

Rachel's Farming Story



This has been a long journey, but at the same time, I feel like it's just begun. As a child, I was always at home in the woods of Springs, East Hampton. I spent hours-upon-hours behind my childhood home lifting rocks, collecting twigs, making "forest soup," and talking to wild plants and animals. My mother influenced my love of plants, though she didn't always know the correct names for them. As a teenager, I looked forward to leaving my hometown to explore life outside what I was used to. I landed in Pittsburgh, PA, and there I discovered my passion for working with plants was almost overwhelming. I took as many college level courses as I could in the nearby community college alongside kids my age whose parents sent them to study agriculture. They were to learn the skill while continuing to work on their family farms. After 3 years of this, I became homesick and couldn't wait to return to the East End of Long Island. The salt air was calling me back. From there, I took jobs working with plants; a private estate gardener on Oxpasture Rd in Southampton, a greenhouse worker for Van de Wetering Greenhouses on Sound Ave. in Jamesport, and a wholesale plant nursery manager for Talmage Farm on Horton Ave, Riverhead among the many.

When my children were born, I put work on hold for awhile but continued to tend my home flower garden while the babies napped. While the children were still young we created a vegetable garden together and eventually added chickens to the backyard. My love of homesteading grew quickly. I've enjoyed home canning, knitting, fermentation, home cooked meals, and eventually herbal remedies. All of these skills I learned by reading or learning from a friend. My passions outgrew my backyard and so my family and I moved to the other side of town in Hampton Bays with a much larger yard and more privacy from nosy neighbors (some people just don't like crowing roosters). At this time, my farm, "Sweet Woodland Farm" was realized. Named after my mother's family name, Soethoudt, a Dutch word meaning sweet wood. Over the next 10 years I added sheep, goats, angora rabbits, and

ducks to the family, and with that came new skills. I learned to care for the animals myself, I sheared the rabbits and learned fiber arts; wet felting, dying, and spinning. During this time, as I learned, I also wanted to share with my community. I gave lectures and taught workshops for adults and children; knitting, felting, spinning, raising backyard chickens, home canning, fermentation, organic vegetable gardening, and a few more. During this time, I continued to make goods, grow plants and vegetables and sell them from my front porch, which after some time became bothersome to my family who preferred their privacy. I closed the shop on the property but continued to sell my goods at area farmer's markets and teach my programs at the local libraries.

In 2016, I was approached by a local couple who described their new nonprofit, Ecological Culture Initiative, whose focus is on the local environment and teaching community members how to make mindful decisions and learn homesteading skills. Shortly after I became the Agro-Ecology director and one year after I took the position of president. Our initiatives include a charity vegetable garden where we teach community members how to grow their own vegetables and collect seeds. The vegetables are donated to the local food pantry and used in our quarterly farm to table dinners. We have a seed library that is free for people to take seeds for their own use. We ran a farmer's market for 5 years and hosted several makers markets throughout the year. We have a native/pollinator garden and a very successful community composting program. The organization has become quite successful with many volunteers eager to work, learn and share.

I found that I still craved more and wanted my for-profit business to grow. My yard wasn't suitable to grow all that I wanted with the heavy deer load devouring everything I attempted, plus the tick population made it almost unbearable to spend more than several minutes in the yard without catching a bite. I began to casually search for some farmland that I may be able to lease though I had my doubts as the East End of Long Island is an area where real estate is mostly unaffordable unless you were lucky to get in when the prices were still low enough, or you benefited from an inheritance. My search led me to the Peconic Land Trust whose mission is to conserve farmland by purchasing the development rights. To my surprise, I discovered their Farms for the Future program where they lease farmland by the acre to beginning farmers. The goal is to encourage people interested in trying out farming without the need to purchase expensive properties with the very real possibility that their new farming venture may not succeed. In this case, they can give it a try without losing their shirt in the process. Curiosity led me to Charnews Farm in Southold where I visited in the summer of 2017. I remember passing the sunflower fields along the way in the farm fields of the North Fork. I stood in the fields at Charnews and took in the view, waiting for a "sign" or something to hit me. Was I really considering taking this plunge? I'm already in my 40s, is this crazy? Could I survive this challenge? Would it be stressful or maybe successful? In 2018, after much thought and hard work on my business plan, I submitted my application to the program and subsequently leased my first acre. I experimented with different crops and had

many failures, but more successes. The kale was loaded with flea beetles which chewed tiny pinholes in the leaves, and I learned that this was not the crop for me and so I checked it off my list. The fields dried quickly in the hot, summer sun which forced me to learn how to set up and install a drip irrigation system with the help of Dan Heston and Brendan Minogue. The water would go directly to where it is needed; the plants' roots rather than evaporating into the air as it would with overhead irrigation.

But first, I needed to make my rows where the plants would live. I do not own a tractor, but thankfully the Land Trust provides an equipment share program as sort of an "add on." Included in the equipment share is a walk behind tractor called a BCS which is basically a beefed up rototiller, with implements(attachments) that can be changed for different farming needs. To this date, I've used the rototiller, row shaper, flail mower, hog mower, and sickle bar mower. I'm thankful that the equipment share is available or I'm not sure how I could have prepared or maintained any of my farmland without it.

