

## The Nature Conservancy and Sunny Valley Preserve: A Leading Advocate and Supporter of Local Farms

By Rachel Murray, for *UConn Extension*

Connecticut's conservation community is at the forefront of reshaping the agricultural landscape throughout the region and increasing farmers' access to prime farmland. Land trusts serve as both leaders and potential game changers in how effectively and successfully farmers will be able to increase food production to meet the ever-growing demand for local food. The Nature Conservancy, well known as a national leader in land conservation, maintains a strong presence in Connecticut. They steward 1,850 acres of wetlands, meadows, farmland, and forests across the State. Through their Sunny Valley Preserve, the Conservancy is also playing a vital role in helping a number of Litchfield County farmers gain critical access to farmland.

### Stuart Family Farm

Bill and Deb Stuart own and operate Stuart Family Farm in Bridgewater, CT. The Stuarts are compassionate, committed, and dedicated livestock farmers working hard to not only provide high quality pastured meat, but also improve the quality of the land that they farm. Starting in 2002, Bill and Deb entered a lease with the Bridgewater Land Trust on the property where their house is located and also where important parcels of hay land was available for their 100% grass-fed cattle. This parcel still serves as a vital part of the farm. Soon after in 2003, the Stuarts entered into a long-term lease with Sunny Valley Preserve at the current location of their farm stand, only a few miles from their home, also in Bridgewater.

The support, understanding, and farming "know how" of the SVP board has



Photo: Rachel Murray

proved invaluable to the Stuart's as they continue to grow and improve their business. Wayne Woodard, the Preserve Manager at Sunny Valley Preserve, acts as a critical resource for tenant farmers at SVP and has been described as "a real advocate for farmers."

The Stuart's appreciate Woodard's commitment to the farmers' needs and interest in supporting a successful farm business. For example, there are certain hay fields that the Stuarts lease that are ideal

nesting areas for the ground nesting Bobolink bird, which is classified as a bird of "Special Concern" in Connecticut. In order to accommodate the nesting needs of the Bobolink, the Stuarts are not able to hay these certain fields until after July 15. As a compromise, SVP has allowed the Stuarts to re-seed the field with a later maturing,

higher quality grass for their hay, thereby eliminating the problem of having inferior quality hay for their cattle.

Bill and Deb Stuart are strong advocates for land trusts and land conservation organizations like Sunny Valley Preserve when it comes to farmland access. They have a long-term lease of 300 acres of land for hay and pasture from SVP throughout New Milford and Bridgewater. In addition, they also have a long-term lease with Bridgewater Land Trust for hay. Stuart Family Farm has written USDA NRCS Conservation Plans in place for both the SVP and BLT properties. As we can see, SVP and other land trusts are at the forefront of improving the local foodshed and providing a sustainable food option for consumers.



Bill and Deb Stuart maintain a herd of approximately 275 Red Angus 100% grass-fed cattle; about 1,000 free-range broilers are raised each year; 40 pastured pigs; and, 100 free-range egg layers on their farm. In addition, all of the meat at Stuart Family Farm is [Animal Welfare Approved](#); a rigorous labeling process that is committed to the humane treatment of livestock. The pigs, cattle, and chickens are often in a field right near the farm stand

available for customers to view. The farm stand is open each weekend, Saturday and Sunday, with a meat delivery option available on Friday's. Please check out [their website](#) for more details and updated information.

### **Nature View Farm**

Felice Martin graduated from the Vo-Ag Science program at Nonnewaug High School in Woodbury, CT in 2011 knowing she wanted a farm of her own one-day. With a focus on Mechanics and Livestock Production at Nonnewaug, Felice spent time working at local vegetable farms and dairies gaining knowledge, experience, and the necessary capital to be prepared for when the day came where she would have the opportunity for her own farm. Shortly after graduating high school, Felice came across an advertisement for a request for proposal to farm the Sunny Valley Preserve property in Bridgewater, CT. This abandoned dairy farm sitting on 85 acres provided the perfect setting for the eventual raw milk, hay, and vegetable farm Felice envisioned.

Felice officially signed an initial one-year lease in 2012 with The Nature Conservancy and Sunny Valley Preserve, which subsequently turned into a rolling lease for the following 4 years. In her first year, Felice focused on buying and acquiring the necessary equipment needed for the farm. Fencing was set up so that when the dairy herd was at the farm, Felice would be ready to pasture them. She purchased various equipment including stalls and a vacuum line from another abandoned dairy on a Bridgewater Land Trust farm. Felice explained that, "Sunny Valley works with the farmer to make improvements on the property." Throughout her tenure on the farm, Woodard and the SVP board take the time to listen to her concerns, such as, on-farm housing, and following through on capital improvements on the farm.

By the spring of 2013, Felice had the initial herd of dairy cows and was sending the milk to Agri-Mark, a New England based milk co-op. If all goes well, by 2017 Felice will sign a 5-year lease with SVP. The process for selling raw milk is time consuming

and extensive, so starting off selling to a co-op made the most sense for Nature View



Photo: Rachel Murray

Farm. The summer of 2013 saw the first planting of mixed vegetables on a freshly plowed 3-acre plot on the farm. By 2014, Nature View Farm was selling bottled raw milk at the farm and growing 6-acres of mixed vegetables. Customers can find this freshly bottled raw milk and an assortment of vegetables at 59 Second Hill, Bridgewater, CT. The vegetables are seasonal and the milk is available year round. In addition to the farm stand, you can find Nature View Farm raw milk at several different stores in the region including; Caraluzzi's Market, New Morning Health Food Store, LaBonne's Market, Northville Market, Bantam Market, Chamomile Health Food Store, and Ridgefield Organics.

Lastly, Nature View Farm sells at the Brookfield Farmers Market, New Fairfield Farmers Market, and New Milford Farmers Market on Wednesday nights.

### **Connecticut Land Access Programs**

As more Connecticut land trusts realize the value in making land available to farmers, the importance to list and find properties is increasingly significant. The Connecticut Department of Agriculture's [CT FarmLink](#) is a statewide resource for farm owners and farm seekers to advertise land available and additionally to search farm properties that are available. Along with farm properties listed on CT FarmLink, [New England Farmland Finder](#) (NEFF) is another resource that includes all properties and farm seekers throughout New England. Utilizing these two matchmaking websites are excellent opportunities for land trusts to efficiently and effectively find a farmer for their land. A statewide reality is that there are significantly more farm seekers than there are farm properties available making the case that land trusts have the potential to significantly alter and improve the agricultural landscape in Connecticut.

[Land For Good](#) (LFG) is a New England based non-profit with Field Agents in each state working to improve farmland access and keep more farmers working the land. LFG has an extensive "Toolbox" available on their website with resources helpful for farm seekers and farm owners, including sample leases and different models to use as a guide depending on the needs of the land trust and farmer. Consultation to actually help craft the match between the two parties is also available. In addition, the [Connecticut Land Conservation Council](#), provides users information about land trusts throughout the state and has model agricultural easement language and leases to use as guidance. Lastly, [UConn Extension](#) has a helpful website with various agricultural programs and services they provide, from a list of essential resources for beginning

farmers called “The Bucket List”, to contacts for Extension educators and specialists, and the Farmland ConneCTions Guide and model leases. All of these resources are ready, available, and free of charge for land trusts, land owners, and land seekers alike to utilize.

The role of land trusts is becoming one of establishing a model for acquiring the land through creative partnerships, protecting the land, and establishing a farmer on the land. They can help lead the renaissance for agriculture in Connecticut.