



Gustafson Farm, Watertown

HIGHLIGHTS

Your support helps bring partners to the table. Here is Dicks Farm in Southbury, for example, by the numbers:

3 Protected farm parcels

211 Acres of farm

2,000 Acres of preserved land these parcels connect!

\$128,000

Southbury Land Trust contribution

\$1.3M State and Federal funding



PHOTO BY CARLA MICELROY

Because of you, Connecticut Farmland Trust is a trusted place for farmland seekers to find farmland owners. This Gratitude Report focuses on the farmland access you have made possible.

CFT's First Open House

By Layla Ennis and Kae Vargas

What is farmland without a farmer? It certainly will not remain farmland for long. Your past support, combined with financial support from the CT Department of Agriculture through the CT FarmLink program, helps make connections between farmland seekers and owners. Layla Ennis and Kae Vargas, our Farmland Access Coordinator, wrote

this article to give you a picture of one powerful new way your support is making a difference in 2024.

When you hear “open house,” farming and agriculture might not be the first things that come to mind. However, after a Milford farm suddenly lost its dedicated farmer of 35 years, Mr. Vargas initiated a uniquely “farm-y” open house to introduce new farmers to the farm’s 20

continued inside



CFT's First Open House

continued from front

acres of high-quality fields and orchards.

First some background on the landowner. Although not a farmer himself, Jim Beard is passionate about the continued maintenance of the farmland his family has lived on since the 1950s. The unexpected loss of the farm's longtime farmer, Dave Siekierski, affectionately known as "Tomato Dave," left Jim searching for someone equally passionate and dedicated to continuing the property's farming legacy. "Dave did a remarkable job maintaining these 20 acres — farming is a labor of love," Jim explained. After his own search for a local farmer turned up dry, Jim reached out to CT FarmLink for help. Mr. Vargas proposed an "open house."



(above) Kae Vargas, CFT's Farmland Access Coordinator; (left) Kip Kolesinskas analyzing soil in Milford; (below) L to R Jim Beard, Larry Passeck, and Kaitlyn Kimball

The "day-of" experience last May was similar to a typical real estate open house, but Mr. Vargas worked in advance to curate an invite list of interested farmers based on intensive pre-meeting conversations to clarify their interests and intents. Mr. Vargas knew the farmers on the guest list had expressed interests in what the farmland owner can offer, dramatically increasing the likelihood of a successful match. Over three hours on a sunny afternoon, farmland seekers had



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with a gift in your will.

We are inspired by your stories and reasons for wanting to protect farmland. Please contact Kimball Cartwright anytime for a confidential discussion regarding how you can protect CT farmland forever.



the opportunity to meet farmland owner Jim and tour the property firsthand.

Two of the farmers were Kaitlyn Kimball and Larry Passeck. These first-generation farmers founded Sunset Farm in 2018. Over the past six years, they diligently stewarded four acres of certified organic vegetables and flowers in Naugatuck. Two years ago, they left their full-time jobs — Kaitlyn as a teacher and Larry as a Broadway set carpenter — to fully dedicate themselves to farming. Sunset Farm operates a community supported agriculture (CSA) share system and sells produce at five farmers markets, along with some wholesale and farm-to-school programs. Recently, the couple began searching for additional land to expand their operation.

“We had been looking for more land without a whole lot of luck,” Kaitlyn explained. “I decided to create a FarmLink profile on a whim one night.” When the couple heard about the FarmLink open house, they made a point to stop by the Milford property on their way to a farmers’ market, even with their truck full of produce. They met Jim while touring the property, and after discussing and inspecting the land and soil, they instantly bonded with him.

In addition to Kaitlyn and Larry, the Somali Bantu Community visited the open house later in the day. After walking around the fields, an agreement was made between the Community’s vice-president,

Mohamed Adan, and Jim for a separate 2.8-acre parcel at the front of the property. This land will be used by the Community’s farmers to grow a variety of vegetables using their indigenous Somali Bantu farming practices. Mr. Vargas is currently assisting the Community in finding more land to enable the 25 families of farmers that form this group to start larger farming operations.

From the Thursday open house, the process moved quickly. Mr. Vargas facilitated further communications between Kaitlyn, Larry, and Jim and they signed an initial yearlong lease with the following Monday. Two matches from one open house!

The farmers have also used other resources provided by CT FarmLink, including consultations from UConn Extension’s Fruit Production and Integrated Pest Management expert, Evan Lentz, for advice on the property’s orchard, as well as a soil health consultation with Kip Kolesinskas, FarmLink’s Soil Scientist, to help Sunset Farm and the Somali Bantu Community assess the fields.

Despite only knowing each other for two weeks, farmland owner Jim and farmer Kaitlyn seemed optimistic about the whirlwind of events that had occurred. “I think and hope Sunset Farm will find success.” Jim reassured the farmers and quoted his father, “Take it as it comes.”

Kaitlyn agreed, “One day at a time.”



THANK YOU SPONSORS

In 2024, these fine businesses helped us launch a farm tour, provide webinars, and hold a farm-based fundraiser, while supporting farmland conservation. Thank you! If you’d like your business to sponsor CFT’s good work in 2025, please contact Kimball Cartwright at kcartwright@ctfarmland.org.

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FARMLAND PROTECTED *(since last reported in this newsletter)*



DICKS FARM 211 acres in three parcels in Southbury

On behalf of his father, David Dicks applied to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture's Farmland Preservation Program in 2018. When his father passed away, he left instructions for David and his two brothers to preserve the family farm. As with Oakridge Dairy (below), protecting the large farm in multiple parcels was important to offer flexibility to future farmers, and the process took many years. The Farm had been long sought by the Southbury Land Trust (SLT) for preservation because the land connects approximately 2,000 acres of preserved land. SLT is a true hero here. They sought

CFT's help with the project early on and then contributed \$128,000 toward the purchase of three easements on the farm, without which the project might not have happened.

OAKRIDGE DAIRY 102 acres in Ellington

CFT's first easement of 2024, as it was in 2023, was at Oakridge Dairy. The largest dairy farm in Connecticut by volume of milk produced, Oakridge also has a 130-year farming history. Since 2018 CFT has been working with the CT Department of Agriculture to preserve the farm in stages. The first easement on the farm was purchased in 2021, the second in 2023, and the third in April 2024.

Preserving the farm in multiple pieces ensures flexibility for the farm's owners and flexibility for future new farmers who generally need to start with smaller parcels of land.



THANKS TO YOU, MORE MATCHES LIKE THIS ONE IN BALTIC ARE HAPPENING



In Baltic, a small village in Sprague, Connecticut, an old farm on a long-forgotten road is experiencing a fresh start. In November 2023, Murray Gates acquired an old 83-acre dairy farm on Lacroix Road and started his operation with 500 chickens rotationally grazing using "chicken tractors." But he had more land that he was not farming. Mr. Gates created a landowner profile on CT FarmLink to find farmers to lease parts of his property. Within two weeks of posting on the site, Murray connected with three interested farm seekers and found his ideal fits. This whole story will be released on our website this winter – sign up for our e-newsletter if you want to know when it appears!