FARMLAND ACCESS IN THE HUDSON VALLEY

Stories of People and Places in Columbia and Dutchess Counties
ABOUT THE FARM PROGRAM

The Columbia Land Conservancy’s FARM (Farmland Access, Resources, and Matching) Program supports farmers and non-operating farmland owners learning about and effectively utilizing a wide variety of land access and conservation tools. These tools include farmland leasing, partnerships and management opportunities, and purchase of affordable farmland using conservation funding. Our program utilizes innovative and integrated solutions to help farmers build equity and secure their businesses for the future.

The Columbia Land Conservancy has partnered with Dutchess Land Conservancy since 2013 to connect farmers seeking land with landowners seeking farmers through our joint Farmer Landowner Match Program. We are a partner member of the American Farmland Trust’s Hudson Valley Farmlink Network, and a member of their statewide Regional Navigator Program. Our work is done in collaboration with many other conservation and agricultural organizations and we continually strive to keep building new partnerships and relationships.

We are deeply grateful to our program partners and program participants for their continued support, guidance and inspiration. Finally, we offer a special note of thanks to our donors, sponsors, and supporters for enabling us to continue meeting the diverse and ever evolving farmland access and conservation needs of our agricultural communities.

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OVERVIEW

In June 2018 the Columbia Land Conservancy published a report called “Farmland Access in the Hudson Valley: An Analysis of the Farmer-Landowner Match Program.” The report provided an overview of our farmland access programs, specifically our work in partnership with the Dutchess Land Conservancy and the American Farmland Trust’s Hudson Valley Farmlink Network. The ten-year anniversary of our highly popular Farmer Landowner Match Program offered a prime opportunity for a programmatic review, analysis, and reflection.

We found that our programs were highly effective in helping facilitate farmland matches, but also noted that maintaining long-term land lease arrangements continued to be a challenge among participants. Another highlight was the fact that many leasing farmers hoped to ultimately purchase farmland at the appropriate stage in their career. As part of our efforts to further facilitate farmland access options, the following year we re-branded our farmland protection and access programs to fall under a common name of FARM: Farmland Access, Resources, and Matching.

We now have fully integrated our multi-tiered agricultural programs to provide a diverse and comprehensive array of options to better assist farmers with their land access needs and goals. As our programs have grown over time, we are now able to more effectively help farmers navigate the complex processes of securing farmland leases and utilizing conservation tools as part of their farmland purchase plans.
In this 2020 supplemental report, we take a more in-depth look at the impact our collective programs have had on the people of our community at a personal level. We endeavored to look beyond the aggregate numbers of matches we have facilitated and the acres of land we have protected, and instead collect and share the stories of how our work is helping to change the lives of farmers and those supportive of farming in our communities.

We present in this report a small snapshot of those stories. Throughout 2019, Columbia Land Conservancy staff visited farmers and non-farming landowners engaged in our conservation and farmland access programs to listen to their experiences. Through these interviews, we collected their thoughts, wisdom and advice as a way to help broaden our collective knowledge of the challenges and rewards of trying to find and hold on to farmland in a Hudson Valley community like ours.

What did we find? Non-farming landowners are learning about the needs of local agriculture and the myriad of challenges farmers face simply to stay afloat. Farmers are learning how to interact with non-farming landowners, in efforts to reach common ground.

We hope their stories will inform and inspire communities like ours to continue finding ways to better understand the dynamic nature and interrelations of the people and farms that define our rural landscapes and food systems.
OVERVIEW

Program Partners
The Columbia Land Conservancy was founded in 1986 as a land trust focused on conserving Columbia County’s rural character and began protecting land from development using a private land protection tool known as a conservation easement. Today, we hold conservation easements on more than 28,000 acres of land, nearly half of which includes working farmland. To meet the broad and diverse needs of our farm community, our agricultural work now also expands well beyond farmland protection to include a constantly evolving suite of additional tools and services.

Our farmland program partner, Dutchess Land Conservancy, was formed in 1985 as a land conservancy to protect, among other characteristics, Dutchess County’s agricultural heritage, scenic resources, and diverse natural resources. Dutchess Land Conservancy has protected more than 39,000 acres of important farmland, water resources, wildlife habitat, and scenic views since its inception.

