, one bag of mesclun greens, one bunch of broccoli raab, one head of Chinese cabbage, PYO [pick your own] herbs, green beans and sugar snap peas.

"The first share tends to be the lighter share because that's the first harvest," Meister said. "By the end of summer, beginning of fall, we've got tomatoes, potatoes, celery, cauliflower, Swiss chard. It works out to be quite a lot."

In exchange for one share, which is typically picked up once a week by shareholders, members pay \$125 as a down payment, then \$150 on April 30 and \$150 on June 30. In addition, a commitment to a work contribution of 10 hours per share, per season is expected.

"This gives our members, the community, the chance to get their hands in the dirt and have a real stake in the farm," Meister said. "We share the bounty and we share the loss together."

The risk of farming, she said, is part of the joy of farming. Although she was not born into



Photos by Nichole Dupont Above, Laura Meister, left, and volunteer Alida Cantor get ready for the season by setting up the greenhouse at Farm Girl Farm in North Egremont.

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farming, she said she has come to appreciate its value in sustaining people, the community and a way of life.

Raised in the outskirts of Philadelphia, Meister went to the University of Pennsylvania to study art history. After receiving her bachelor's degree, she went on to Tufts University, where she earned her master's in art history.

She came to the Berkshires in 2003 to pursue a one-year master's in documentary film through Suffolk University's Visionaries Institute based in Sheffield. For her thesis project, she co-produced, with Erica Spizz, "Sweet Soil" by Wild Thayer Productions, a short documentary about four local farms - Equinox, Rawson Brook, Thompson-Finch and High Lawn - and their integral importance to the local food economy of the Berkshires. Although "Sweet Soil" was only 20 minutes in length, Meister said it "ended up having legs" and was shown at the grand opening of the Berkshire Co-op on Bridge Street in Great Barrington, as well as at the Brattleboro Women's Film Festival and the 2004 Consumer Cooperative Management Association conference in Minneapolis.

"It was a great project for us," Meister recalled. "I've always loved farming, and I learned a lot by doing the film."

Her interest in farming grew, and after she completed the film, she took a part-time job farming at Indian Line Farm, a CSA farm in South Egremont. It was there, she said, that her dream of working the soil began to materialize.

"I was friends with another apprentice, Rory O'Dwyer, and she was really passionate about starting her own farm. We weren't sure where to begin."

O'Dwyer and Meister found out through friends that there were 2 acres of unused land on Pumpkin Hollow road and that the owner wanted someone to farm it. The rent: \$5.

"We went for it," Meister said. "At first, we weren't sure if there was enough of a need, but all of the sudden we had 45 members, and we figured we needed at least 40 to succeed. It was very heartening."

At the end of the 2005 season, O'Dwyer became ill and left the farm. Meister took the ball and ran with it. With the help of friends, volunteers and part-time workers, she has once again prepared the farm for the upcoming season. What she found most gratifying, she said, was the help she has received from other farmers in the area.

"I've benefited greatly from the help of other farmers. Liz and Al [of Indian Line] let me house seedlings in one of their barns last year. Sean [Stanton, of North Plain Farm] has done all the plowing. I think everyone feels like the market is not tapped here. There's no competition. I really appreciate that people, other farmers, think of me."

It was through other farms that Farm Girl Farm gathered a "surprise" client base - local restaurants. Last season, Meister said, the farm suddenly got calls for tomatoes - lots of them - as well as large orders for vegetables that other farms could not supply because they had already divvied out their crop to existing members.

"Suddenly we had 12 restaurants we were supplying to," she said. "We have 30 signed up for this season, from Lee, Stockbridge, Lenox, South County. Restaurant sales have become a major focus for us now."

Restaurant clients for the farm have included Verdura, Pearls, John Andrews, the Egremont Inn, The Red Lion Inn, Caffe Pomo D'oro and the Old Inn on the Green, to name a few.

Amid such rapid growth, Farm Girl Farm is fast becoming a well-established CSA in the Northeast. Meister said that, with the farm's increased membership, she hopes to have more help in the dirt.

"I'm hoping to have two apprentices by the time the high season rolls around," she said. "We have a lot of volunteers, so that's good. There are so many things of equal urgency that need attention on a farm. There's never a typical day."

With more help, she plans to maintain a "fully stocked" roadside farm stand with sunflowers, vegetables and herbs.

"Of course, our first priority is to our members and preparing the shares every week, but it would be great for people to be able to drive up and get some nice cut flowers or some fresh veggies for dinner," she said.

While the demand for fresh local produce remains steady, Meister said it is not just the end result of farming that draws people to the fields.

"The members commit to work during the season; they see what it is to farm. This is a way for people to finish the connection."

For more information on Farm Girl Farm, call 413-528-1952 or visit www.farmgirlfarm.com.

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