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VERMONT FARMS

The Fullness of Circles

Cedar Circle Farm & Education Center



ANDREW CARNEGIE had a vision: a public library in every community. Will Allen, manager of Cedar Circle Farm, has a similar dream: an organic farm in every community. He firmly believes that if we eat better food, we will be healthier, live longer, and begin to heal the planet.

“The way to get people to change their diets and habits is not by beating up on parents but by teaching the kids! We start with the kids, get them here on the farm,” Will explains. “They learn about healthy food, soil, animals, composting. They love being here because their eyes, minds, and hands are engaged. Then they bring that knowledge back home to their families. It all comes full circle.”

Full circle, much like the ring of cedar trees that stands behind the farmhouse at Cedar Circle Farm and Education Center. Located in East Thetford

along the Connecticut River, the farm spreads across 40 acres of loamy soil. The place buzzes with activity, a staff of 30 employees and volunteers tending the fields and 13 greenhouses, selling produce at four local farmers’ markets, and preparing value-added foods and baked goods in their commercial kitchen.

Equally important is the farm’s educational mission, which has four specific areas of focus: To train the next generation of aspiring farmers; to raise awareness of organically grown local food and food systems; to increase access to organic foods for people of limited income; and to demonstrate farm-appropriate models of alternative energy.

Cedar Circle Farm is owned by a private foundation based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The foundation has a 25-year relationship with Will Allen and Kate Duesterberg, who have managed

the farm since 1999. “This farm is our shared dream. Fortunately, the foundation supports our vision of a sustainable, organic farm that connects with and provides for our community,” explains Kate. “We manage the farm and educational aspects while the foundation remains involved in overall strategy discussions several times a year.”

Kate and Will are stewards of the land, upholding the motto “If you take care of the land, the land will take care of you.” Active in food politics and sustainable agriculture for several decades, the couple works with various organizations around the world to protect the rights of small family farms and to promote soil health. Will earned his PhD in anthropology and has farmed organically since 1972. 2008 saw the publication of his book *The War on Bugs*, which raises serious questions about the use of chemical pesticides in food



production. Kate has been active in the Vermont farming community, working as a policy maker at the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA-VT), Rural Vermont, and University of Vermont's Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the Women's Agricultural Network.

These connections helped Kate and Will to discover the East Thetford property in the late 1990s. They fell in love with the 1847 farmhouse and dairy barn. Lush fields stretched to the riverbank, prime agricultural land. The farm was growing perennial flowers, corn, strawberries, and some vegetables. Several greenhouses were already in place along with a farm stand. The foundation purchased the farm in 1999, and Kate and Will spent the next few years converting the land to gain organic certification in 2003.

Taking over an existing farm was like boarding a moving train, and the first five years provided plenty of challenges. Kate tackled the business end, including personnel, marketing, education, and retail; Will focused on the farming and production plans: "I came from California agriculture where we had 11-month growing seasons, and here I was lucky if I could get in six!" He quickly learned to use the existing greenhouses for season-extension production. Will also incorporated some of

his Western practices such as ordering new strawberry plants each year and tilling in the old. He understood that young plants produce significantly more fruit with fewer diseases and weed problems. Kate acknowledges that "Since we were new to the area, we had to learn who our customers were. We are finally getting to the point where people come to us because they appreciate what we are doing, how we are growing and educating and investing in our community."

Cedar Circle is first and foremost a production farm, offering more than 100 types of vegetables, including 50 types of tomatoes. Five acres are devoted to strawberries, two to blueberries, and an acre and a half to raspberries. The farm grows a dozen varieties of dried beans along with wheat and rye for grain. Sunflowers provide the seeds that are pressed for oil to be used in their baking and cooking, and eggs come from the farm's laying hens. All manures, vegetable waste, and kitchen residuals go into compost operation, another part of this full-circle approach.

"We must be a viable working farm for the educational aspect to be meaningful," says Will, since people of all ages come to Cedar Circle Farm to learn how food is grown. He continues, adding, "Many people have an elementary



Each year, the farm holds a pumpkin festival in October that is a fun-filled event for children and adults alike. The 2012 festival drew a record-breaking 1,900 people. The 2013 festival is scheduled for October 13. It is also possible to travel by train from White River Junction to the Thetford farm (there is a stop at Montshire Museum along the way) on certain days in the fall.

school understanding of agriculture, which makes sense because that's usually the last time they took a trip to a farm!" More than 1,000 schoolchildren visit the farm each year. "We show the kids how we plant, how we fertilize, how we make compost, how we cultivate and harvest." And the education is not limited to kids. Cedar Circle offers popular gardening and cooking classes for adults as well. Moreover, visitors can take a self-guided tour of the farm, following well-marked signposts with information placards about what is happening in the fields, gardens, barns, and greenhouses.