Program Description
The Columbia Land Conservancy’s FARM (Farmland, Access, Resources, and Matching) program is designed to engage and assist our local agricultural community with a variety of programs and resources. Farmers and landowners interact with the program and its services in many ways. Some are interested in exploring farmland conservation opportunities, some are directed to our matching program in their quest to find a farmer or property to lease, and others simply seek a trusted referral to another service or organization. Regardless of how or why farmers and landowners approach the program, our staff work with participants to address individual needs while offering connections to the many other resources available in the Hudson Valley and throughout New York State.
Sources: Esri, Airbus DS, USGS, NGA, NASA, CGIAR, N Robinson, NCEAS, NLS, OS, NMA, Geodatastyrelsen, Rijkswaterstaat, GSA, Geoland, FEMA, Intermap and the GIS user community.

Farmland Access, Resources, and Matching (FARM) Program in Columbia and Dutchess Counties, New York

FARM Program Farms
- Active Farmer-Landowner Matches
- Past Farmer-Landowner Matches
- Purchase of Development Rights (PDRs)
- PDRs with Preemptive Purchase Right Agreements
- Agricultural Ground Lease

Protected Lands
- Private Easement by CLC
- Private Easement by Others
- Owned by CLC
- Public by Government
- Public by Others

Map created 6/10/2020

303.5 Miles

3 1.5 0 3 Miles
Conservation Easements
In partnership with local farmers and project partners, the Columbia Land Conservancy has utilized private, local, state and federal funding to complete more than 45 grant-funded farmland protection projects, helping direct more than 26 million dollars to Columbia County farmers in exchange for protection of their farms.

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements that permanently limit the use of land in order to protect agricultural, ecological, open space, and other important conservation features. Generally speaking, most conservation easements nationally are donated by landowners in exchange for financial tax incentives. However some federal, state, and local programs provide funding to conserve land through the purchase of conservation easements (referred to as “purchase of development rights”). Purchase of development rights programs are a critical tool for farmers that often have land as their primary asset and minimal opportunity to utilize income-based tax incentives.

The majority of our agricultural conservation easements have been funded through state and sometimes federal grant programs, often in collaboration with partners such as Scenic Hudson and Equity Trust. These agricultural conservation easements are designed to limit development that is incompatible with agriculture while encouraging farming, forestry, and other land uses that are supportive of farming as it will change and evolve over time.

Farmer Landowner Match Program
The Columbia Land Conservancy and Dutchess Land Conservancy Farmer Landowner Match Program (“Match Program”) was established by the Columbia Land Conservancy in 2009 with the mission of ensuring important farmland remained in production. We recognized that while protection of our agricultural land base was critical, facilitating farmland access was equally critical to maintaining a viable farm community and economy.

After its initial establishment in Columbia County, in 2013 we partnered with the Dutchess Land Conservancy to expand services into neighboring Dutchess County. In 2014 we assisted the American Farmland Trust and several other organizations with the design and creation of the Hudson Valley Farmlink Network, a 17-member group servicing 13 counties in the Hudson Valley. In 2018 American Farmland Trust (AFT) launched a statewide initiative called Farmland for a New Generation, based on the success of the Hudson Valley Farmlink Network. Columbia Land Conservancy (and Dutchess Land Conservancy via the joint organization program) again partnered with AFT and became a Farmland for a New Generation Regional Navigator organization, continuing to act as an on the ground service provider providing support and resources to farmers and landowners in Columbia and Dutchess Counties.

Since its inception, the Match Program has assisted hundreds of farmers and landowners, facilitating more than 75 land matches over its first decade of operation. These matches represent approximately 3,800 acres of Hudson Valley farmland kept in active production. Participating farmers operate diverse operations ranging from hay production and commodity crops to small vegetable farms and fruit orchards.
Preemptive Purchase Rights
While agricultural conservation easements have proven to be a highly effective strategy to protect farmland from development, they alone have limited ability to keep farmland affordable for farmers. This is especially true in agricultural communities near large urban areas, such as the Hudson Valley, where farmers must navigate a competitive second home real estate market for access to land.

