



PRESERVING CONNECTICUT FARMLAND FOR FARMERS

Castle Hill Farm: Fairfield County Gem Preserved

When the Paproski family first took the reins at Castle Hill Farm in 1927, they had plenty of farming neighbors. The Newtown property was one of more than 3,000 farms in Fairfield County, which was over 50 percent agricultural land at the time.

Over the years, the landscape began to change. In the nearly 100 years that Castle Hill has been in operation, the surrounding area has lost three quarters of its farmland.

“Fairfield County especially has so little farmland left,” said Diana Paproski, who operates Castle Hill Farm with her husband Steve.

Luckily, their farm will not be one of the ones to disappear.

In November 2020, Castle Hill became the first farm protected by Connecticut Farmland Trust (CFT) in Fairfield County. In partnership with the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) and the Town of Newtown, 31 acres of Castle Hill Farm’s best farmland were permanently conserved.

“It took a week and a half for it to set in. We were a bit numb when we finally signed the deal,” said Diana. “I’m just so grateful it will be preserved forever.”

“Castle Hill Farm is a universally loved vista in Newtown. I know I speak for all of our residents in gratitude for the partnership between the Town, Connecticut Farmland Trust, USDA-NRCS, and the Paproski family in securing the preservation of this trophy property for generations to come,” said Dan Rosenthal, Newtown’s First Selectman.

“The other important element, not to be forgotten,” he continued, “is that the property will continue to be farmed, which is great for our community and Connecticut,” Castle Hill Farm, one of the last farms

in Newtown, sits on 100 acres of prime working land. The 31 acres recently protected include the farm’s best agricultural soils, are some of the most valuable and scenic, and are highly visible along Route 302. Five generations of the Paproski family have kept the farm running through the years. Castle Hill was once the second largest supplier of dairy products in Fairfield County. Today, they grow hay, corn, pumpkins, and Christmas trees.

The Paproskis have been able to keep their farm viable by diversifying into agritourism and making Castle Hill a destination. People come from all over the area to pick pumpkins, choose their Christmas trees, and get lost in the farm’s popular corn maze. They’ve recently begun offering space for events like weddings, birthday parties, and field trips.

Opening their doors to visitors has further deepened the farm’s ties to the community. After the Sandy Hook school shooting in 2012, the Paproskis designed their corn maze in the shape of a dragonfly

Continued on next page.



Rainbow over Castle Hill Farm
 PHOTO: CASTLE HILL FARM

Community Update:
While We Were Working from Our Dining Rooms...

Join us to hear about what CFT staff have done over the past year while working from home and our upcoming plans now that we are throwing open the barn doors.

Join us on Tuesday, May 25 6:30 pm via Zoom

Sign up at: CTFarmland.org

PHOTO: DOGORA SUN-STOCK.ADYBE.COM

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in honor of one of the victims, Avielle Richman, and held a benefit for her foundation.

Now, they open a private area in the farm's Christmas tree grove each year to allow Sandy Hook survivors and family to have peace in nature and bring a tree home. This year, the farm's corn maze paid tribute to medical workers and first responders on the front lines of the pandemic.

The community has responded in kind with strong support for the farm throughout COVID-19. Castle Hill went to a reservation-only model to keep the farm open and give people a chance to safely spend time outdoors.

"There is a lot of community sentiment here – this community came out to the farm all year by reservation [to allow for space regulations]. Many people went out of their way to say, 'thank you for doing this,'" said Diana.

Agritourism ventures like Castle Hill's seasonal attractions and special events are a win-win for local communities. Visitors get a chance to learn about farming and life on a farm, and farms benefit from a much-needed additional revenue stream. Agritourism is becoming an important part of many small farms' bottom line.

However, agritourism can present challenges to land conservation. When a working farm generates revenue from sources that are not strictly "farming activity," it can make preservation more challenging. This is one of many complicated issues that CFT can resolve to help ensure a farm is conserved.

CFT's guidance and expertise were essential to preserving Castle Hill Farm. The process took three years and went through many complex stages before farm's preservation was completed. Without CFT's leadership, the farm would likely not have been preserved.



Three generations at Castle Hill Farm

PHOTO: CASTLE HILL FARM

In the end, CFT provided a dynamic conservation strategy that allowed Castle Hill Farm to keep its thriving and diverse business model intact. As a result of CFT's partnership with the Town of Newtown and the USDA-NRCS, Castle Hill Farm is set up to thrive for generations to come.

"Everybody at Connecticut Farmland Trust... and our attorney... this took a village," said Diana. "I'm so happy that the people in Newtown can drive down 302 and look at that beautiful field. And to be able to say that it'll be like that forever, that's wonderful.

Thanks to your support, another piece of Connecticut's agricultural landscape is preserved for future generations.



Comings and Goings

New Staff!

