

Finding a Place to Grow

How the next generation is
gaining access to farmland



Piedmont
Environmental
Council

Executive Summary

Access to affordable tillable farmland and pasture is one of the primary barriers for next-generation farmers and a healthy evolution of the agricultural economy in the Virginia Piedmont. Much of the region's farmland, both prime soils and soils better suited to pasture, could be more productively and profitably farmed.

Many next-generation farmers from non-farming backgrounds have contacted *The Piedmont Environmental Council* seeking access to available farmland. Conversely, many non-farming landowners are interested in agricultural land use, but the process of leasing land for this purpose can be daunting. It involves a number of complex steps, including setting clear long-term goals for one's property, identifying a suitable farmer, and negotiating a lease that serves both the landowner's and farmer's long-term goals.

In order to help potential next-generation farmers, and non-farming landowners who are interested in leasing their land, we have put together "Finding a Place to Grow: How the Next Generation is Gaining Access to Farmland", which includes eight profiles of successful farmland lease arrangements in Virginia. The profiles focus on the different business arrangements underlying these successful leases, to demonstrate the various options that landowners and beginning farmers have to establish partnerships and prudently share risks, responsibilities and rewards.

The following leasing profiles are included within this publication:

1. A Communal Approach: Local Farm Becomes a Launch Pad for Entrepreneurs
2. Earning a Herd, Opening a Store
3. Leasing from Likeminded Landowners: Working Vegetable Farm Finds New Hands
4. Organic Farming at a Public Nature Preserve: An Opportunity to Grow Food and Invest in the Environment
5. Making the Most of His Family's Land
6. The Model for So Many Others: A Long-Term Lease that Creates Ownership
7. Lessons Learned at Whisper Hill Farm: What Happens Next Door Matters
8. Housing Development Sets Aside Land for Farmers

We hope you find the stories helpful and inspiring!

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For more information or questions about the stories, please visit pecva.org/placetogrow.

A Communal Approach

Local farm becomes a launch pad for entrepreneurs

In the five years since Jason “JP” Pall and Sally Walker began growing produce on a hilly, windswept plot not far from Virginia Tech, they’ve watched several of the parcels surrounding them change hands. A few have been transformed from pastures into new homes.

In fact, developer Patrick Bixler owns the 48-acre property that’s home to JP and Sally’s farm, Glade Road Growing, located within Blacksburg town limits. Bixler had intended for houses to be built on his land — until he met the pair of young farmers and decided to give something else a shot.

What’s growing on the parcel now, though it does include some new construction, is more than the landowner could have imagined.

The parcel that had been leased to one farmer for grazing cattle is now home to more than a half-dozen farm-related and other businesses, many of them offshoots from JP and Sally’s thriving vegetable and poultry-growing operation. There’s a tenant who raises pigs and another who keeps goats, a pair of cooks that cater,

a woodworker who builds tables, and a mechanic and a solar panel business.

“I don’t take credit for dreaming it up, but it makes a lot of sense when you see it,” Bixler said of the way the likeminded tenants have layered multiple uses on the landscape. “If you just say, ‘I’ve got 48 acres. I’m looking for somebody to run cattle.’ That’s about as boring as it gets.”

Pall and Walker, both 31, are reluctant to call what they’ve helped create here a “business incubator,” but that’s basically what it is. Their experience has attracted others interested in starting their own ventures, many of them food-based, and a unique support system here is helping many of them get off the ground.

“We encourage our employees to do their own thing for a side income while they’re here. They’ve all done it,” JP said. “We’re just giving them

some income while they get themselves up and running.”

“Our landowner didn’t say, ‘I want a small business incubator,’” Sally said. “It kind of fell into that through the networking and the people that we attract.”

At one end of the expansive pole barn that houses most of the businesses, a former employee is buzzing through sustainably harvested wood, turning it into artisanal furniture that he now sells full-time. By mid-morning, several others are coming and going, perhaps putting in a few hours at the mechanic shop or picking vegetables.

A brick oven that can bake up to 30 loaves of bread at a time — and enough pizzas to feed a sizable farm tour — recently took shape at the barn’s other end. Garum, a baker/pizza business runs the brick oven on the farm and it’s often used by Fare Palate, a hot plate stand that sells at

He now supports the agricultural uses of his family-owned land so much that he’s putting it into a conservation easement to prevent future development.



Photos by Jami McDowell



Photo by Jami McDowell

the local farmers market. Its owners will also share a commercial kitchen that's currently under construction in a side room with the other tenants.

In the early afternoon, several of the workers gather around one of the handcrafted kitchen tables for a farm-to-table-style lunch that rivals that of any restaurant. The meal features a duck-egg frittata, as brilliant in color as the sun-ripened tomatoes, with homemade mayo and pickles on left-over, oven-fired bread.

"It turns out that everyone who works here is a fabulous cook," JP said.

The decision to lease

After they both graduated from Virginia Tech, JP worked for a year at the university running its onsite farm, which provided a couple of acres of produce to the school dining hall. Sally continued with graduate school, and the couple began looking for land "to start our own farm."

With some cash saved up from renovating and selling a house, the Pall and Walker began looking for farm properties they could purchase within 45 minutes of Blacksburg, where they wanted to sell produce directly to customers.

"But all the land that we could have afforded didn't look like it would be very good to farm," Sally said.

"Then we were stuck with two choices," JP said. "We could buy an acre of land way out on the top of a mountain, or we could put that money into our farm infrastructure."

Pall and Walker soon met Bixler and began the process of leasing land from him. Bixler said the idea of leasing to the young entrepreneurs appealed to his sensitivities, if not his bottom line at first.

"They really convinced me that they were dedicated to doing it right. They weren't just biding their time before they moved on to the next adventure," said Bixler. He now supports the agricultural uses of his family-owned land so much that he's putting it into a conservation easement to prevent future development.

And, last year, after a neighbor Sally and JP had gotten to know acquired "this flat piece of land close to the farm," Sally said, they entered into a lease with her to farm those three acres as well.

Elisabeth Swindell lives on the adjacent property that her mother, Danielle Wattel, owns, and already had a

habit of bringing her three children by the farm to volunteer or pick vegetables.

"I don't think we would have done it with just anyone," Swindell said of the lease. "We know them, we like them and we know they have a good work ethic, so we jumped on it."

Though leasing land inside town limits is more expensive, it also comes with some perks.

JP takes advantage of what he calls "wasted resources" like wood chips, leaf mulch and other compostable materials that the town hauls away from peoples' lawns. The town delivers the materials for free to the farm, where Pall and Walker put them to use as soil-building compost in their vegetable beds and in between the rows in their burgeoning orchard.

