



Stroud Common Wealth Community Farm Land Trust Project

Case Study

Peacework Organic Farm, Newark

New York, USA

Article based on story by Elizabeth Henderson
www.newfarm.org/archive/1000stories

Summary

Peacework Organic Farm is a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm with 320 member families. There are 70 crops (vegetables, culinary and medicinal herbs, and flowers) raised organically on 18 acres. It demonstrates how to deal with the key problem of securing a new farm for an already successful CSA farmer.

The Story

In 1998, Elizabeth Henderson had to start on a new farm, after ten years farming as a partner at Rose Valley Farm, a diversified, organic farm. The farm business partnership at Rose Valley Farm ended. In 1989, Rose Valley and a Rochester-based nonprofit, Politics of Food, had formed the Genesee Valley Organic CSA. They started with 29 shares, and, over a decade, expanded to 160 shares. Though in 1998, Henderson's business partnership ended, the CSA enterprise was committed to supporting Elizabeth. So she brought 'her' market — the whole CSA community — to a new farm. Peacework values the relationships CSA fosters between farmers and the people who eat the food they produce as much as the business side. The farmers also value the connections CSA forges among the farmers, the community and the land. Running a CSA farm supports their values, among them: cooperation, justice, appreciation of beauty, reverence for life and humility about the "place of human beings in the scheme of nature." "For me, farming for a community of people whom I know well is very satisfying," Elizabeth says. "It's not like shipping crates off somewhere, where I never see the customers. I know everyone, and I know most of their children."

The CSA worked together to help Elizabeth and her new partner, Greg Palmer, create a working farm that reflects their vision. During the 1998 growing season, the CSA purchased vegetables from four other organic farms in the greater Rochester area, while members helped transform 15 acres of sod into vegetable beds, built a new greenhouse and cold frame, and renovated an old barn and packing shed. Members contributed what they knew best, from architects helping design the greenhouse to an electrician laying wiring. Peacework Farm rented 15 acres from Crowfield Farm, a 600-acre bison and hay operation that had been chemical-free since 1983, allowing Peacework to get organic certification immediately. They also were able to rent a barn and packing shed that, with work, were made appropriate for vegetable production. In 2000, Greg's wife, Ammie Chickering joined their partnership, and in 2004, after two seasons as an apprentice, Katie Lavin became the fourth partner.

The farm: how does the project work?

Peacework Farm grows about 70 crops, including a wide variety of vegetables, herbs, flowers, and melons, all according to certified organic practices. About 95 percent of the harvest goes to the CSA enterprise. "I think farmers ask much too little of the people who buy their food," Henderson says. "They don't ask them to pay enough or to contribute in other ways." Not all CSA farms have a work requirement, but it's a cornerstone of Genesee Valley's success. During a season, members work three four-hour shifts at the farm and two 2.5-hour shifts in distribution. Because the farm is about an hour's drive from Rochester, where most members live, members work to both harvest crops and coordinate distribution. "It's really important to learn how to design volunteer work so that people can give what they really want to give," Henderson explains.

Organization and advance planning are key. From a season-long work schedule, to detailed instructions about what to wear and bring, to directions for harvesting vegetables, Henderson and her partners make sure shareholders are prepared to be successful contributors to the farm. "Members consider the farm work a benefit," Henderson says. "Their end-of-season evaluations are unanimously positive about only two things: the quality of the food and the farm work." The CSA farm's core group handles another set of crucial tasks: accounting, distribution, scheduling, outreach, a website, newsletter production and new member recruitment.

How successful is the farm business?