Then the weeds took hold. In my studies and experience, I learned the importance of keeping the soil's integrity intact. This means minimal tillage and the use of organic compost to build the soil's structure and support the microorganisms and mycorrhizal fungi. Healthy soil equals healthier, stronger plants that can more likely survive an attack of the occasional flea beetle. If we can minimize the use of aggressive agricultural practices such as over tilling and focus on regenerative practices, then the use of harmful pesticides will be minimized. In between the rows I plant clover seed. One of the most harmful practices of agriculture would be to leave soil barren and, in this case, fields are left vulnerable to soil loss. I've observed that the Peconic Land Trust shares my concern for this soil loss, and I watch as the fallow fields at Charnews Farm are managed by using cover crops. Brendan seeds the fields with rye, sorghum, or a mix of vetch, clover, and mustard. The plants are allowed to grow to protect the soil from erosion and then tilled under to add nitrogen and other beneficial minerals. My pathways between rows, seeded with Dutch, white clover are maintained by mowing when it gets too tall. This beautiful ground cover has many benefits other than protecting the soil from erosion. Clover provides food for pollinators as well as having this impressive ability to draw nitrogen down from the atmosphere and fix it into the soil. Nitrogen is then used by surrounding plants and gives them their green hues and aids in overall plant growth.

Did I mention weeds? One person's weed is another person's food or medicine. Rather than tilling under weeds where they are not wanted, I try to find a use for them. Dandelion, for example, is a blood cleanser and strengthens the liver. They are harvested from the chemical free fields and dried to be used as a tea or tonic. Saint John's Wort, a native Long Island plant is excellent for the central nervous system and strengthens the nerve endings. Used internally as tea or tincture, it can be used to ward off depression. Used externally, it makes a wonderful massage aid when infused with nourishing oil. If there's no use I can find,

then I mow them short rather than till them under. Mother Nature wants these “weeds” here to protect her soil and who am I to argue? She’s been here much longer than I.

Through experimentation, my love of medicinal herbs grew. Most perennial and beautiful by nature, I grew my crops from seed in my living room and transplanted them to the field. My farm has grown to 3 acres as I celebrate my 5th year as a “real farmer.” I have a small team of amazing helpers including my firstborn. We grow a long list of medicinal herbs and dry them in the drying shed, then process them over a screen and either sell them individually or in tisane (herbal tea) blends and used in salves and bath soaks. However, not an “herb,” my main crop has become the American black elderberry - *Sambucus nigra* subsp. *Canadensis*. What a beautiful plant she is! We quickly increased the number of plants, starting with just 64, and two years later we are in the thousands. Elder is easy to propagate from cutting and makes the most delicious and wonderfully medicinal syrup. I’d been making the syrup for over ten years already and never even considered growing the plant. How silly! Elderberries, native to Long Island, grow so quickly in our area and thrive in our climate. I’ve grown fond of the Elder’s folklore and mystical feel within my elderberry fields. My team and I rooted over 3,000 new plants from cuttings taken from the first rows of 64 elderberry plants. By the end of the summer, these 64 plants then produced their first good crop last season, producing 260 lbs of berries and then 600 bottles of elderberry syrup. Elderberries are extremely high in vitamin C and antioxidants and taken daily, boost the immune system and works wonders on a cough, cold or sore throat. Children love to take the remedy because of its sweet and fruity flavor. Last season my farm helper experimented with a small batch of elderflower champagne which was a huge hit and elderberry wine may be in the works shortly. Elderberry has quickly become my main crop and their value added products have become my best sellers. I continue to enjoy sharing when I’ve learned with others who are interested and so more recently, I’ve begun to give presentations about the American black elderberry.

This is my story, but I’ve also observed other beginning farmers try their hands at this extremely challenging, not-for-the-weak work. Some have succeeded and grown to become thriving farmers. My friends at Thera Farm in Brentwood have created food access to an otherwise food desert in an area where many families struggle to find fresh produce and Priscilla’s Farm, my neighbor at Charnews, has impressed me with their growth and inspired me with their knowledge of organic vegetable farming. I’ve come to value the comradery among the farming community, and I’ve made some new, lifelong friends since becoming a member of the program.

The Peconic Land Trust has allowed me to explore what might push my farm business to success. I’ve been fortunate to stumble upon the Farms for the Future program and given the ability to farm at an affordable price on a protected piece of land on the beautiful North Fork of Long Island. The wonderful people of the Land Trust are always there to answer

questions and give support when needed. The program attracts new farmers so that farming on Long Island can continue for generations to come. Local, farm grown/raised food is healthier for the local economy and for both the local and global environment. The Land Trust's important work helps to conserve historical farms that would otherwise fall into development. The farms on the east end are at risk of disappearing as land value continues to climb, but the disappearance of all this special open space would make this place not what it is today the health of the local economy relies solely on the health of the land (and sea). If that is gone, then this place will no longer be as desirable. These historical farms need to have protection and I hope that their supporters will continue to contribute to their mission.

Be well,

Rachel Stephens

Owner, Sweet Woodland Farm

www.SweetWoodlandFarm.com