

Thursday, October 16, 2008

A Tiny Urban Farm, a Bounty of Benefits

source: bostonglobe.com

It may not be the sprawling 50-acre countryside farm he once dreamed of running, but for Newton resident Greg Maslowe, the 2 acres of city-owned property in south Newton is just right.

Day on the farm

Newton Angino Community Farm is holding its annual fall festival Oct. 26. The event will include demonstrations, tours of the farm, pumpkin decorating, musical entertainment, and refreshments. For more information, call 617-916-9655 or visit newtoncommunityfarm.org.

"I've come to really enjoy this particular situation," said Maslowe, 38, who is completing his third season as the manager of Newton Angino Community Farm. "I like that I can pay more attention to each crop than on a bigger farm." In addition to selling a variety of organic, locally grown fruits, vegetables, and herbs and administering a community-supported agriculture operation, Maslowe runs numerous programs to promote environmental awareness and sustainable agriculture. The farm is renovating its barn to create a space for the programs, which include composting, container gardening, and other techniques to help Newton residents and other city dwellers grow food in their own backyards.

The property, at the corner of Nahanton and Winchester streets, has been organically farmed for more than 300 years. It was purchased by the city of Newton in 2005 using Community Preservation Act funds after residents urged Newton officials not to let the city's only remaining farm be developed. The city allows Newton Community Farm Inc., a nonprofit, to operate the farm on its land rent free but does not provide any funding to the farm. "From the city's perspective, the farm has added a dimension to Newton that didn't exist before," said Newton Alderwoman Cheryl Lappin. "It continues to teach people about local farming and growing in their own neighborhoods and it's provided locally grown produce to the community."

Maslowe, who paid for college and graduate school by driving tractors and working as a groundskeeper at an amusement park, said he examined jobs on large farms in Central and Western Massachusetts but was turned off by the isolation and lack of ethnic diversity. "That's the trade-off - not just physical isolation but cultural isolation," said Maslowe, who lives with his wife, 8-year-old son, and 5-year-old daughter on the farm. "My kids really thrive on social interaction. Being out on a 50-acre farm, they'd be bored out of their minds."

Of course, running an urban farm has its share of difficulties, especially a lack of growing space. A typical farmer aims to make \$20,000 per acre but Maslowe must coax \$60,000 per acre out of the Newton farm, he said. "We have to try and get as many plants into and out of the ground as possible," Maslowe said. To accomplish this, much of the weeding, planting, and harvesting is performed by hand, eliminating the extra space needed for a tractor to maneuver but significantly increasing the need for labor. Since he cannot hire many workers, Maslowe relies heavily on volunteers, something that fits in with the educational mission of the farm, said Rebekah Smillie, the president of Newton Community Farm's board of directors. "It's really wonderful to have people coming out to the farm and working through the season," Smillie said. "They are really learning how the farm works day to day."

Over the summer, the farm hosted eight high school and college students who came five days a week for up to eight hours each day. Besides working in the fields, the group learned about sustainable agricultural and environmental practices from Maslowe, who said he hopes the experience will inspire the youth to consider a career in sustainable agriculture or at least grow their own gardens. "It can happen in the largest Newton backyard or the smallest postage stamp of a yard," Smillie said. "There's so much emphasis on eating local and there's nothing more local than growing food in your backyard."

The farm will have a dedicated educational space once the \$500,000 renovation of the barn is complete. The refurbished structure, which was built in the 1850s, will include a community lecture room, demonstration kitchen, public restrooms, and a library stocked with literature on organic and sustainable farming, said Peter Barrer, a member of the board of directors and chairman of the farm's building committee. "It's very exciting to have preserved this beautiful space," Barrer said. "One of the things we like about the whole farm is we have this preserved for not only produce but the view. You don't have to eat the vegetables to enjoy the farm."

Phase one of the renovations includes timber-frame reconstruction, insulating the barn, and removing vinyl siding and replacing it with red cedar shingles, something the barn originally had. The second phase will involve interior work such as plumbing, wiring, and creating handicapped accessible bathrooms. "The most gratifying thing is just to see it transformed," Barrer said. "It still looks a lot like the barn it was, but it's solid and will be there for many years now."

Phase one is expected to be completed by the end of the year, but phase two is dependent upon the farm's ability to raise money, Barrer said. Despite the challenges of operating an urban farm, preserving the property for its scenic, historical, and environmental benefits is invaluable for the community, Maslowe said. A lot of people from other countries [visit the farm and] say 'This is what it looked like in my country,' " he said. "But, for so many of us who have lived in America, this is not where we came from."■