"Before we got started, we knew the leaves and wood chips were available in town but not outside of town. That's one of the trade-offs between owning land outside of town and leasing land here," JP said.

The farm's location also keeps them close to customers, who, as of this season, can buy produce directly from a farm stand on Friday afternoons. Glade Road Growing also has more than 100 members in its CSA

and sells at the Blacksburg Farmers Market twice a week.

"We're in town, so we tell our customers that they can come see our farm if they want to," Sally said. "You can't do that if your farm is 45 minutes away."

Creating Synergy

The various businesses based at the farm have such symbiotic relationships that the lines between them sometimes blur. Pall and Walker serve as a sort of anchor tenant for the facility and the land, though they farm vegetables with organic methods on fewer than seven of the total 48 acres.

Each tenant works out his or her own rent with the landowner, often starting out with a reduced rate and building up to what is affordable as the business grows. Pall and Walker had a similar arrangement during their first two years on the property, exchanging manual labor (planting trees and repairing old barns) as rent while getting their farm business off the ground.

"But as the farm business grew, we had less time for maintenance and more money for rent, so it switched over to a money rent," Sally said.

The couple now pays a flat \$750 a

month to Bixler, though the number of acres they're cultivating or using for animals at any given time fluctuates.

Pall and Walker don't sublease to any of the other tenants, but they do coordinate with all of them, especially when it comes to rotating animals through the property's pastures. Their chickens, turkeys and ducks now rotate through the pastures following the cows that are part of the original tenant's cow-calf operation.

Pall and Walker also coordinated with the state cost-share program to get funding to fence the cattle out of the property's streams, helping add important infrastructure to the property while simultaneously ensuring the property was more environmentally friendly.

As part of their lease, Bixler pays for any permanent infrastructure that stays with the property — from additions inside the pole barn to the 150 apple trees that were recently

planted for Pall and Walker's farm — and welcomes new tenants whose rent helps him earn a good return on those investments. That works well for Pall and Walker, too.

Each tenant works out his or her own rent with the landowner, often starting out with a reduced rate and building up to what is affordable as the business grows.

"This investment is what we wanted," JP said of new infrastructure that's filled the main barn. "We want to sell from the farm as much as possible. That's a major advantage of being this close to town."

Listening to JP talk about all that is going on at the farm, you have to think that perhaps the greatest investment isn't the infrastructure, but the creative energy that JP and Sally have brought to the farm. When you start thinking about all of the good farmland and creative people we have in the region, you just have to get excited thinking about all the possibilities.

Photos by Jami McDowell



Earning a Herd, Opening a Store

Working as a chef, Mike Peterson used to drive by the green, cattle-flecked acres of Mount Vernon Farm near Sperryville on his way to the Inn at Little Washington. And when he signed up for a six-month internship at the farm — to learn more about the sustainable farming methods behind the beef — he never thought he'd end up staying.

"He had every intention of going back to the kitchen. He was there 11 months, and then the manager left, and he stayed," said Mike's wife, Molly Peterson, who was soon roped into the family business of farming as well.

The Petersons took over management of the grass-based cattle farm in 2010 and, three years later, began the process of buying the business from its owner, Cliff Miller. And in the fall of 2013, the Petersons formed and began operating the livestock business as Heritage Hollow Farms.

They still lease the land from Miller and one other landowner in Rappahannock County. "I wish more farmers that want to retire or landowners with land just sitting there would give young farmers the opportunity, because that's the biggest hurdle for farmers is finding land they can af-

ford. Securing access to start up capital has proven to be a necessity, too. Scalability requires upfront capital to make the whole operation tick," Molly said.

Along with their lease with Miller to farm 250 of his acres, the Petersons inherited a lease Miller had with nearby landowner Dick McNear

for 380 acres of his pastures. The lease between McNear and Miller was originally written in pencil on lined notebook paper — two pages, front and back, explained Molly.

But that doesn't mean it didn't cover a lot of ground. It became the template for the Petersons' lease agreement with both parties, and both leases cover a lot more than the land.

Earning a herd

Though having access to more than 600 acres of grass for their cows was a

boon for the beginning farmers, they also needed help getting started with a herd.

"I wish more farmers that want to retire or landowners with land just sitting there would give young farmers the opportunity, because that's the biggest hurdle for farmers is finding land they can afford."

As part of the leases, the Petersons manage 95 breeding cows owned by McNear and 60 owned by Miller. In exchange for their daily management labor, mineral supplementation and hay feeding for those cows, Heri-

tague Hollow has the option of buying the calves those cows produce at a discounted rate.

"It's a way for us to get into it without having to make the investment into cows, without having to buy any land," Mike said.

As the new calves that Mike and Molly manage are weaned, the Petersons can buy the calves (them) from Miller and McNear for 25 percent of their appraised value. From here on the Petersons own the calves, which they will either sell at the livestock market or continue to graze and fin-



Photos by Molly M. Peterson



Photos by Molly M. Peterson

ish on grass- to be sold later directly to customers as Heritage Hollow grass-fed beef.

As you can imagine their leases cover a lot of territory, but there are still some gray areas when it comes to managing animals and land owned by someone else.

Because the landowners still own the cows, they are in charge of supplying water to them, which is mostly handled by existing watering troughs and piping. The Petersons maintain that infrastructure.

The same goes for the fencing. If a tree falls on it, the Petersons patch it, “but we’re not responsible for a complete overhaul or replacement,” Molly said.

They have access to the landowners’ tractors and trucks to care for the property and the cows, but they rent that same equipment when using it for the other animals they own outright.

Deciding who takes care of what with the cows they manage can be a little trickier. Something that’s come up is what to do when the herd has a lower fertility rate, which means fewer calves for the Petersons.

“There is a lot of gray area that we still figure out as we go. There are things we never thought of at the time we wrote the leases that have come up,” Mike said. But overall, “there’s a mutual understanding. We both have a mutual vested interest in it, so it’s to all of our benefit that the (cows) be cared for.”

Investing in the Land

Mike first got to know McNear at a Holistic Management Training conference in Rappahannock County — one that changed the way McNear raises cattle and cares

for his land after some 50 years in the business.

The holistic training focuses on “mob grazing” management that uses electric fences to continually move cattle through the fields, fertilizing the soils as they eat the grass and giving each field time to recover between feedings.

McNear admits that he was the “biggest skeptic” about the grazing techniques taught at the conference, at first. But, after the first year of grazing with the new methods, “he was so thrilled by how his pastures were looking,” Molly said.

