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## FROM GOOD LAND

BY BRIAN HALWEIL

# GARDEN OF YOUTH

*The East End's oldest community farm carries on.*

SOUTHAMPTON—You wouldn't know it, but a stone's throw from the Hampton Jitney's Southampton hub is the East End's oldest community farm. It's light-years away psychologically. On a recent Monday morning during the unseasonably balmy spring, while expectant passengers munch muffins and down coffee, 20 or so gardeners-cum-farmers stoop over seedling trays, weedy paths, and wheelbarrows full of compost.

This spring, the farm members hope to attract a wider demographic to share in this rejuvenating activity and ensure the future of this farm. A collaboration with a nearby school would be natural, and families with young children would make perfect compliments—physically and mentally—to the empty-nesters and retirees who currently predominate.

“Our big problem is labor,” said Sandy Forgelman, a neat, compact

woman with short-cropped hair who favors safari-style work clothes and a broad straw hat, and sends short, lower-cased, information-dense email. Forgelman, who never mentions her age and has been a member since 1989, is the closest thing that the farm has to a manager. (And people interested in joining the farm should call her at 283-3631.) Another woman, who was sitting in a path, straddling and extracting a patch of weeds, explained further: “Because we're older people, we try to hoe rather than stoop,” she said “Often we'll sit as a couple and chat and weed together. You don't need your whole head to weed.”



Sheltered from the roar of Highway 27 by a winding dirt path, thick rows of bamboo and privet, and a lack of any signage, the farm is a sort of Shangri La. Not just because the members share in the labor, make collective decisions, and savor the result of both good and bad harvests—in direct contrast to the arguably unthrifty and disconnected McMansion mentality on the other side of the hedge. But also because the members, who are predominantly women in their sixties and seventies, succeed at remaining remarkably young at heart. Perhaps it's the slow, steady physical activity of mini-farming that's particularly suited to older bodies or the wide open sky, scent of freshly turned soil, and rare “ocean breeze” that members joke about on hot days.

### THE FATHER OF QUAIL HILL AND EECO FARM

The farm was started by Hugh Williams, a biodynamic orchardist who now farms in the Hudson Valley, but left a strong mark on East End agriculture when he lived here in the 1970s and 1980s. Williams started the first CSA (community supported agriculture) arrangement on the East End at his Full Circle Farm and Orchard on Snake Hollow Road in Bridgehampton. (The orchard is currently being sold.) The orchard also held some vegetable production and chickens for eggs. When Williams's partner didn't want to continue using that space, the existing members tried to figure out a transition plan.

The CSA's members ultimately split—geographically and philosophically. The group living closest to East Hampton liked the idea of

buying food direct from a farm, but didn't necessarily want to get their hands dirty, and eventually founded Quail Hill in Amagansett. The group living closer to Southampton liked the idea of gardening together. One of the latter group was Leslie Barker, who owned a 40-acre parcel behind the Jitney and who generously shared her land and an existing irrigation system. The current community farm, unofficially named the Southampton Community Organic Farm, was born. (Interestingly, some of the original members of this farm later went on to found EECO Farm in East Hampton.)

**"I love it. I can always have my own garden at home. But here I've got company."**

It's always surprising when something you do goes on like that," said Hugh Williams by phone. The Southampton Community Farm is still organic, but no

longer follows biodynamic principles. It also gave up its chickens. But the philosophy of cooperation remains intact.

"It started very idealistically," said Gene Friedman, 78, who with his wife Dorothy, was one of the original members of Full Circle Farm. Friedman distinguishes his farm from Quail Hill and EECO Farm by noting that no one is on salary and nothing is sold or grown for people other than members. The farm's small size also comes with a smaller membership fee. "One of the reasons that this exists is economics," said Friedman, noting that for \$75 per share per season, members enjoy many times that value in produce. (A few of the members pointed out the substantially higher membership fees at Quail Hill, which they attributed to the fact that Quail Hill has "actual farmers it needs to pay.")

