A NEW PRODUCTION SYSTEM AT THE CENTER OF OUR VEGGIE OPERATION

BY TYSON NEUKIRCH

Flat Field North
- Mow strawberries as soon as production is finished (Mid July 2018)
- Disc, chisel, perfecta (Mid July 2018)
- Check for strawberry kill (Late August 2018)
- Continued tillage as necessary (Late August/Early September 2018)
- Intensive rock pick (Mid October 2018)
- Pull soil tests (Mid October 2018)
- Establish beds and apply compost (Late October/Early November 2018)
- Tarp Beds for Spring production (Early November 2018)
- Check beds, re-apply compost/amendments as necessary (April 2019)

This is a simple list, one of the endless and cyclical to-do lists that drive and define the life of a farmer. Yet this particular list embodies a shift, a reframing, an act of agricultural bricolage. It represents the first physical steps of transitioning the Flat Field - a production field that is at the geographic and energetic heart of the Farm School - into an innovative and experimental market garden.

There is a small but growing cohort of leading-edge farmers in North America that are challenging the way we think about scale, profitability, and potential for regenerative practices. Growers like JM Fortier, Elizabeth and Paul Kaiser, Ben Hartman and Conor Crikmore are leading a movement of contemporary market gardeners growing on a half acre to five acres and grossing 75-200K per acre while growing soil and deepening the capacity of their farms to produce into the future. Their production systems are lean on mechanical technology and tractors and rich in observation, reflection, and action. These growers leverage their income to deepen the capacity of their agro-ecological systems and refine their management as opposed to expanding in acreage.

Transitioning the Flat Field to a 1.25 acre Market Garden could have profound impacts on how we grow and how we teach at The Farm School. The site will eventually produce all of the arugula, head lettuce, lettuce mix, spinach, salad turnips, mesclun, carrots, and beets for The Farm School’s CSA, Farmers’ Markets, and ridgetop meals. These are crops that require frequent sowings, are highly responsive to irrigation, and can be grown at a high density given the presence of good fertility and adequate water. By investing in fertility, irrigation, and more intensive management, the production in the Flat Field could initially produce the equivalent of 3+ acres in our current, more extensive management system.

What happens when we take 1.25 acres and turn it into 3+? We are able to take 2 acres out of active production each year and work on growing the productive capacity of those acres: building soil, improving fertility, breaking pest and disease cycles, and depleting the weed seed bank through rotations of diverse cover crops and periods of bare fallow. These acres, in turn, become more productive and profitable, meaning that in subsequent seasons, we are able to manage towards a goal of having half of our 13 Certified Organic acres in production and half in soil-growing cover crops each season. In doing so, Student Farmers are empowered by experiencing low capital investment, low acreage, high knowledge approaches that serve as the foundation for their own future farming endeavors, increasing the likelihood that they will translate what and how they learn at The Farm School into a lifetime of profitable and regenerative agricultural practices.

As with all things, this potential is only made actual through work. The addition of the new Flat Field infrastructure and management systems into the production and curricular space of the adult Learn to Farm Program increases the educational surface area of the program, deepening the opportunities for student farmers to connect to the land, to themselves, and to each other. The creation and perpetual improvement of the Flat Field will rely on the creative and dynamic agricultural problem solving that is at the core of our pedagogy and is, in many ways, the most valuable skill that the student farmers take with them when they go.
THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW PLACE FOR THE DRAINY

BY JOSH PINCUS

The small dairy at Sentinel Elm Farm at The Farm School has always been the heart of the visiting student livestock experience. Every child is offered the opportunity to try their hand at milking a cow, free time is often spent with the cows in the barn, and the cows parade in and out of the barn at chore time always draws an adoring crowd. The cows and the kids really connect in the barn; the kids brush and feed the cows, they put their hands on them and feel their heat, feel their breath, feel them shift and move. They smell the deep bovine scents, and clean up the mess. The kids make contact with these large animals and feel the strength of their presence, and the slower cadence of their lives. Naturally, this connection turns into caring, and caring into caring for, and caring for into real work.

One of the essential principles of this place, one that makes it so remarkable, is that all of the work is real. Every endeavor has a real purpose, every job has to get done, and every task is genuinely important. This farm is not a petting zoo. So the cows in the barn must earn their keep. They must produce. One of the essential aspects of this place, one that makes it so remarkable, is that all of the work is real. Every endeavor has a real purpose, every job has to get done, and every task is genuinely important. This farm is not a petting zoo. So the cows in the barn must earn their keep. They must produce.

Now we are working on a project to make our small dairy facility into a state inspected pasteurization plant. The new facility will be comprised of three rooms: a milk room for storing the raw milk from a small herd (six or so milkers), a refrigerated bulk tank, a processing room for pasteurizing the milk and transforming it into any other products we want to make, and an entrance room into the processing room that will hold clean work clothes for working in the processing space.

All of the details of these spaces, and their uses, are regulated by state and town inspectors. We have been working to build a facility that will meet these regulations and also serve our larger educational mission by enabling students to be in the processing room converting pasteurized milk into a finished product that they can consume (such as butter, which is a large line item in our food budget). The fact that the work opened up here for our students will have such a clear purpose will deepen the connection they forge with the cows and expand their overall sense of working to sustain themselves and this place. It will add another layer to their relationship with the cows, and with the work, and with the farm, and ultimately, with the land that supports everything that we do.