McNear knew that he wanted to work with farmers who would graze the cattle with an eye toward soil fertility, and that’s just what the Petersons had in mind. They took over his lease with Miller three years ago, and it expires in 2017.

Long-term leases with young farmers allow them to leave the options open for their children, should they want to farm the property themselves or alter agreements, while ensuring that the land is productive in the meantime.

Both McNear and Miller are in the process of transitioning the land their families own to the next generation. Long-term leases with young farmers allow them to leave the options open for their children, should they want to farm the property themselves or alter agreements, while ensuring that the

land is productive in the meantime.

Miller is a decade into his 40-year lease agreement with a pair of vege-

table farmers on a portion of the land his family owns, and he'd like to see a similar arrangement happen with the Petersons once their initial 5-year lease expires.

"Hopefully, (Mike) will find that this is the way he wants to spend the rest of his life, and we'll enter into a long-term lease," Miller said.

Heritage Hollow Farm Store— Growing the Business

In their first year as Heritage Hollow Farms, the couple is still looking to grow their own herd and considering leasing additional lands in the area. Along with harvesting up to 100 of the cattle they acquire each year, the Petersons own and raise 100 pigs and 60 to 80 lambs on the land leased from Miller.

Miller's farm had already spent nearly a dozen years establishing local buyers' clubs through which his grass-fed beef was sold directly to customers in the Washington metro area.

The Petersons tweaked their delivery routes a bit after transitioning those customers to Heritage Hollow, but direct retail sales are still the bread-and-butter of their beef business. The Petersons were able to open a new farm store, up the street from Heritage Hollow, at the Sperryville Schoolhouse—an investment they could afford because they weren't burdened with the costs of buying land and infrastructure. They sell a growing percentage of their meat products through the store, and have cut back on the number of places they deliver in the DC area.

Sometimes they have to explain to customers who stop by the store that the meat comes from their farm from across the street—and not suppliers.



Photos courtesy of Molly M. Peterson

"We have a little bit of confusion where we have to tell people that we are the farmers," Molly said. "That's why we've got a painting on the wall that says, 'We are your farmers.'"

Leasing from Likeminded Landowners

Working vegetable farm finds new hands

In his search for the right piece of farmland, Ben Stowe spent a considerable amount of time “walking the grid.”

He’d look up the soil maps for a prospective plot, taking into consideration that some of them hadn’t been updated in a half-century, and then he’d put his boots on the ground. One property looked nice and flat on its surface — perfect for harvesting a few acres of vegetables — but the map said its soils were “stony alluvial” and could be plagued with rocks. Image

“So I went out there with a digging fork, paced a grid and hit a lot of rocks. I didn’t think I wanted to farm that,” said Stowe, who can only imagine what the process might look like if he was looking to buy, rather than lease, the land he farms.

“You don’t want to be signing a lease on something that isn’t going to grow well for you,” he said.

Stowe spent months scouring Northern Virginia acreage like this with a landowner who was interested in buying property for a second home

and leasing much of it to a small farmer.

It was a unique opportunity, and Stowe was close to settling on a lease with him — until he was lured away by a better offer. A couple that understood firsthand what he would need in a piece of land — because they’d been farming it themselves for the past decade — was looking for a farmer.

The partnership

Michael and Kathryn Bertoni thought the five-acre plot in Nelson County was “about as pretty a spot as you can hope to find” when they bought it in 2003. They’d just finished an eight-month internship at Waterpenny Farm, an ecological growing haven in Rappahannock County that has spawned several likeminded farms in the region, and they were eager to set out on their own.

But, after a decade of selling produce and eggs from their Appalachia Star Farm, the Bertonis, now in their late 30s with two young children, were tired, mostly of all the driving this brand of farming entailed.

“It was just a hectic lifestyle, and we decided to let it go for a little while,” said Michael Bertoni.

He said leasing the property as an entire farm made better economic sense for their family than just renting out the house, which wouldn’t have taken into account the property’s full value.

The Bertonis also wanted the land to remain in sustainable agriculture, so they put it up for lease on the Virginia Farm Link Database that’s run by the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Stowe, who had also just finished an internship at Waterpenny Farm, began perusing the database for landowners who used terms like “good stewardship” in their postings. After working at small farms in Wisconsin, California and Oregon, Stowe said interning at Waterpenny showed him he could have a successful farm business by leasing land.

“If you want to be near a metro area, in areas where land is relatively unaffordable for people like us, leasing is a great option,” he said.



Ben Stowe, Heather Coiner. Photo by Jami McDowell
Little Hat Creek Farm. Photo by Heather Coiner



Ben Stowe, Heather Coiner. Photo by Jami McDowell
Leggies. Photos by Heather Coiner

He didn't realize when he first replied to the Bertonis' posting that they also were Waterpenny alumni — or that he'd visited their farm as an intern in 2011. Since then, Stowe had met his partner, Heather Coiner, at a music festival. The two had decided to get some land together where he could grow vegetables and she could bake bread. The idea of stepping into a property with practically everything they'd need — and into the former farm's slots at farmers markets — was more than appealing.

'They want us to succeed'

Named for a stream that runs alongside the five-acre property, Stowe and Coiner's Little Hat Creek Farm is now in its first full year selling produce and "old-time bread" at markets in the Charlottesville area and through an 18-member CSA.

Coiner had worked on a farm before and was baking and selling bread through a CSA in Toronto when she met Stowe.

They signed a two-year lease on the property, which also includes the house they live in and most of the equipment they need to run a small farm. Along with a greenhouse, market tent and bins for picking produce, the farm already featured several per-

ennial berry bushes and asparagus that "really helped us in our first year," Stowe said from a shaded picnic bench near the house, a carton of perfectly ripe blackberries leftover from a recent market sitting on the table.

"Our situation is unique, because it was a working vegetable farm already," he said. "They've done what we're doing, so they want us to succeed. We're lucky in that way."

Even though they were working with likeminded landowners, Stowe and Coiner went to great lengths to craft their first lease agreement for the property.

They had learned from Waterpenny the importance of a solid lease, and Stowe had taken some notes while looking for the right property with other landowners. Sample leases they'd found online helped them consider factors they might not have otherwise, like maintenance costs.

Their lease originally said the farmers would fix or maintain anything that cost less than \$100 and call the owners, who now live in Crozet, if it cost more. But they soon realized that the cost of "maintaining" unfarmed portions of land with regular mowing was adding up fast.

"We sort of left that out, so we had to negotiate that with them after the fact," said Coiner, who ended up striking a compromise with the owners to split lawn care costs.

Making additions

Stowe and Coiner said it was important to craft a lease that left their options open for additions in the future, like animals, while still describing the type of farming they planned to do in the present.