Madeleine Dres has joined CFT as our FarmLink Associate. A native of Texas, she will graduate from UMass-Amherst this spring with a major in Sustainable Food and Farming. She currently works on a small dairy farm in MA and has a strong interest in sustainable agriculture.

New Board Members!

Michele Murray is Vice President and Financial Services Leader for Farm Credit East.

Robert Chang is a farmer and owner of Echo Farm in Woodstock, CT.

Farewell and thank you

to Jack Haller, Mike Fotos, Toni Robinson, and Mike O'Neill. CFT is in gratitude to them for their 37 combined years of service on our board.

Thanks a bunch!

Thank You! to the generous local businesses that have supported CFT over the past year with free promotions of our work, pro-bono counsel, and other professional discounts.

Alliance Graphics, Newington
Berkshire Style Online Magazine, Canaan
Connecticut Explored Magazine, West Hartford
Cooper, Whitney & Francois, New Haven
Kelser Corporation, Glastonbury
Murtha Cullina, Hartford
Park Broad Investments, Hartford
Waller, Smith & Palmer, New London



CFT-Protected Farms Give Back

In one of the most challenging times in US history, Connecticut farms stepped up to support their communities. CFT-protected farms donated food, provided safe jobs, and conducted other acts of kindness during the height of the coronavirus pandemic.

We're shining a light on just a few of the good deeds done by farmers of CFT-protected farms who went above and beyond in 2020.

Creating Space — Castle Hill Farm

At Castle Hill Farm in Newtown, owners Diana and Steve Paproski made just about everything the farm produces available to their community last year.

"There were many occasions that we were fortunate enough to help others in need during this crazy time!" said Diana. Castle Hill Farm made their outdoor space available to first responders and medical personnel for safe, socially distanced outdoor events.

The farm also donated Christmas trees, fall farm products, and boxes of fresh produce, which they delivered to local families in need.

"We feel honored to have been supportive," said Diana, "It has been a challenging time for everyone and we sincerely hope that we will continue to be supportive of our community."

Providing for Their Workers and Area Families — Cushman Farms

While many companies were forced to lay off workers last year, Cushman Farms based in Franklin actually expanded its workforce.

"Part of what we've done because of COVID is bring on extra employees to cover in case somebody got sick," said Jim Smith, Operations Manager at Cushman Farms.

They now have 36 employees tending to a herd of 1,800 dairy cows and almost 2,000 acres of farmland.

Cushman Farms, which owns 89 acres of farmland in Lebanon protected by CFT in 2014, is part of The Farmer's Cow collective, a group of six family-owned Connecticut farms that offer local, sustainable dairy and other farm products around the state.

Despite a very challenging year for dairy farms and restaurants alike, Cushman Farms and the other members of The Farmer's Cow found a way to give back.

"We donated ice cream to the local hospital to keep them upbeat and as a genuine thank you," said Jim. "We also provided meals and allowed for delivery to or pickup before and after shift for people that work at the hospital."

Ned Ellis of Mapleleaf Farm in Hebron, another Farmer's Cow farm, said nearly a thousand gallons of milk were donated to Foodshare and distributed to families in Hartford and Tolland Counties. "It was just to help out," he said.

Fresh Food for All — Long Table Farm

Another CFT-protected farm that took the initiative to get their produce to those in need was Long Table Farm in Lyme. Farm owners Baylee Drown and her husband Ryan Quinn created CSA "scholarships" to make fresh food accessible during the height of the pandemic last year.

"We wanted a way to make shares affordable to everyone," said Baylee. Free or reduced cost CSA shares were made available to those in need.

These three CFT-protected farms provided their communities with a reliable source of healthy food, stable jobs, and much-needed outdoor escapes during the past year. Farms are an integral part of the community in good times, and in times of crisis, they're more important than ever.



Save the date

September 19th

**Community
Celebration of
Protected Farms**

Details to come



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Ask an Expert

Weekly Virtual Series

How does farmland preservation work? What else can land trusts do in addition to protecting land?

Join us from your living room or kitchen or backyard deck to learn the answers to these questions and more from CFT staff and guest experts who will share their knowledge in our Ask an Expert virtual series.

This series will help farmers, farmland owners, land trust representatives, and CFT donors learn about farmland preservation, farmland climate resiliency, issues related to farmland ownership and access, and how land trusts can support food access.

FREE. Sign up at CTFarmland.org

Farmland Conservation 101

CFT Executive Director Elisabeth Moore
May 13, 6:30 pm

Meet n’ Greet Farmers Who Preserved Their Land

May 20, 6:30 pm

Understanding Soil Health

Soil Scientist Kip Kolesinskas
May 27, 6:30 pm

Public Act 490 Overview and Q & A

Connecticut Farm Bureau Executive Director Joan Nichols
June 10, 6:30 pm

Land Trusts and Food Access

Kent Land Trust
June 17, 6:30 pm



PHOTO: MR. TWISTER-STOCK.ADOBE.COM