Access to affordable farmland is critical for farmers at the stage in their careers when they need to establish long-term security and invest in permanent improvements. A preemptive purchase right agreement is an innovative additional farmland conservation tool designed to keep farmland affordable for farmers. Equity Trust’s Hudson Valley Farmland Protection Program, which has provided funding to Hudson Valley farmers to complete affordable farmland conservation projects, was one of the first sources of funding available to fund affordability restrictions in New York State. Modeled after the option to purchase at agricultural value (also known as “OPAV”), which has been used for decades in Vermont and Massachusetts, the preemptive purchase right became an eligible expense in New York State’s Farmland Protection Implementation Grant program in 2018 with the passing of the Working Farms Protection Act, spearheaded by the National Young Farmers Coalition and advocated for by the Columbia Land Conservancy, Equity Trust, Scenic Hudson and other supporting organizations.

When farmland conserved with a preemptive purchase right is sold, it must be sold to a farmer at agricultural value. In the event the land is proposed to be sold to a buyer who is not a farmer (or farm family member), or at a price above agricultural value, the easement holder can either purchase the farm at agricultural value and resell it to a farmer, or convey its right directly to a farmer buyer. Through these restrictions, organizations like the Columbia Land Conservancy are working to create and maintain an agricultural land base that will be available and affordable to farmers of the next generation. While still a relatively novel tool in New York, at the time of this publication we have completed four preemptive purchase rights projects and are in the process of completing a fifth.

The success of the Columbia and Dutchess Land Conservancy Farmer Landowner Match Program provides us with a high level of confidence that if there ever came a time when we needed to find a farmer to purchase land restricted by a preemptive purchase right, our established network of farmers seeking to buy affordable conserved farmland would provide a ready pool of capable and qualified farmer buyers.

Ground Leases and Other Tools
An additional farmland affordability tool that we have utilized most recently is an agricultural ground lease. As is further described in this Stories report, in the spring of 2019 the Columbia Land Conservancy completed the acquisition of a well-known local organic strawberry farm that is now leased to farmers through a 99-year secure arrangement, providing mutual benefits to the farmers, the community, and the natural habitats and unique ecosystems present on the property. Many local partners including Dutchess Land Conservancy, Equity Trust, and Scenic Hudson assisted with the project, along with the support of more than 300 donors, businesses, and foundations.
CHASEHOLM FARM
A Family Farm in Transition

The purchase of development rights grant program for farmers is maybe the only way to protect both the land and the farmer.

As a farmer it allows us to have our cake and eat it too. Every farmer’s best asset is their land, and to be able to retire, pass the farm onto the next generation and keep the land you love is a win-win.

Barry Chase

Chaseholm Farm, a third-generation dairy farm, has been operating in Pine Plains since 1935. In 2006, owners Kenneth and Rosemary Lyons-Chase began planning to transition their business to their children Sarah and Rory, and contacted the Columbia Land Conservancy to explore conservation opportunities that would both protect the farm they have called home for so many years, and enable a transition to the next generation. Their property includes prime farmland that spans the Columbia and Dutchess County border.

The Columbia Land Conservancy first applied for and was granted an award for the purchase of development rights on the Columbia County part of the farm through the State’s Farmland Protection Implementation Grant Program. This grant enabled the Chases to begin the transition of their business to two of their three their children, Sarah and Rory, who are continuing the family farm into the next generation.

Rory began making cheese in 2007, shortly after the farm was conserved, by retrofitting an existing barn to serve as a creamery and aging cave. Sarah joined the farm full time in 2013 to manage a small dairy herd, and has since expanded and converted her herd to organic, grass-fed production, in an effort to increase and support both herd and soil health. The Chaseholm Farm Creamery is now one of the only farmstead creameries in New York State. The farm is guided by a holistic, regenerative approach to the farming. It has also become something of a community icon, offering popular burger nights during the summer months, and drawing people from diverse backgrounds to take a guided tour of the cheese cave, shop in the store, and learn about the farm.
My drive to become a dairy farmer is inextricably linked to the relationship that I have with the land. I grew up with the understanding that the land supported my family and all the cows that we raised.