"I feel like the onus is kind of on the farmer to try to imagine all the things that they might want to do on the land," said Coiner.

If they hadn't put it in their lease, for example, it would have been difficult for the Bertonis to imagine the wood-fired oven that now fills a portion of the pole barn next to the house.

Stowe and Coiner built the oven with a base of recycled glass bottles from nearby wineries, using sawdust from a local woodshop to form the seven inches of clay. After beginning construction in the winter, Coiner began using the oven this summer to bake up to 32 of her naturally leavened loaves at a time. But, before they broke ground on the massive project, the farmers made

sure the landowners approved — and that the oven was addressed in their lease.

“We were planning to invest in this major construction project that was going to alter one of the structures,” Coiner said. “How do they feel about that? And, if we decide to leave the property, do they compensate us for its value or do we have to pay for it to be removed?”

After discussing these questions, the Bertonis agreed in the lease to purchase any value-adding modifications to the property, like the oven, should Coiner and Stowe move elsewhere.

The Bertonis liked the idea of the oven, not to mention the loaves it produces, but “I think they were still surprised at how big it was,” Stowe said with a chuckle. “I think Michael’s comment was, ‘That is massive.’”

While there are sure to be more surprises, as Stowe and Coiner continue to build their farm business on the land they lease from the Bertonis, the solid groundwork that they have all built and the common language that they speak as farmers will be invaluable.



*Heather Coiner and Ben Stowe. Photos by Jami McDowell
Farm fresh bread. Credit Heather Coiner*

Organic Farming at a Public Nature Preserve

An opportunity to grow food and invest in the environment

Attila Agoston and Shawna DeWitt met while working seasonal jobs at a research center in the South Pole. They started farming because, after running fuel stations in the frigid cold for several months, the summer work on an island off the coast of Washington State sounded warmer and entailed access to better food.

“When we first got into this,” Agoston says from a small farmhouse where they now live in Virginia’s Loudon County, “Shawna was in full-on health mode. She wanted to eat awesome food. For me, I wanted to get dirty and tinker with stuff.”

They found the property where they currently lease farmland online, which was advertised as a nature preserve adjacent to the Appalachian Trail in need of farmers to manage the land. Agoston was originally from Blacksburg, Va., and had gone to Virginia Tech University, but the big draw to this particular property was that it had some infrastructure in place, like fences and a place to live.

“That was a big thing for us coming from seasonal work. The biggest leap

for us into farming was — are we going to be able to stay somewhere? It’s not like you just do it a couple months and then take off,” Agoston said.

Finding a property that would involve less investment on the front end was a big plus for the couple when they moved into a little cabin onsite in 2006.

But they didn’t realize at first how unique the property — and their relationship with the non-profit that owns it — would be, or how long they’d want to stay.

Agoston and DeWitt’s Mountain View Farm grows about four acres of certified organic produce on a hilltop overlooking the verdant 900 acres that is the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship. Besides working full-time as farmers, the couple serves as onsite caretakers of the property, keeping its paths cleared for visitors and fitting their farm into

its vision for land preservation.

“Attila and Shawna do a really nice job of stewarding the land, taking care of it, especially since they’re an organic farm,” said Joe Coleman, who sits on the board for the privately run Blue Ridge Center and chairs its conservation and land use committee. The farmers’ work “ends up protecting the natural resources on the property. They actually end up benefitting the land.”

Agoston and DeWitt couldn’t be happier with the arrangement that’s allowed them to raise food and a

family — Emmet is 3 and Ruby is 6 — on this picturesque property for the past eight years. They recently signed a five-year lease to continue their arrangement with the landowners.

“I’m not sure if we’ll ever get rich selling vegetables, but we’ve figured out how to make a living,” said Agoston, who’s been able to invest in the farming business because of the extended lease.

“If you don’t own the land, if you can secure a long-term lease, you can make long-term business decisions and basically minimize the risk.”



Photos by Jami McDowell



*Farm from the air. Photo courtesy of Atilia Agoston
Chicken. Photo by Jami McDowell*

"If you don't own the land, if you can secure a long-term lease, you can make long-term business decisions and basically minimize the risk."

In addition to vegetables

As part of their \$450-per-month lease, Agoston exchanges 20 hours a month of work for the center doing "lots of mowing" and small maintenance jobs that come up. In addition to the lease, DeWitt is paid to rent out (through airbnb.com) a historic house on the property that sleeps 15 and welcomes Boy Scout groups or bachelorette parties on the weekends. She also works a side job as a trained midwife.

Besides the four acres of vegetables, greenhouses and fruit trees that comprises the bulk of their farm, the farmers keep chickens, pigs and goats on hillier portions of the property that are set aside for agriculture.

They sell a few pigs and goats whole to other farmers or individuals, but mostly the animals are for the family — and to add nutrients to the compost pile.

Agoston plans to change that soon by adding cattle to the operation next year. The 20-acre pasture where

they'll roam will be fenced off from the streams running through the property with the help of state and federal funds available through the local Soil and Water Conservation District.

"Being on leased land where the incentive isn't high to spend that much money if we don't own the land, that worked out really great for us," he said.

Coleman said the animals that are rotated throughout the pastures are also a draw for visitors to the park with children on their way through the center's 10 miles of trails and water access points.

Agoston and DeWitt spend a portion of their time at the farm answer-

"I firmly believe, having watched it over the last few years, that Mountain View Farm is really a positive addition. It's a partnership that should be strengthened even more."

ing questions from curious visitors and pointing them in the right direction toward trails or campsites. A sign

on the farm's deer fence tells passersby about the importance of crop diversity on the farm and its role in biodiversity on the landscape.

Agoston said interacting with visitors is a welcome part of the deal that allows them to farm "within striking distance of DC," where they sell the organic produce at a premium in three of the city's most popular farmers markets and directly to restaurants.

Taking a year off

Signing the five-year lease also gave the farming family the flexibility to do something they've been talking about for years: resting the land and themselves for a season.

This year, instead of driving to and from the city three times a week and hiring summer workers to keep up with harvest, the family spent the month of July on vacation in Alaska. They followed the Biblical model for farming suggested by a friend, which lets the farm rest for a year.

Instead of planting vegetables, they sewed their fields in cover crops like buckwheat and added thick layers of composted mulch to build the soil quality while they were away. They are growing little more than a few pots of produce around their house

for food and living off of the money they've made in previous years (and the generosity of neighbors).

"We're in a lot of places with farmers and we see the burnout of both the land and the people," Dewitt said. "We thought (resting the land) was a great idea in year four. After 10 years, we were like, 'Remember that thing we were going to do?'"