Peacework Farm business is structured so its revenue covers all farm expenses including labor without incurring debt. Henderson is pleased that they never borrow money, either. The farmers designed the size of the CSA operation to generate enough income for Henderson, Palmer, Chickering and Lavin to live in a manner Henderson describes as leaving a "small ecological footprint." Not only do they easily cover farm expenses, but also they have health insurance and are starting a pension fund. "We negotiate our budget each year with the CSA core group, which is very committed to paying us a living wage," she says. In 1998, Henderson put \$35,000 into the farm and has since received an annual salary that covers her living expenses with some money to save. "That is a decent return on my investment," she says. The CSA enterprise has 200 full shares and 100 partial shares, but because two or three families sometimes split a share, about 320 families are members. Developing the CSA farm budget is a process of balancing the numbers with philosophy. On one hand, the CSA membership is committed to providing the farmers with a just wage. On the other hand, the core group and the farmers want to make sure the CSA farm is accessible to people of all income levels. To make this possible, they offer a sliding scale for membership fees.

Securing the Farm Land

Elizabeth Henderson writes in her new book *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture* (Chelsea Green, 2007), 'To raise money to pay for the 148-acre Peacework Farm, the core committee of the GVOCSA (Genesee Valley Organic CSA) set up a special "Preserving Peace work" committee to raise funds in coordination with the Genesee Land Trust, the local community land trust. 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. After describing the purchase and lease work in progress, the Preserving Peacework committee made this special appeal to GVOCSA 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 wild flowers.”

In only 14 months, the Preserving Peacework committee raised the money to buy the farm; CSA members pledged \$140,000. The GLT completed the purchase of the land in January 2006, and in March signed a 25-year rolling lease with Peacework Farm. 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’

Lessons Learned

1. It is important to have a competent CSA farmer or group of farmers to secure a community farm buy out because this can drive the whole buy out.
2. It also helps to have an inspirational educator, public speaker, writer and advocate for CSA and local food cultures. In this case, Elizabeth Henderson has been a well-known advocate for organic farming, for local, sustainable food systems, and CSA for over two decades.
3. Peacework is a good example of the inclusive social and community benefits of an accessible local farm. It is open to all, regardless of income. In the 2007 growing season, shares ranged from \$14 a week to \$25 a week, with \$17 a week the average payment, depending on a member’s ability to pay. “The people who are paying \$25 know they are balancing out the people who are paying \$14,” Henderson says. The CSA sponsors a scholarship fund that helps further reduce share prices to assist lower income people.
4. Peacework demonstrates to the larger farming community that a small-scale, organic farm — with cooperation and support from its neighbors — can be viable and succeed. “I want my farm to serve as a demonstration to my farming neighbors, many of them very conservative people, that ecological farming is a practical possibility,” Henderson wrote in *Sharing the Harvest*. ‘The conventional farmers I know consider my organic CSA to be a sort of special case, but at the same time, they recognize it as a creative approach to marketing and admire my ability to get the cooperation of consumers.’
5. The Peacework story also shows that a community farm buy out works well when there is an established farmer, with a strong CSA community, land is available nearby,

and the social support for the farm can then more easily translate into fundraising for the community buyout

6. It also helps to have a local Community Land Trust, of which there are over 1500 in the USA, to hold the Farm in trust and then lease it affordably to the farmers on a rolling long-term lease. Henderson observes that a surprising number of farmers find themselves facing sudden changes to their farming situations.

7. Land is much cheaper in the USA—Peacework Farm land sold for around \$1,000 per acre. The usual price is closer to \$2000 an acre. The landowner gave the land trust a “bargain” price and, as a result, realized tax savings.

8. It helps to have good technical support. Equity Trust and the E.F. Schumacher Society helped the farmers of Peacework Farm and Genesee Land Trust draft a lease that balanced the needs of the farmers to run their business whilst securing the long term community interest in preserving the land and keeping it affordable to future farmers.

See www.equitytrust.org/ReprestProj06.htm, and www.smallisbeautiful.org.

Further Information

A new updated edition of *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture* will be available in the fall of 2007, published by Chelsea Green.

The Genesee Valley CSA website: www.gvocsa.org.

The Genesee Land Trust website: www.geneseelandtrust.org.

The Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources lists most of the CSAs in North America: www.wilson.edu/csacenter/