I'm farming to keep up that legacy and because there is nothing else I'd rather be doing. Chaseholm is such a big part of who I am that being far away from it has always been hard to imagine. I'm grateful to know that our land now is protected; it's an essential part of making farming accessible for many more generations to come.

Sarah Chase

In 2018 the Columbia Land Conservancy was able to complete protection of the family farm, this time protecting the Dutchess County portion in collaboration with Scenic Hudson and with funding from both the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets and the Dutchess County Partnership for Manageable Growth. This second grant further enabled Sarah and Rory to diversify their products and secure the future of their farm. They now offer raw milk at their farm store, as well as grass-fed beef, yogurt, whey-fed pork, and of course their ever popular farmstead cheese which is available at a variety of local and regional markets.

Dairy farms have fallen under immense pressure in the last few years, and more and more family dairies have been lost or forced to transition their production in response to volatile markets with razor-thin margins. Chaseholm Farm is a bright spot in an otherwise challenging landscape for small family-owned dairies.

By partnering with the Columbia Land Conservancy, and accessing state and county funding along with partner support, a successful transition of the farm and business has been completed, and a new generation of farmers has been given the opportunity to realize their vision of family farming.

Lessons Learned
Purchased agricultural conservation easements can be critical in facilitating family transitions. They can help next-generation family members create viable farm businesses by providing the necessary capital to fund investments in new infrastructure.

Family farm transitions take time, patience, and thoughtful planning, but if done carefully, can allow for necessary flexibility in business planning, and facilitate future farm viability for next generations.
THE FARM AT MILLER’S CROSSING
Collaboration for Conservation

Being able to purchase this land and buildings at an agricultural value has allowed us to secure the land that we are farming. Organic systems take years to implement.

Now that we own the land, we can focus on growing great crops and grains and establishing our retail operation in the renovated Dutch barn along Route 217. We want to thank Scenic Hudson, Equity Trust, NYS Ag & Markets, and the Columbia Land Conservancy for their support and guidance in protecting all of this prime farmland for future generations of farmers.

Chris Cashen and Katie Smith

The Farm at Miller’s Crossing home farm encompasses 200 beautiful acres of farmland in the central portion of Columbia County. Together, owners Chris Cashen and Katie Smith grow vegetables, flowers, raise a small herd of beef cattle, and produce maple products, which they sell in their farm store and distribute to Community Supported Agriculture (“CSA”) members both locally and in New York City. The Columbia Land Conservancy worked with the Cashen family to protect their home farm with a conservation easement back in 1996.

As their business grew, so too did their need for quality farmland. Aside from the protected acres they already owned, the Cashens began to lease about 70 acres of land on a 400+ acre neighboring farm. In 2015, that farm was put on the market, and the Cashens were suddenly at risk of losing access to their leased land. Unable to purchase the entire farm, the Cashens reached out to Equity Trust and the Columbia Land Conservancy in collaboration with Scenic Hudson and with a conservation-minded farmland impact investor group to find a way to protect the farm.
The investor group purchased the entire farm in the summer of 2015, taking it off the market. Meanwhile, Equity Trust, Columbia Land Conservancy, and Scenic Hudson worked together to secure funds from New York State to purchase a conservation easement. As part of their Hudson Valley Farm Affordability Program, Equity Trust contributed additional funding to the project to secure a permanent affordability restriction on the land, known as a preemptive purchase right.

Equity Trust also helped the Cashens negotiate a lease with the investor group, securing an option to purchase, so they could purchase the land they had been leasing. After the grant was awarded, the 70-acre parcel was sold to the Cashens subject to the conservation easement held by the Columbia Land Conservancy with the affordability restriction. When the Cashens are ready to sell their 70-acre parcel, the additional restriction will ensure the land stays affordable and available for local farmers. The Cashens are currently working with the impact investor group to grow organic grains on the remainder of the protected property.

This project exemplifies the collaborative and creative efforts of organizations in the Hudson Valley, who often work together to complete ambitious conservation projects. The conservation easement held by the Columbia Land Conservancy is one of the first in New York to include the additional affordability restriction. Since the completion of this project, New York State has designated the provision as an eligible cost in the Farmland Implementation Grant Program, an important step in establishing a base of preserved, affordable farmland in the Hudson Valley.