Even in this "off year," Agoston is keeping up his end of the management deal with the landowners, maintaining fences and mowing pastures as needed while DeWitt keeps busy delivering babies on the side.

Coleman said the couple's decision to rest the soils only reinforces their shared vision with the center to do what's best for the landscape long-term.

The privately run preserve is currently in the process of becoming a state park, which could take several years. Coleman is hopeful that the state will see the value that an organic farm adds to the property and continue to partner with Agoston and DeWitt as managers of the land once their lease expires.

"I firmly believe, having watched it over the last few years, that Mountain View Farm is really a positive addition," Coleman said. "It's a partnership that should be strengthened even more."



*Attila and Shawna's son Emmet and pig. Photos by Jami McDowell.
Shawna Dewitt with goats. Photo courtesy of Attila Agoston.*

Making the Most of His Family's Land

with additional acreage, added opportunity

For Brian Walden, his path to farming started with 250 acres of land.

He grew up on the property his family bought in Albemarle County in the 1980s, but his parents never farmed its rolling acreage themselves. His dad worked in the city and leased the land out to farmers who mowed it or kept cattle on it at various times, "but never productive farming," Walden said.

Walden went on to study education and agriculture at the University of Vermont, interested in the landscape on which he'd grown up but not yet committed to it.

"I went to college and, as time went on and I learned about what I wanted to do, the farm was that palette that I could access," Walden said.

Walden and his wife Mihr, now in their early 30s with two children, moved back to his family's land almost a decade ago and "started learning how to manage the land we have already."

Since then, they've built a house

and their Steadfast Farm has taken on twice the amount of land through a handful of leases, mostly to manage his neighbors' fields. Walden sees the landscape as a blank slate and considers anew each year what it might be best suited to grow or graze.

Walden started out with a small herd of cattle and taught himself how to make hay. Though he wanted to sell to local markets, he preferred the efficiency of livestock and rotational

Steadfast Farm has taken on twice the amount of land through a handful of leases, mostly to manage his neighbors' fields.

systems to the painstaking work of raising vegetables in rows. He also had a lot of land, much of it hilly, and wanted to make the most of it.

"I started to think more about the ability of me to produce more from an acre of land than what was being produced," he said. "And grain was an obvious option."

Walden saw in crops like wheat and barley the opportunity to bring the nutrient cycle of his cows and the land full-circle. But, in order to process the commodity-scale products, even for a local market, he had to get some oil as well as dirt under his fingernails.

Equipment

Because he already had access to land, and leases additional acreage for virtually nothing (the lease to make hay on his neighbor's 250 acres is based mostly on a handshake), Walden funneled his investments toward second-hand equipment. One of his first purchases was a small, 1950s John Deere combine that was big enough to manage a few acres.

He recognized that the consolidation of larger farms in this country was turning plenty of high-dollar machines into unwanted scrap metal, ready to be snatched up for discounted prices.

Walden's barns are now brimming with combines, tractors, a small grain mill and even a retro seed cleaner that he's picked up over the years. If



Photos by Jami McDowell



Photos by Jami McDowell

he doesn't know where to process something he's grown, he considers buying the equipment to do it himself. If he doesn't know how to use it — or how to fix it when it's broken — he learns.

"I made the choice to start using this machinery, and now I'm deep into it. I take care of 50 separate wheels; I've got 12 drivelines — the amazing things I've got to handle just to make the farm work," Walden said a couple years ago, after his first five years of growing grains and accumulating equipment.

He said equipment and access to land are the main reasons more farmers don't grow grains for local markets, despite a growing interest in locally produced flour for bakers and barley for brewers.

The markets

This summer, Walden harvested 20 acres of hard white winter wheat that he'll store at 45 degrees "almost indefinitely" in a refrigerated tractor-trailer he acquired.

He'll sell some of it to the historic Woodson's Mill that was recently revived in Nelson County to process flour and grits for local markets. Some of that flour, though not necessarily labeled as Steadfast Farm's, will end

up at Dr. Ho's Humble Pie, a pizza café that's a short drive from the farm.

But the majority of it will go to North Carolina, where a revived system supporting local grains — from grower to miller to baker — is making better headway than it has so far in Virginia.

Walden does mill a small batch of the grains himself, but he no longer exhausts himself trying to sell grains through a local CSA or at the Charlottesville Farmers Market, where most customers barely recognized the wheat berry kernels he tried to sell once, let alone knew what to do with them.

Walden's farm business has entailed plenty of trial, error and a few successes. He seems to thrive on experimentation and it can be difficult to keep tabs on what he has in the works at any given moment.

During a visit in 2012, Walden was fixated on establishing local markets for his grains, the flour from which we could sample in the pizza dough at Dr. Ho's. He was making most of his income selling the beef from his cat-

tle through a CSA and at the farmers market.

But, this year, Walden put his cattle on a trailer and sold them in Staunton, because they were garnering such a high price on the conventional cow-calf market that he couldn't "justify hustling it around" to local buyers.

Walden is working on setting up better rotational systems at the farm that could allow him to grow the herd beyond the 40 head of cattle he

maintains now. This spring, he received 100-percent funding from the state to build fences and watering troughs that keep his cattle out of the streams and give him the ability to move

them more strategically through the pastures.

He sees opportunity in selling the cattle locally once he can generate more volume with better systems.

But, for now, he's thinking small.

...equipment and access to land are the main reasons more farmers don't grow grains for local markets, despite a growing interest in locally produced flour for bakers and barley for brewers.

Specialty crops

As primed as Walden's land is to support cattle and grains, he's always had a soft spot for a brand of farming that makes a lot of money with a little bit of product. On a bit of flatlands near the cabin in which he and his wife first lived is a plot of land that serves as a sort of research station for the farm.

As rain begins to roll off the mountains and onto the farm one July afternoon, Walden ducks into a 3,000-square-foot greenhouse that's growing neat rows of what looks like bamboo shoots. It's ginger root, and lots of it.

Next to the greenhouse is a row of vines that are just beginning to crawl up the posts and wires that will support their fruit. The kiwi berries — picture green kiwis the size of a large grape, without the fuzz — won't be ready to harvest for five years. But Walden thinks the specialty crop that can earn a high price will be pre-sold to buyers before it's even picked.

"They're a super food, most vitamin C per unit of weight you can get anywhere. And nobody's doing them," he said.

Beyond the burgeoning kiwi berries are what look like telephone poles bearing the crop that, for now, is generating the most excitement and marketing energy from Walden: hops.