"As long as I've been a member, it's been about 20 people," said Friedman. "This is a very interesting cross section of New Yorkers. Some of the members are vegetarian, but the main motivation is that they are getting organic food. We're not McMansion people. There are the diehards who stay on. And then there are the springtime soldiers who work from May to June and then in the summer heat they move on." (Members may pick over the patch in winter, but the work generally stops around Thanksgiving.)

Either way, planting continues, as it has for the better part of two decades. "Peas are in," said Forgelman. "Spinach, kale, and parsley are in. So are broccoli, beets, arugula, tatsoi and scallions and the whole gamut. The greenhouse is going full force with leeks, tomatoes, and peppers." Whether it's late-summer tomato harvests in oppressive heat or early-season pea planting in torrential rains, the farm endures. "We've been here in weather you wouldn't believe," said Forgelman.

#### A WORLD WITHOUT BOSSES

When I visited the farm last August, these same members were busy weeding overgrown patches of leeks, picking tomatoes, and harvesting onions and garlic. "We always have more than we need," said Dorothy Friedman, hunched over a forest of tomato plants, reaching deep within to pick out ripe fruit. "Because none of us is casual about getting rid of things." (The farm, like many, struggles with an unresolved debate about caging tomatoes. Several of the plants were sup-

ported by wire cages, while farther down the row the plants leaned on twine strung between wood stakes, and elsewhere it looked like the tomatoes were on their own.)

A fellow-picker further explored the point, noting that although unblemished tomatoes are the goal, even damaged ones get harvested, the damaged parts meticulously extracted, and used for sauce. "This is our refuge from a wasteful society," she said.

At the field's margin, four giggly women—Lou Edmonds, Ann Cully, Pat Darcey, and Mary Lane—were looking over a pile of shopping bags and two wheelbarrows full of onions. The dialogue hinted at the rejuvenating nature of the work, the easy-going manner of the members, and the egalitarian decision structure.

"It's like a Citarella ad," said one, pointing to the two dozen grocery bags that were being effectively recycled.

"Have you seen our onion crop?," another asked coyly. "Isn't it great?"



There are no bosses, but that doesn't mean that nothing gets done. Members dug garlic last summer.

"Twenty piles for 20 shares," one repeated over and over like a mantra.

"It's hard enough to keep track," said another. "Very often we lose count." And the crew broke down laughing.

"We say we share in the fruits of our labors, but we raise mostly vegetables."

Forgelman approached with clipboard and a smile and tried to interject some seriousness. "Each month we get together and form opinions on what we should do with the farm," she said.

"We always discuss business before pleasure," said Pat, referring to meals at which decisions are made before the food is served. "Yes, big decisions. To mulch or not to mulch."

## RECIPE

### SCALLION PANCAKES

4 bunches scallions (1 finely chopped, 3 coarsely chopped)	1/2 c. sifted flour
1/2 c. water	1 egg beaten
2-3 tbsp. olive oil	2 tbsp. soy sauce
	ground pepper to taste

1. Rapidly boil 3 bunches of coarsely chopped scallions in 1/4 c. water until just wilted. Save the water. 2. In food processor, blend these scallions with soy sauce and pepper. 3. Stir in 1/2 c. flour, then add finely chopped scallions. (If batter is too thick, slowly add saved water. It should have the consistency of pancake batter.) 4. Drop batter by tablespoons into hot oil. The completed pancake should be crisp on both sides. (Serves 6-8.)

### SESAME BROCCOLI SALAD

2 heads broccoli	1/4 c. sesame oil
2 tsp. hot pepper flakes to flavor oil	

#### Dressing:

2 cloves garlic, polled and minced	1 tsp. salt
2 tbsp. red wine vinegar	1/2 c. olive oil

1. Cut off broccoli florets, peel stems to remove woody parts, and cut into bite-sized pieces. Cook until *al dente*. 2. Heat sesame oil in small skillet until it just starts to smoke. Remove from heat. Add red pepper and steep 10 minutes. Pour over cooked broccoli. 3. Prepare dressing in jar with tight-fitting lid and shake well. Pour over broccoli. 4. Mix through, cover, and let marinate in refrigerator for at least 2 hours. (Serves 6-8.)