There are abandoned fields and pastures. And nearly always there is evidence that one follows in the footsteps of the people who were here long before the colonizers. This forest has been tended by so many people before me. And each one of us who comes through this place sees the mark of the stewards who came before them. A story is told by crumbling stone walls, by a forked wolf pine, a multi trunked red maple, a pocket in the earth where things collect like the bottom of a change purse. On the surface these may seem to be stories of ruin, of decay, of collapse. Stories of misjudgment and short sightedness. We are accustomed to believing that if a thing is good it will last. We are obsessed with man made structures that, against all odds, have "stood the test of time": the Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Wall of China, the Mayan temples. But, New England's lusciousness wants nothing more than to be fully cloaked in vibrant green forest. The trees push up, unapologeticaly and we are ever creeping into the pastures, the veggie fields we fight to keep clear. The forest is at work, dying to renew itself, covering the tracks of those of us who were here, burying the paths and the old stumps and the refuse.

So our job, too, as farmers, as teachers, as mentors, as humans, is to learn from what the forest is teaching us. Burn piles and compost heaps are as valuable and useful as a golden ear of corn or a bottle of amber syrup. Finding ways to move the old through in order to make space and feed the new is as much a part of our work as nurturing the newborn calf or planting a seed. Mushrooms can produce food as it works to decay a log. Fire will heat the living in its own doing. The forest is showing us what to hope for. And how to hope. How to reuse, transform, and renew. It will always be a new world if we will let it be.

BY ABIGAIL DEVRIES

That the world is stable and its order fixed is perhaps the most persistent human delusion. How many errors have been made on the assumption that what was, is? To a young child the house she lives in is permanent and unchanging, an eternal verity. But it is clear to the person who keeps the house that if it is treated as an eternal verity it will soon fall into ruin. Against the constant jealousy of decay there is the necessity of constant renewal. And there are, of course, the maxims to the effect that you cannot go home again, or step in the same river twice. But no place is to be learned like a textbook or a course in school, and then turned away from on the assumption that one’s knowledge of it is complete, the patterns set. What is to be known about it is without limit, and it is endlessly changing. Knowing it is like breathing: it can happen, it stays real, on only the condition that it continue to happen. As soon as it is recognized that a place, a river—or for that matter, a home—is not a place but a process, not a fact but an event, there ought to come an immense relief: one can step into the same river twice, one can go home again.

The Farm School has been, and continues to be a home for so many children, adults, and animals who have gotten to be a part of the ever changing story of this land and its community, moving through it as water through a river, each contributing in their own significant and joyful way to the vibrancy the land soaks in to feed us. It has recently become a home to me too. First, as a student with the Learn to Farm Program and now as a Farmer/Teacher/Forester in the Program for Visiting Schools. As my role has shifted from student to instructor, my work has also shifted from settling, orienting, and grieving to playing part in the ongoing labor of renewal. There is not much I do differently from the instructors and foresters who have occupied this space before me. After all, so much of farming is the repetition of yearly tasks that must be done again and again, year after year in much the same way. The firewood is cut, bucked and split. The timber felled, and milled. The Maples tapped and sap boiled. The trails tended and walked. But within that repetition there is also the room to try and streamline the process, build in efficiencies and explore new techniques of getting the work done better, or faster, or more joyfully. In order for space to be made for such development the old must make way for the new to feed that growth. The forest is teaching me what that looks like.

If one spends much time walking through these woods, it is hard to escape the signs of one’s predecessors. There are the obvious ones: the recently felled pine, the pitch fresh enough to stain your hands and fill the air with the scent of Christmas, the red spray painted X’s on trees marked for falling and then forgotten, the stick forts and primitive debris huts. There are also the signs that point even further back than the Farm School’s tenure on this land: the stand of same-age birch saplings that marks an old clear cut site, the “Enchanted Forests” checkerboard of gnarled red pines. Walking along the ridges and stream bottoms, one will come upon the heaped stones of a chimney, or the slowly filling depression of an old cellar. Wherever the land is level enough
MANDATE
“A natural outgrowth of the Farm School’s core value of kindness is our commitment to making diversity and active inclusion part of our community and organizational culture. We define active inclusion as conscious and substantial efforts by The Farm School administration to value, welcome, recruit, serve and empower people of all races and ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, sexual orientations, religions, and ages, within our organization, programs and support community.”
Unanimously adopted by The Farm School Board of Directors, December 2, 2017

FOUNDATION
The Farm School Board of Directors is pleased to invite you to join them in enhancing and protecting The Farm School far into the future by making a gift to the new Farm School Foundation, in addition to your usual annual contribution!

Gifts to the Foundation will form a fund that will be invested carefully. Income from these investments will be available for two, very particular purposes:

Innovation Funding will provide seed money for new ventures that advance The Farm School’s priorities and, potentially, generate income. The new ventures in the dairy and vegetable fields outlined in this Newsletter are perfect examples of the kind of projects that the Foundation will support in the future.

Stability Funding will temporarily make up budget shortfalls due to reasonable risk-taking or unforeseeable financial losses. On the very rare occasions that the school may need to access this funding, it will be repaid to the Foundation over time, as with a revolving loan fund.

In order for the Foundation to promote the kind of innovation, reasonable risk-taking and long-term stability for the school intended, The Board set a goal of 3 million dollars for initial funding. 2 million dollars has been committed to date. Any gift you can make to the Foundation now will be incredibly helpful in reaching the goal and creating a legacy that forever inspires hard work, kindness, and a connection to the land that feeds us.

For more information about the Foundation, and/or to make an online donation, please visit www.farmschool.org/foundation