He would harvest the last of this crop that day, once the rain stopped. He'd then dry the hops and vacuum pack them with a label his wife designed for sale to local beer brewers and herbalists. Walden had been promoting the new product at farmers markets for weeks, and it was generating plenty of interest among local brewers.



Photo by Jami McDowell

After growing a third of an acre of hops this year, Walden said he only has enough product to sell to the highest bidder.

"Home brewers will pay top dollar," he said. "I only have so many dollars here, so I'll sell to those."

The Model for So Many Others

A long-term lease that creates ownership

Eric Plaksin and Rachel Bynum are standing near a row of peak summer tomatoes in a field that, after 15 years of farming, feels very much like their own, when the landowner pulls up in his golf cart with his dog Hannah perched in the backseat.

“They aren’t disparaging me are they?” Cliff Miller asks with a grin.

He knows enough about the farming couple — with which he has a 40-yearlong lease agreement — to answer his own question. But, in his early 70s and as sharp as ever, he doesn’t miss an opportunity to jibe them.

Miller goes on to offer up his perspective on the lease, and why more people should consider partnerships like the one he’s forged here.

“A 40-year lease throws us both on the same trail. We both want the best thing to happen,” he said. “More people should do that, but they’ve gotta trust each other.”

Bynum and Plaksin were in their early 30s when they first signed the lease to farm 27 of the 850 acres that

Miller’s family owns in Rappahannock County. In the 15 years since, Waterpenny Farm has flourished as an example of what ecological growers can accomplish with the support of a long-term lease.

The farmers will be at least 70 by the time the contract is up, and their two children will be almost 40.

“We feel ownership for this land,” Bynum said. “We care about it and we know it. We feel like we’re going to be here for our careers.”

“We feel ownership for this land. We care about it and we know it. We feel like we’re going to be here for our careers.”

When it comes to long-term leases, the kind that support growers who are benefiting the landscape and the community, “that ownership feeling is kind of what you’re going for,” Bynum adds.

But the deal that reinforces their thriving business here was several years in the making.

The early years

After meeting Bynum at college in Minnesota, Plaksin went on to Wheatland Vegetable Farms in Loudoun County, where he cut his farming teeth during four years in the fields. Bynum worked in environmental education at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation’s Claggett Farm while also doing seasonal work at the vegetable farm.

But they were ready to start their own operation. “We drew a big circle around DC” and started looking for land to buy. But, a few trips with a realtor showed that most of what they could afford didn’t include a place to live, let alone the infrastructure and community they’d need to make a farming business work.

“As we looked at what we could have afforded to buy, it was like a bad house or no house in the middle of a field,” Bynum said of their search for land within a drive of DC’s markets.



Photos by Jami McDowell



Photos by Jami McDowell

Around the same time, Miller had begun his own search for an organic vegetable grower. He had rented land to conventional farmers in the past but, after enrolling several hundred acres in conservation programs, had a change of heart about the best use for the land his family had owned for generations.

"When the previous managers left, there was a lot of bad stuff like Johnson grass growing in here," Miller said during a drive across his land in the fall. "My solution was to get an organic vegetable farm to come in and pull the Johnson grass out by hand, rather than put a bunch of Roundup on the soil."

Miller reached out to Wheatland for farmer recommendations, and "Eric and Rachel were as good a fit as there is."

The pair didn't jump on the opportunity at first, because it came up too close to the spring planting season.

"We wanted to plant cover crops. Nobody's going to successfully bust sod in the spring and have a good farm going," said Bynum, who now grows produce on just 8 of the acres they manage.

When he asked again later in the year, they were ready. In 1999, the

farmers moved into a small white house that had years ago housed migrant orchard workers, and they began planting.

The farmers paid their rent in sweat equity those first two years, chipping away at projects on the old house and the landscape. They paid to rent farming equipment from Miller as needed.

"We went into leasing because we couldn't afford to buy, but we think there are some advantages to being part of something bigger."

"It allowed us to try it out and see if it was going to work for us," Plaksin said.

Waterpenny Farm — named for an ecologically sensitive bug seen in streams on the property — had in that first year landed a coveted spot at the Takoma Park Farmers Market in DC. The market is their biggest source of income to this day, along with the Arlington Farmers Market and a 100-member CSA program.

After deciding the land was the right fit, the couple expressed interest in a long-term lease, something that

would basically allow them to stay on the land "until we die." Miller wanted that, too, but he also wanted the next generation of his family to have choices.

"My history of short-term leases with good farmers indicated that that doesn't work for me anyway," he said. "So if you can get a 40-year lease, that's like owning it."

Plaksin and Bynum agreed that such a long-term lease would be the best fit for them as well, but it still took about three years to craft the 50-page agreement. Bynum said that was partly because there were few, if any, examples of such arrangements that they could use as templates.

The freedom of leasing

Also complicating the lease was language surrounding the home that the couple built and owns — on land they do not. The lease states that, should Plaksin and Bynum decide to leave with 90 days' notice, Miller Properties has to buy back for the appraised value the two houses and barn that the couple owns.

The arrangement helps the farmers build equity without owning the land or having to worry about their investments on the property being lost.

"We went into leasing because we couldn't afford to buy, but we think there are some advantages to being part of something bigger," Plaksin said.

Waterpenny's lease includes a land use agreement that neither party use chemicals that would harm the environment. Since Miller owns all the property surrounding their farm — far more acreage than the couple could afford to buy as a buffer — they don't have to worry about how their neighbors' actions might affect an ecological farm.

Conversely, Plaksin said, "It's in our interest to take care of the soil, not just to try to use it up and go somewhere else."

Not having to pay a mortgage on the land and having good markets meant that Plaksin and Bynum could invest in their farming business early on — and turn a profit in their first year. That profit has grown a little bit each of the years since, allowing the farmers to invest in retirement funds and college funds for their children.

They also invest in other farmers.

Waterpenny hires about six interns a year and, besides paying them good wages, offers up an educational opportunity that has inspired many of them to branch out on their own. (The interns almost always ask how they landed that enviable 40-year lease.)

Ben Stowe started his own Little Hat Creek Farm last year after interning at Waterpenny and said the experience showed him he could make money, pay workers well and "have a good life" as a farmer.

"I used to feel like we were choosing to make less money than we could make doing other things," Plaksin said, noting that many people stick



Photo by Jami McDowell



Photo by Rose Jenkins



Photo by Jami McDowell

with farming for the lifestyle. "But we're doing well enough that I don't know what else I would do to make better money."

Lessons Learned at Whisper Hill Farm

What happens next door matters

Holly Hammond grew up on a you-pick vegetable farm in Arizona that her parents ran. She had no intention of following in their footsteps as farmers, hobby or otherwise, and neither did her husband, James Hammond, when they married in 2002.