"Where's that ocean breeze?"

"Are we counting or just putting them in?"

"Of course, we're counting."

"I didn't think we were counting."

"Dump your onions! There's been a miscalculation."

After several failed plans to group the motley onions by size and then divide them among the bags, someone hinted at the possible downside of such collective management: "I'm part of labor, not management. I'm happy to count and dispense onions, but I don't want to decide how the counting and dispensing should be done. Where's the boss? We need some direction."

"If you think that was bad, you should see how we order seed. There's no one boss. We're all bosses here," said Fogelman. Someone else added, "But there are always people with big mouths."

But such pleasant chaos is sort of the point. Because everyone shares in the management and labor, no one person has to be on the payroll or drop their entire life for the farm. "Nobody measures how much you do, or how often you show up," Fogelman said. "No one is excluded, but we do expect two hours of labor twice a week." It's a form of enlightened communism that would make Marx blush. And it's a learning experience for everyone.

"It's such a great retirement," said a member entering her fourth season. "It certainly wasn't planned. And I appreciate the food so much better. These are the benefits you don't really realize. It's an appreciation and connection that you don't expect."

### A COMMUNITY OF HOBBY FARMERS

These people will be the first to tell you they aren't "real" farmers, but two decades of intensive gardening has yielded an impressive haul. One member was filling basket after basket with zucchinis while another planted winter squashes. "They can be stuffed or split and sautéed on a grill," said Carla Rich, referring to some forgotten pattypans that had reached record size. (A member since 1990, Rich was involved in producing a members-only recipe book a few years ago.) An older woman was whistling softly as she slowly planted the farm's fall crop of peas. Nearby, fruit weighed down a row of raspberries (transplanted a few years ago from Quail Hill). There were piles of peppers and eggplants, and thick rows of three types of leeks. The group had only two crop failures to report: a disappointing crop of beets that were thoroughly gnawed underground, and green beans devoured by rabbits. "Some things work and some things don't," Fogelman said, sounding exactly like a humble, self-respecting farmer.

The group does include two master gardeners, including Joe Lane, 74, of Sag Harbor. "I've always gardened," said Lane, who attended Cornell Cooperative Extension's Master Gardener program in 2003, and has since "gone out and spread the knowledge" at this farm and elsewhere. He was whacking weeds at the margin of asparagus rows planted just a few years before. "It's a beautiful plant itself, even without eating it," he said pointing to the shoulder high ferns waving in the wind. "Five thousand years ago, Egyptians grew this. It's a very special plant. Every one of these was an asparagus."

He points to certain innovations that have helped the farm in recent years, including a tall deer fence that eliminated the major source of crop losses to deer, but hasn't kept out rabbits. He said that cloth

mulch was a good idea for controlling weeds. "The beauty of a community farm like this is you work together," he said. "I love it. I can always have my own garden at home. But here I've got company."

"Covered dish" meals—a surprise-oriented, anything-goes version of potlucks—at members' homes serve as farm meetings. This past January, the group got together to welcome the New Year and to begin early discussions of seed purchases—debating what did well in 2005 and what everyone enjoyed. "Not only do we call ourselves a community farm," said Fogelman, "but we are a community. We really get tangled in each others cares and woes. We care for each other. We look out for one another." (Several members are part of Community Without Walls, a local model of an organization in Princeton, NJ, of the same name that creates a network of friends and helpers "to enable people to age in place.")

Naturally, many find it therapeutic. "Whatever ails you," said Dorothy Friedman, "get into the garden or get into the kitchen." For Gerrie Nussdorf, a garrulous retired psychologist from Noyac who learned about the farm from some fellow activists opposing West Nile spraying in Little Round Pond, farm work has yielded new skills. "I'm much better at weeding and staying on top of my own property," she said proudly. "And I've planted some edible flowers and vegetables at home too. I have had to broaden my tastes. There's something called kohlrabi. Have you ever heard of it?" □