

Going back to the land Young people moving in to fill agricultural niches

The Boston Globe

By Sarah Schweitzer, Globe Staff | May 7, 2005

BURLINGTON, Vt. -- There were no glitzy PowerPoint presentations, no assurances of high-tech riches. But they came by the dozens to a student center, young women with cat-eye glasses and young men sporting sideburns, to learn how to finance a John Deere tractor and market a crop.

Farming is cutting edge, even hip, among a growing corps of ambitious 20- and 30-somethings.

"It's totally the new thing," said Samantha Tilton, a 25-year-old Mount Holyoke College graduate who attended a recent conference to prepare for buying land to till. "There is this sense that we don't have to do investment banking or IT and work in a cubicle all day. We can live a more hands-on life."

As family farms are swallowed up by corporations and housing developers, young men and women, some from suburban backgrounds and families with no agricultural ties, are filling the void. They are opening small niche operations in Vermont and elsewhere in New England to grow hydroponic tomatoes and raise free-range chickens.

Some are going back to the land to escape corporate culture, farming specialists say. Some of the young farmers and farmers-to-be say they are motivated by a sense that farming can save the world or at least some corner of it.

While Peace Corps volunteers of decades past sought to aid African countries facing famine, these young people see a dire state of agriculture in the United States. Many of the young farmers and college students studying for a life in farming said they worry that as family farms are sold to large agribusinesses, food has been corrupted by chemicals and produced with exploited migrant workers. They also say that sales of onetime farmland to housing developers are worsening sprawl and that with small-scale farming they can begin to reverse those trends.

"You hear about all these terrible things in the world, and you're told to go out there and change them," said Ian Irwin, 22, who plans to raise cattle after graduating from the University of Vermont. "This is an enjoyable way to do our part."

But if they are idealists, the young farmers are also business-savvy. They toss around corporate catch-phrases such as value-added and diversified. They have business plans and have taken accounting classes.

Unlike farming of another generation, when producing and getting a crop or animal to market were primary tasks, the smaller enterprises require more of their owners. Because they often operate without middlemen or employees, the farmers must oversee production, marketing, sales, and distribution.

Jason Pappas, 26, a onetime music major at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vt., who grew up in Tenafly, N.J., and Dave Demarest, 25, a graduate in environmental science from the University of Vermont who grew up outside New Haven, have become minor specialists in any number of agricultural and business fields.

The pair joined forces two years ago to grow Reishi mushrooms that they use to brew an earthy-tasting iced tea, which is flavored with maple syrup and cranberry or lemon juice. They call it VTea and hope to sell 50,000 bottles this year in Vermont.

They work on Demarest's property, 51 acres he bought three years ago in the town of Underhill, near Burlington. They prepare the mushroom seeds in a sterile lab, planting them in hemlock logs laid cross-hatch style under tree cover. But they also prepare and bottle the tea. They market it. They seek prospective buyers on the Internet. They deliver it by truck to local stores. And they sell it at farmers markets and fairs.

The infusion of young people into farming is a trickle compared with the mass departure of family farmers. The average age of American farmers rose to 55 in 2002 from 50 in 1978, according to the US Department of Agriculture. Just 5 percent of farmers in 2002 were between the ages of 25 and 34, government numbers show.

The aging of the American farmer, agriculture specialists say, is due to global trends that have made middle-sized farms, the sort operated by families throughout much of the 20th century, unprofitable compared to bigger, more efficient operations.

Many young farmers are entering the agricultural market at the other end of the spectrum, with small enterprises that sell products directly to local stores and farmers markets, rather than to wholesalers. The products they grow tend to appeal to a relatively small but growing group of health-conscious, educated, and well-off consumers who will pay more for organic lettuce, low-spray apples, and locally produced milk.

The entry into small-scale farming by young people is evident on both coasts. But Vermont, with its limited land mass and tendency toward smaller farming plots, is at the forefront of the movement.

Enrollment in agriculture classes at the University of Vermont is up, particularly those aimed at teaching business skills. The Vermont Youth Conservation Corps -- a nonprofit that traditionally assigns workers, ages 16 to 24, to woods restoration of state parks -- will establish a farming component next year in response to demand. Young people crammed the recent conference in Burlington entitled, "Young Entrepreneurs in Agriculture and Local Foods."

The movement is different from the 1960s swell of back-to-the-earth hippies who piled into Vermont to escape urban unrest and the Vietnam War. The new ranks of farmers, specialists say, are not dropouts from society, but rather seek closer connection to society through farming.

"These are young people who are interested in community development," said Jane Kolodinsky, who heads the College of Agriculture and Life Science's department of community development and applied economics.

Many are helping one another. There is a growing network of small-production farmers who band together in ventures known as community supported agriculture that lock customers into purchases before harvest. Some share distribution, bottling, and other facilities. Farmers are also aligned with activists behind other causes, such as conservation, ecological repair, and fair trade.

Nonetheless, the rigors, many know, are daunting, and failure rates are high.

Tilton, for one, is conscious of the challenges. She is quick to point out that she has no land, little money. Yet asked what sort of farming she plans, she rattles off: "Organic, well-diversified, no meat."

Farming holds her future, said the daughter of an interior designer and oncologist, a product of the Delaware suburbs.

"It's a rejection of Seven jeans and the Ugg boots," she said referring to the designer jeans and footwear of the moment. "And that's OK. You can also be pretty hip with dirty fingernails."

Sarah Schweitzer can be reached at schweitzer@globe.com. ■