**Lessons Learned**
Collaborative projects can be key to cultivating unique solutions to conservation challenges.

Preemptive purchase rights can be an important tool to transition protected farmland to farmers, by compensating landowners for agreeing to limit the future sale price of farms to their agricultural value.
Preservation of the Randall Cattle, and all heritage breeds of livestock, is important as it provides several benefits to our everyday world. They are the connection in civilization to livestock history and heritage. Because they have not been manipulated by humans through single trait selection, these animals carry a full complement of characteristics and genes. In the event of a catastrophic failure in the livestock industry, those characteristics and genes would be of value to re-establish breeds and herds.

While the conservation easement does not guarantee someone will continue to farm with the Randall Cattle, it does guarantee that a struggling farmer, like me, will have affordable farmland available to them, land that will not be sucked up and ruined for farming by development, land on which someone can start out with their dream of owning a farm and raising their livestock on it. Equity Trust, Columbia Land Conservancy and Scenic Hudson have made this possible going forward. I am genuinely grateful to all three of these remarkable organizations for the work they have done for me, for the Randall Cattle and for what they are doing for all farmers of the future. It is noble work.

Cynthia Creech
Cynthia Creech first established Artemis Farm more than 31 years ago in Tennessee. At the time, there were only 16 Randall cattle remaining in the country. She moved the farm north to 120 acres in New Lebanon so the critically endangered cows—first developed in Vermont and descended from the local cattle common in 19th-century New England—could be in a climate more suited to their breed. Cynthia is passionate about conserving this breed.

Since the cattle made their journey north in 2004, Cynthia has helped to grow the total population of Randall cattle to over 1,000 cattle. She’s worked with more than 20 herds, both large and small, and has sold single cows to homesteaders looking for a sturdy house milk and/or beef cow. In 2000, she was honored by the American Livestock Breeds Conservatory with an award for heritage breed conservation. She also supplies grass-fed beef to consumers via local farmers markets.

In addition to preserving the breed, Cynthia also wanted to make sure her land would continue to be part of the important fabric of Columbia County’s agricultural heritage. Working in collaboration with the Columbia Land Conservancy, Scenic Hudson and Equity Trust’s Hudson Valley Farm Affordability Fund, and with additional funding from the State of New York’s Hudson Valley Agricultural Enhancement Program, and the USDA’s Agricultural Land Easement program, Cynthia’s farm was protected in 2018 with an agricultural conservation easement that includes resale restrictions that ensure the property will always remain in agricultural production and affordable for farmers. As part of the overall transaction, Equity Trust provided critical financing from its Hudson Valley Farm Affordability Fund to secure a portion of the land until it was protected.

Now, several years into the protection of her farm, Cynthia is starting to think about the transition of her farm to new ownership. She has been in touch with Columbia Land Conservancy staff about how the preemptive purchase right will work as she thinks about sale of the farm to the next farmer. Our staff are helping her navigate the process, and if needed are prepared to utilize our networks to help identify farmers in our community who are prepared to purchase and become the next stewards of her special piece of land.

Lessons Learned
Multi-tiered approaches to farmland conservation and affordability, and planning for the future with conservation organizations can help landowners prepare for future transitions.

By working with organizations like the Columbia Land Conservancy that are dedicated to farmland conservation and affordability, farmers can take advantage of existing networks when the time comes to sell their farms to future farmers.
The most important part of a lease is finding the right landowner.

A lease is a relationship - choose someone who believes in your vision, respects you as an the owner of your business and as a farmer, and who you wouldn’t mind having dinner with occasionally. Resist the urge to jump into a lease that doesn’t feel quite right.

Schuyler and Colby Gail

Schuyler and Colby Gail are no strangers to leasing farmland. The couple operate Climbing Tree Farm, a rotationally-grazed pastured pig operation focused on regenerative land practices. The couple started their farm using leased land for several years before purchasing land that they found through the Farmer Landowner Match Program in New Lebanon in 2011.

Owning the land gave the Gails enough security to invest in their business and provided a home base to raise a family. However, over time their business grew from direct sales at farmers markets to wholesale distribution, and soon they needed to find more land for their animals.