Kate explains, "We want people to



With a direct field-to-table connection, the farm offers a plethora of things to do (and eat), including cooking and gardening classes, country dinners, and tasting events. There is also a pick-your-own option (in season, of course) for flowers, herbs, strawberries, and certified-organic blueberries. And, of course, pumpkins come fall!

know where their food comes from. Our pick-your-own crops are a real draw. When the crops ripen from June through October, you can go into the fields and harvest the berries, herbs, flowers, and pumpkins. It's a great family activity. Folks get a coffee and muffin at our café, shop in the retail store, and just hang out. We have artists who come and paint in the fields." Will emphasized, "We need small farms in every community, places where people want to come and learn and enjoy good food." The farm hosts two popular festivals, the Strawberry Festival in mid-June and the Pumpkin Festival in October, which attract more than 1,200 people from throughout New England. "One year, the train came up from White River Junction and delivered 289 people to our farm. The festivals give us the chance to see people enjoying the literal fruits of our labor," Kate adds, "and the hugs keep us going throughout the year!"

This is all part of Cedar Circle's mission, to be a relevant and vibrant part of

their Upper Valley community. Kate and Will are passionate about getting high-quality food to people of limited income. To that end, they have donated an acre of their farmland to "Willing Hands," a group that collaborates with the Vermont Food Bank to provide food to 59 soup kitchens and pantries in the Upper Valley area. Cedar Circle does most of the organization and training of the volunteers who plant and tend the garden. Will is justifiably proud, exclaiming, "That garden produces a tremendous amount of food!" Two years ago, volunteers harvested more than 6,600 pounds of vegetables. "Our garden supplements what the food bank gathers from other resources, and the volunteers gain valuable experience in growing food," Kate says.

Another essential goal is developing young farmers. Will advises that "I tell young people, 'If you want to go into a profession where your customers hug you, then become a farmer!'" Their loyal and creative staff ranks as one of the primary joys of their job. Kate clarifies by saying, "Right now, we have a dream team. Megan Baxter has been with us since the beginning. She came in 2000 as a high school kid and is now our production manager. Luke Joanis has worked with us for 10 years and now serves as op-

erations manager. He's Will's right-hand man. Cat Buxton has been the education and outreach coordinator for six years, developing the farm tours and planning our workshops and harvest festivals. She also helped create the amazing garden program at Thetford Elementary School. Alison Baker came on a few years ago as chef and kitchen manager."

In 2010, Cedar Circle transformed a three-car garage into a certified commercial kitchen. After dabbling in baked goods and value-added products for years, Kate and Will decided it was time to ramp up to the next level. Getting certified allowed Kate to hire a professional baker. Will added, "The staff has taken real ownership of the place, coming up with innovative ideas such as extending our CSA [Community-Supported Agriculture] into the fall season and keeping the retail store open through October. These people are brilliant, passionate, dedicated workers who can take an idea and run with it."

The final piece of the mission is to incorporate alternative energy throughout the farm. To that end, photovoltaic panels grace the south-facing roof of the barn while one of the greenhouse heaters runs on used vegetable oil. Two draft horses work the fields. Five years ago, Will converted one of his old tractors, an Allis Chalmers "G," to battery power. With a pack of eight six-volt batteries strapped



At the helm of this 40-acre farm are Kate Duestenberg (above) and Will Allen, who have been the managers here for the past 14 years. Cedar Circle offers both guided and self-guided tours for schoolchildren, scouts, and camp groups, which is especially helpful for teachers or groups that are starting farm-to-school programs.

behind the seat, the tractor works for five hours before requiring a three-hour recharge. These lightweight tractors are silent, efficient, and well suited to the flat riverside land. "Everyone loves this tractor because it actually has more power than the gas engine! I want to convert more of our equipment to battery powered. It's a clean and inexpensive form of energy," attests Will.

What is the future vision for the farm? "We'd like to increase our number of CSA memberships so we can feed more families and continue our work with schools and our community," Kate says. Will just smiles, saying, "Fix the soil! Change people's habits! If we all committed to organic methods, we could have a huge impact on the global atmosphere. It's pretty simple: Get more organic matter back into the soil so it can pull the greenhouse gases out of the air." A full-circle approach once again. 🌱

Maria Buteux Reade has a home along the Battenkill River in Arlington, VT. When not teaching English, she works at Someday Farm in East Dorset and

Just the facts

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