At least, not in Arizona. “It just didn’t make sense to try to grow food there,” said Holly, 32. The Hammonds came to Virginia in 2007, but it would take two years — and a little hiking — before they’d find “the farm.”

“We had actually no idea what it took to start a farm. We didn’t know about interning; we didn’t know about any of that stuff,” Holly said last summer from the kitchen of their 1930s farmhouse in Rapidan. A pair of seasonal interns weeded vegetable beds beyond the window as she plopped a jar of her pickled cucumbers on the table.

“People are always like, ‘Oh, you found the farm!’” said James, 37, but “it was a long way around.”

Holly and James began to seriously consider growing food for a living

after starting a community garden in their Phoenix neighborhood and reading books by Wendell Berry about what was wrong with modern agriculture. James had grown up in Greensboro, NC, with fervent gardeners as parents and a father who’d been raised on a tobacco farm. But he chose a career in professional baseball, which eventually brought him to Arizona for training. After meeting and marrying Holly, he stayed there for several years.

Holly’s parents had since divorced and sold the farm in Arizona. Her dad now had some land in Virginia, a state that, at the very least, promised more hospitable growing conditions for a fledgling farm. But James and Holly never ended up farming the land owned by her dad.

Instead, they hiked the Appalachian Trail, moved back to Arizona and then back to Virginia before stumbling upon Waterpenny Farm online. The

small, organic operation in Rappahannock County was looking for interns, and the Hammonds were looking to learn the trade. The couple also signed up for a program offered by *The Piedmont Environmental Council* called “Exploring the Small Farm Dream.”

Finding the farm

After interning at Waterpenny for a year — “the best experience we could have hoped for” — their plans to stay on for another year were interrupted when they found some farmland of their own to lease.

“Lots of people have land, but it doesn’t have the infrastructure in place that would make something like this feasible.”

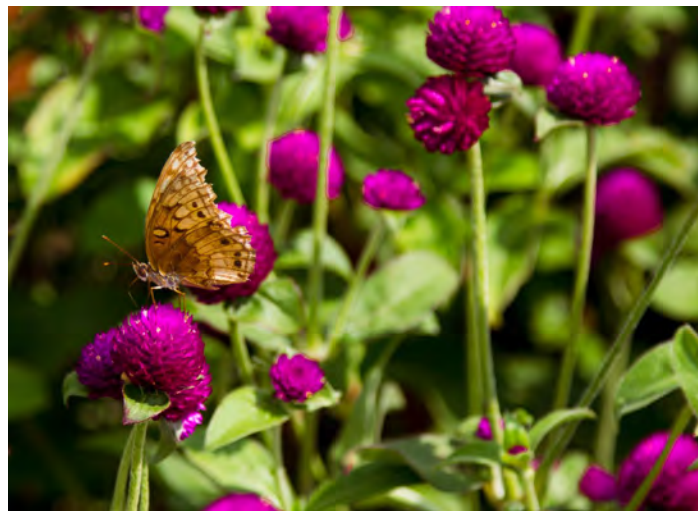
Leasing 10 acres for \$800 a month met their criteria, and “we were so eager to start farming.” The property in Culpeper County included an old barn, and several storage sheds. Rolling hills gave way to some flatter

portions of river bottom-like land that would be ideal for growing produce, and a creek could provide irrigation.

“Lots of people have land, but it doesn’t have the infrastructure in



Photos by Jami McDowell



Photos by Jami McDowell

place that would make something like this feasible,” said James, who had looked at a handful of other properties by the time this opportunity arose. The parcel represented a small fraction of the total farmland the family owned in the area, and the Hammonds liked the autonomy that came with landowners living off-site. The house and outbuildings were “a little rundown,” but the Hammonds, who wanted to farm organically, liked that the ground hadn’t been intensively farmed for several years.

In January 2010, they moved in. Over the past five years, the couple has used this land to build a greenhouse, cold storage, irrigation system — and a sturdy farm business raising four acres of vegetables, herbs and cut flowers without the use of synthetic chemicals. They sell the produce at two farmers markets and through a community supported agriculture (CSA) program, making more money each year.

Holly said leasing land allowed them to get to know the landscape and establish a business without having to take on a mortgage right away. “We spent like \$40,000 before we’d even been to our first farmers market. So if we had bought a property that we weren’t sure about, too, that would have been really stressful,” she said.

Last summer, the Hammonds were so pleased with the arrangement that they’d begun to consider drafting a long-term lease.

Lessons learned

And then the unexpected happened.

The Hammonds knew that the land surrounding their farm, owned by the same family, was used to graze cattle and grow hay. They knew that the chemical fertilizers that are heavily used in the agricultural county might be used nearby (and that tests of their drinking water had recently revealed it was high in nitrates).

Then, last summer, the farmer working the land uphill from their own — 400 feet from their home and the well that waters it — applied biosolids as fertilizer.

Biosolids are sewage sludge, including human waste, that’s been treated to remove pathogens and reduce the presence of heavy metals. The state considers the processed sewage safe for applica-

tion on land and regulates its use as a fertilizer.

But that doesn’t make it “organic” — far from it — and the Hammonds considered the new addition problematic enough that were looking for a new place to farm after the season was over.

“I didn’t quite understand how much someone up above you or a river below you could impact you. We didn’t have enough experience farming to see it all,” James said.

Now, “when it rains really hard, we see streams of water coming down from there,” he said, pointing to the hill just beyond their barn where biosolids were spread. “That hasn’t happened since (it was spread), but it’s inevitably going to contaminate our operation.”

“I didn’t quite understand how much someone up above you or a river below you could impact you. We didn’t have enough experience farming to see it all.”

The Hammonds hadn’t even thought much about biosolids until they discovered — and

smelled — them being applied on the nearby field. James said they’ve come to realize that what happens around them impacts everything

from their drinking water to their own business' integrity.

The Hammonds were interested in including a land-use agreement in a long-term lease, one that would stipulate what can be applied on the fields surrounding them even if they're not leasing them. But, based on recent conversations with their landowners, who had been receptive to the idea of a long-term lease, the Hammonds realized they might not agree to limitations on the land.

"I think a main lesson is we have to work with people that really get it, really value the same things, because farming is just way too hard to be up against people who... I'm sure they think we're crazy," Holly said. James added that they don't blame the landowners for using an additive that the state still considers fairly harmless, though regulations are evolving. But, for them, "it's just as far from the other end of the spectrum of organic farming as there is."

The Hammonds said they've learned a lot from their first five years of renting farmland, and that this recent incident has taught them how important it is to work with likeminded landowners. They'd even consider buying a piece of property now that they've saved enough money over their first five years.