As beginning farmers, the pair faced a variety of criticisms from land lessors. Animal impact that was considered regenerative by Colby and Schuyler was viewed as destructive by landowners. There were also critiques of slaughtering practices and their business. While there is no way to foresee all the challenges of leasing land, Schuyler and Colby attribute many of these criticisms to a fundamental difference of understanding between farmers and non-operating landowners, who sometimes have a romanticized view of farming.
Using lessons learned from previous leases, in 2018 Schuyler and Colby once again contacted the Columbia Land Conservancy to search for nearby farmland to lease. After visiting with several landowners, and talking candidly with them about their intentions, Climbing Tree Farm found an opportunity to lease land from a neighbor. Their current lease is really a sub-lease with a well-known small grain and hay farmer who concurrently leases the land for his own operation.

The Gails consulted with Columbia Land Conservancy staff several times during the process to think through the concept and potential challenges of an integrated sub-lease and to seek advice on how to design the arrangement to be secure and equitable. As they have learned, misunderstandings between farmers and landowners can place unrealistic expectations on both parties and can lead to more serious conflicts in the future. Schuyler and Colby emphasize that farmers who are looking to lease land should present potential landowners with a clear and honest representation of their operation.

The previous owners of the land that Colby and Schuyler are now sub-leasing were dairy farmers earning the “Dairy of Distinction” title using conventional practices. The land was protected in 2009 with a conservation easement held by the Columbia Land Conservancy. When the farm was sold several years ago, the new owners asked the leasing farmer to switch to organic production. This transition meant a shift away from conventional soil amendments to organic alternatives, which come at a higher price.

The leasing farmer’s calculation was that the switch was chipping away from his profit. Faced with the prospect of spending more money on organic amendments, the leasing farmer then agreed to collaborate for mutual benefit by enlisting the services of Colby and Schuyler’s pigs. “We’re basically pooping on that land so that he doesn’t have to pay as much for amendments,” says Schuyler.

Rotational grazing has now been integrated into the lease and Climbing Tree’s pigs rotate through a sizeable acreage of fields each year before moving on to another portion of the farm. The main leasing farmer follows the pigs, planting his crops on the freshly fertilized pasture. If this integrated sub-lease continues to prove mutually beneficial over time, the arrangement should eventually amend and improve soil health on the majority of the farm, and thus improve profitability.

**Lessons Learned**

Clear, honest communication about farming activities and land use is key to establishing any leasing agreement.

Learning from past challenges is critical to establishing security and confidence in leasing arrangements.

Creative arrangements including integrated uses can be mutually beneficial for all parties, if done thoughtfully and carefully.
We’re grateful for the Farmer Landowner Match Program and proud to be a success story!

It proves to be continuously mutually beneficial – the program provided us an opportunity to find a plot that fit the needs and growth of our young business, and it provided the land and landowner a fresh start with practices aimed at building more robust ecological function.

Patrick Knapp

Starting a farm isn’t easy. Just ask Allison Toepp and Patrick Knapp, co-owners of Back Paddock Farm. Their 100% grass-fed beef operation was years in the making before establishing a home in Austerlitz, NY in 2017. Patrick and Allison hope that by establishing their own business, they can have as great an impact on the farming community as possible, whether that will be through advocacy and education, or by exemplifying sound agricultural practices like rotational grazing and holistic management.

Patrick and Allison’s dream of starting their own farm was born while they were both working at Sprout Creek Farm in Poughkeepsie, NY. Each spent several years working in agriculture, and after a few years they decided it was time to start their own business. Together they applied to Glynwood’s Hudson Valley Farm Business Incubator, a program that provides business and technical support to new farm enterprises hoping to establish themselves in the Hudson Valley. While enrolled in the program they were given access to land and the support they needed to get their business off the ground.
After spending a year in the program, the couple agreed it was time to look for land of their own. Unfortunately, the high cost of farmland eliminated the prospect of purchasing land for themselves. Instead, they began exploring opportunities to lease land in the Hudson Valley, leading them to the Farmer Landowner Match Program.

