Can NOT owning land ever be a good idea for a farmer? I would say an emphatic YES! What is it about the ownership of land that is most important to us? I would answer these three things:

- **Security** – Every person has a legitimate interest in having a secure home. Home implies continuity, stability and a sense of privacy.
- **Equity** – Every person has a legitimate interest in keeping whatever value they put into their homes and land.
- **Legacy** – The development of a farm is often a family effort extending over more than one generation. Families have a legitimate interest in seeing that members of a new generation can inherit the family farm.

It is possible to craft a lease that gives a farmer all of these things. **But why would you want to do this?** The simple truth is that in growing numbers of places, farmers cannot afford to buy land in today’s real estate market. Even the most successful of farmers cannot compete against the prices that are paid for farms by either developers or people of wealth wishing to buy a rural estate. Farmers are caught between two very strong social forces – our demand that food be cheap and our desire to use land ownership as an investment tool. This drives the cost of land out of the reach of the farmer. Farmers cannot solve this problem alone.

Equity Trust has created a land tenure model that partners farmers with a local nonprofit. The underlying land is owned by the nonprofit. (This can be a community land trust, a conservation land trust, or other nonprofit.) Houses and/or other improvements are owned by farmers or cooperatives. Farmers are given a 99-year, inheritable ground lease to the land. All restrictions are spelled out in the lease, which balances the interests of farmers with needs of the community. An appraisal is done to determine the farm’s market value as well as its restricted agricultural value. The farmer is asked to pay the restricted agricultural value. The difference between these two values is raised through public and private gifts to the nonprofit partner.

There are growing numbers of programs, local, state and federal, that can help to purchase the development rights off of farmland. The land trust and the farmer, in designing the lease, will make decisions around land use requirements, such as whether there are restrictions on what the farmer may grow or what type of farming methods must be followed. The most important restrictions in the lease require that the land stay actively farmed and, if the farmer wishes to sell, that they sell to another farmer for the restricted agricultural value. This protects the community’s investment in making the farm affordable to this farmer and all succeeding farmers.

We must remember that farms are made up of three equally important things:
- dynamic and healthy soils
- a solid infrastructure of home, barns and other out-buildings, and
- the farmer

We are not really doing farm preservation work unless we protect all three! A 99-year lease is an elegant tool for the job that balances the needs of the farmer with the needs for the community for good healthy food.