"I would rather never farm again than be subjected to stuff that's against all the reasons why we got into organic farming," James said. "There are plenty of people out there who value what we're doing, who would be proud of it."

In the fall of 2014, Whisper Hill Farm relocated to Scottsville, Virginia. They are excited to be leasing from landowners who value organic production. Whisper Hill will be certified organic for the 2015 growing season.



Photos by Jami McDowell

Housing Development Sets Aside Land, Funding for Farmers

Mike Snow's future boss wasn't quite sure what to ask when he first interviewed him for the position of "farmer" at a new housing development in Loudoun County.

It was the middle of winter and, while Snow came with references from previous farming positions, "it's not like they come in with a resume of what they grow," said Brian Cullen, who was piecing together a core team for what would become Wil- lowsford, the first planned neighbor- hood of its size to set aside a portion of land for a working farm.

For his part, Cullen was operating in uncharted territory, too.

"You're sizing each other up. And Mike was probably saying, 'Are these guys just doing this as a marketing ploy?'" Cullen wondered. (Snow, 36, said later that the thought did cross his mind, but mostly he was thinking about how uncomfortable he was in dress shoes.)

A few farming seasons later, Snow says he couldn't be happier with the arrangement that's provided him

both a place to farm and a steady sal- ary. He now sees this type of develop- ment as a potential model for sustain- ing agriculture alongside new resi- dences.

The thought of farming under an unconventional arrangement wasn't new to Snow, whose most recent farming position had been at a non- profit. He was running the Ecosystem Farm and farmer-training program at the Accokeek Foundation when Wil- lowsford approached him, though they weren't necessarily looking for an organic farmer.

But "they realized that farming that way would add more value to the community," he said. "It's my choice to farm this way. They didn't say, 'We need an or- ganic farm.'"

Snow's introduc- tion to farming came while he was working on his geography degree at Middle- bury College in

Vermont. While in school, he worked on a mapping project with a farmer, and he also ended up taking a per- maculture course.

"It seemed like I should know that stuff," he said. "That's where I first heard of kale."

Snow took a part-time job at a vege- table farm while he finished his thesis and began to consider farming full- time.

Freedom to farm

At Willowsford, the developers de- cided early on against the type of neighborhood that has dotted much of Loudoun County, with one- to

three-acre lots and a golf course. They chose instead to cluster the homes onto portions of the land, leaving about 2,000 acres to be conserved as natural landscapes and farmland. Some of that land had been leased in

"What we found is that a lot of the young farmers are lacking land and money— two important things— and we actually had the land and the money to start this."



Photos by Whitney Pipkin



Photos by Whitney Pipkin

the past to farmers, who used it for pasture or to grow crops like soybeans and corn.

"The question was, 'How do you use it in some meaningful and purposeful way rather than let it go fallow?'" Cullen said.

The idea was soon born for a small-scale farm, one that would grow food for the development's residents and others instead of feed for cattle. And they started looking for a farmer to manage it.

Of the 300 acres now set aside for such agricultural uses, Snow grows produce and grazes chickens on about 30 of it while managing the rest with a larger future farm in mind.

From a marketing standpoint, Cullen said Willowsford saw in the farm an opportunity to appeal to potential residents who, increasingly, want to live in a place "where maybe kids can grow up knowing where food comes from."

But, from a land-use perspective, Cullen saw the chance to support local farmers who want to sell directly to customers in the Washington metro area.

"What we found is that a lot of the young farmers are lacking land and

money — two important things — and we actually had the land and the money to start this," he said.

Snow said the partnership works well because Willowsford has given him the freedom to farm as he sees fit. More than that, the developer helped put the initial infrastructure in place — including barns, deer fencing and a greenhouse — and basically asked Snow to help determine a budget. (Cullen said Snow still insisted on buying used equipment as much as possible. "It's not like a kid in a candy store.")

While Willowsford pays the farmer's salary for now, the farm will need to sustain itself financially by the time the development is complete.

While Willowsford pays the farmer's salary for now, the farm will need to sustain itself financially by the time the development is complete. And, in exchange for all these resources, Snow also does more than just grow vegetables.

He appears in short videos that show customers of the farms' CSA program what to do with the contents of a weekly farm box. He dis-

plays an incredible amount of patience while showing the neighborhood kids how to "help" move laying hens from one field to another after a potluck meal at the farm. And he explains to residents and customers alike (not all residents are CSA members) how he uses biology rather than chemistry to foster healthy soils and plants in a holistic way at the farm.

"I think for any farmer who is involved in direct marketing, you have to have some way of interacting with your people," Snow said. "In that sense, it's not for everybody." Snow said, despite his regular interaction with customers, he's still very much "a grumpy farmer," which is where Deb Dramby comes in.

Dramby is the farm's market and education coordinator and another young farmer whose position is supported, for now, by the development. Dramby spends part of her time growing vegetables and keeping goats that help with problem vegetation on this and other properties. She also runs — with an effervescent smile — the farm's market stand three days a week, along with regular events like volunteer weeding nights coordinated through the farm's active Facebook page.

"Deb is really good at this stuff," Snow said. "Rarely do you have a farm

where it's just one person doing everything. We want to be at the scale where we can support more than me."

Salary vs. equity

The farm has room to grow into the 300 acres that Snow currently is charged with managing in a sustainable manner, whether for wildlife, crops or livestock.

He said one of the reasons he thinks a salary is appropriate is that his and Dramby's positions add value to the development beyond the farm.

He compares the other aspects of their positions to the side jobs that many farming families keep to subsidize their income in the early years. The salary also helps make up for the fact that he doesn't have the chance to build equity on the farm like he would if he owned the land.

But Snow has a keen sense of ownership in the farm he helped build from a blank slate, a farm that also has grown a palpable sense of community in this burgeoning neighborhood. About 400 homes have been sold so far, and Cullen estimates construction could continue into 2019. This year, about half of the farm's 150 CSA members are residents of Willowsford. Some residents stop by the market stand more frequently than others, while some don't have any interest in heaps of local produce.

"It's not like a bunch of hippie families who want to live on an organic farm. It's mainstream people who move here for a lot of reasons," Snow said.

He adds that, if the community wasn't interested in supporting the farm and its produce, he would do what most other small-scale farms do, cart-



Mike Snow and Deb Dramby. Photo by Molly M. Peterson



Photo by Whitney Pipkin

ing the products to the nearest willing customer at farmers markets closer to D.C.

"If the community wasn't interested in supporting us, we'd find other customers," Snow said, "because our mission is to manage land and do it viably."