After about a year of searching for land to lease, Patrick and Allison were approached by a landowner from Columbia County who was eager to support young farmers attempting to establish themselves. His property is protected with a conservation easement held by the Columbia Land Conservancy. They hit it off during an initial phone call, and after a visit to the property decided to move forward, agreeing to a relatively simple 10-year lease. A longer-term lease of that nature gave Patrick and Allison the security they needed to grow and invest in their business and has informed the way they make decisions about improvements on the farm and to the land.

The costs of investing in infrastructure are shared. Patrick and Allison pay for anything that they could take with them should they decide to leave, while the landowner pays for permanent improvements that will stay on the farm. Establishing this system early helped guide decisions about new fencing. Patrick was happy to use portable fencing to rotate his herd around the property, but the landowner saw value in establishing permanent fencing on the property and was willing to incur the cost of making this more substantial improvement.

Although Patrick and Allison aren’t giving up on land ownership, they acknowledge that in order to maximize their impact on land, leasing land will likely always be a part of their operation. Patrick’s advice to other farmers looking to enter a leasing relationship is to be flexible. Farming is already unpredictable and leasing land only adds to that complexity. Being a ‘gracious guest’ and maintaining a positive relationship can help both farmers and landowners navigate conflicts and difficult decisions down the road.

**Lessons Learned**

A long-term lease can provide farmers with the security they need to invest in growing their business and establishing a career.

Splitting costs for agricultural infrastructure installation and repairs offers landowners an opportunity to improve their property’s farm viability, while at the same time making the farm more valuable to future farmers.
Our families have built a great friendship during this partnership. [The landowners] have been a pleasure to work with and all of us have enjoyed seeing the land improve and produce beautiful animals.

Joe Grimaldi

As a child, Mario Grimaldi grew up helping his aunt and uncle on their farm in Livingston. In 1982, he started his own 65-acre dairy in Ghent and operated it for the twelve years while raising his family at the farmstead. In the mid-1990s, Mario’s two sons, Joseph and Dominic (“Dom”), joined the family business and began to transition the farm to beef production.

Mario and his sons now manage more than 200 grass-fed beef cattle, have become certified organic, and recently opened a farm store in addition to the multiple farms and markets that they supply with their beef. To support their expansion, the family has been able to utilize additional farmland through both purchase and lease arrangements.

Several years ago, Joe and Dom became aware of an opportunity to farm a neighbor’s property that previously had been an apple orchard. The landowners had enrolled their old orchard property in the Columbia and Dutchess Land Conservancies Farmer Landowner Match Program and had worked with staff to explore possibilities, but were having trouble finding farmers due primarily to a lack of housing and water. After several discussions with Joe and Dom, a mutually agreeable 5-year lease was begun.
Currently, the Grimaldis are also working with the Columbia Land Conservancy to permanently protect the land that they own with conservation easements funded through a New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets farmland protection grant program.

The landowners, meanwhile, continued to look for additional ways to put their land resources to use. Soon after signing the lease with Joe and Dom, they met a farmer interested in planting and harvesting several varieties of nut trees. The landowners carefully considered how a long-term lease could be crafted to give enough security to the farmer, while providing themselves necessary flexibility to end the lease early if need be.

After consultation with Columbia Land Conservancy staff about ideas and concepts particular to long-term leases, the nut tree farmers and the landowners signed a 20-year lease allowing the landowners to buy out the farmer at any time. The price of the buy-out is based on the number of years left in the lease and reduces as the end of the lease term is reached. This structure offers a creative solution to a problem faced by many leasing farmers who are often reluctant to invest in a slow-growing crop on land they don’t own.

The Grimaldis are grateful to have met their neighbors and found a way to enter into a positive leasing arrangement, while at the same time working with the Columbia Land Conservancy to permanently protect the lands that they own. The owners of the old orchard have benefited from an array of opportunities to learn about and directly support different type of agricultural enterprises in the Hudson Valley.

**Lessons Learned**

Multiple leases can help achieve multiple land management goals.

Buy-out leases can offer an opportunity for orchard and other more long-term perennial or tree crops, which require long-term commitments.

