

Wintonbury Land Trust: Supporting and Improving Land Access to Local Farmers

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Land trusts are at the forefront of reshaping the agricultural landscape in Connecticut. They can be a leader supporting and promoting new and beginning farmers by providing access to farmland.

Wintonbury Land Trust and Hawk Hill Preserve

Protection of natural resources, conservation of farmland, and community building through the natural landscape are part of the strongly held mission of The Wintonbury Land Trust (WLT) in Bloomfield, Connecticut. On a recent walk through the newly acquired Hawk Hill Preserve, Land Trust President Dale Bertoldi and Treasurer Vikki Reski spoke about the historical and agricultural presence Hawk Hill has in the community. According to the Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) there are over 137 land trusts throughout Connecticut. These include local, regional, and statewide organizations. Land trusts provide a real and thriving opportunity for new and beginning farmers to commence a local agriculture business.

The 45 acre Hawk Hill Preserve is nestled between two adjoining farms, including the farmland that's part of the LaSalette Park owned by the Town of Bloomfield. Bloomfield is a community rich in agricultural and cultural history so the



Photo Credit: Rachel Murray

desire to acquire this property with its prime agricultural soils, scenic vistas, and potential to support multiple farmers selling local products has been very strong with the Wintonbury Land Trust. The Hawk Hill preserve is one of the oldest continuously operating farm properties in Bloomfield. The Kelly Family purchased the farm land in the 1860's, and operated it as a Dairy Farm until it was sold to a developer in the early 1980's. The

original farmhouse, located on an adjoining parcel of land, dates back to 1746 and was originally a Tavern. Additionally, there are fields across the street that were once part of this farm, but are now owned privately could add to the 21 acres of tillable land at Hawk Hill in the future.

Wintonbury Land Trust partnered with the Town of Bloomfield, CT Department of

Energy and Environmental Protection, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to purchase the property from its current owners and additionally purchase the easement on the land so that Hawk Hill is guaranteed to stay as working farmland and open space. In this arrangement, the Town holds the easement rights and Wintonbury Land Trust owns the property outright. Through the work of a strong local campaign to raise money to purchase the land along with the help of several foundations, Wintonbury Land Trust purchased the Hawk Hill property on April 23, 2015. To help protect the multiple conservation values, and according to the easement, any farmer using the land must provide and follow a detailed Conservation Plan. Additionally, a designated walking trail is available and maintained for hikers to pass through Hawk Hill connecting several local trails.

For the 2015 season, Wintonbury Land Trust leased the 45-acre Hawk Hill Preserve to a local farmer raising Scottish Highland cattle. In this arrangement, the farmer provides and installs her own temporary fencing for the cattle while also mowing hay for her cattle for the upcoming winter. The farmer also agreed to mow the fields not suitable for hay to maintain the aesthetic appeal of the farm and continued management of perennial weeds and invasives. For the 2016 season, it is planned that Wintonbury Land Trust will formally accept "Request For Proposals" (RFPs) for farmers interested in a long-term lease on the Hawk Hill property. Keeping the farmable portions in agriculture will reduce WLT and the Town's stewardship costs, help maintain the conservation values, and add fresh local agricultural products into the community. Stay connected with the [Wintonbury Land Trust](#) through their website for more details.

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 Farm 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.