Working with neighbor farmers can have many benefits for all parties.
My advice to other farmers looking for land through the CLC is to be patient and know exactly what you need before leasing. Don’t jump into a lease if it’s not what’s truly best for your operation. Be clear and transparent when negotiating as well.

Stephanie Wyant

Clifford and Kyla Hart had been residents of Clinton since 2004 when they bought 5 acres of farmland. In 2008 they added 7 acres of contiguous open farmland and in 2013 purchased a large piece of woodland once used for farming. Since purchasing the property, the Harts strived to maintain some form of agriculture on their land, especially as they were aware that the property had been farmed for many generations before them. As such, they welcomed a neighboring farmer to use part of their property for pasturing their cows and sheep in an arrangement that was mutually beneficial. The Harts provided their neighbor with more land to use at low cost, while qualifying Clifford for an agricultural tax assessment.

However, when their neighbor decided to step away from farming in 2015, the Harts were left at risk of losing their agricultural tax assessment. A friend who had found a farmer through the Farmer Landowner Match Program suggested the Harts reach out to the Columbia Land Conservancy for help finding another farmer who could use his land.

Soon after signing up for the program, the Harts received a call from the CLC staff who referred them to Paul Williams and Stephanie Wyant. Paul and Stephanie are the founders of Hudson Valley Kinders, a diversified goat and livestock operation offering grass-fed meats, seasonal vegetables, and unique on-farm experiences. Paul and Stephanie had previously found farmland to lease through the Match Program, but their ability to expand and diversify their business was being stifled by limited acreage.

After being connected, Clifford, Paul, and Stephanie met to discuss their respective land management and agricultural goals, eventually agreeing to a lease. Since then, they have all been working together to improve and reclaim parts of the property for farming. Much of this work has involved clearing trees and pulling out stumps in an effort to open forested areas, reclaiming it as pasture for grazing livestock.
Over this time, the Harts have also made significant investments in agricultural infrastructure on their property. Three new goat barns (one of them a small, movable structure), and the renovation of an existing barn provided storage space for animals, machinery and hay. This investment in infrastructure has allowed Paul and Stephanie to get more creative, pushing their business into new markets with value added products, agritourism experiences like goat yoga (a yoga class with some four legged friends), and the increasingly popular goatscaping (think landscaping, but with goats).

The Harts describe their relationship with Paul and Stephanie as being 95 percent positive. Disagreements are discussed with civility, and regular meetings help keep channels of communication open. In the future, Paul and Stephanie would like to continue to expand their operation and the Harts are eager to help them do it. However, more animals, more frequent on-farm events, and visions of incorporating more land into their operation means their next lease will be more complex.

To address these challenges, the Harts, Paul, and Stephanie have been more engaged with the local farming community support networks, turning to the Columbia Land Conservancy and other local organizations that together provide a network of support for them as they seek advice about managing land and crafting their next lease.

Taking lessons learned from their previous lease and capitalizing on their support network has prepared the Harts, Paul, and Stephanie to further their negotiations for a new lease. While no farm lease arrangement is without challenges, this match exemplifies what is possible when committed landowners and well-prepared, skilled farmers are able to find one another and work together toward a common goal.

**Lessons Learned**
Seeking help and using available resources like the Columbia and Dutchess Land Conservancy’s Farmer Landowner Match Program can be key to establishing fair lease terms.

Farmers and landowners can respond to unforeseen challenges by communicating well and amending lease terms over time.

Access and referral to additional resources can be helpful for both farmers and landowners hoping to establish fair lease terms.

Farmers and landowners can respond to unforeseen challenges by amending their lease
Ed Hoe already had visions of how his property might be used for agriculture when he purchased land in Columbia County in 1995 from a neighbor who first conveyed a conservation easement to the Columbia Land Conservancy. Since then, the portion of Ed’s land that was formerly used as a horse breeding farm was kept in good shape for agriculture, as were two barns and some fencing.

Ed maintained an interest in working the land himself but knew his plans to farm might have to wait until after his retirement. Rather than sitting on the agricultural resources he had at his fingertips, he started searching for farmers who could take advantage of his unique property.

To search for a farmer, he joined the Match Program in 2014. He spoke with several prospective farmers before finding two young farmers interested in growing hops. Their plans were to complete a small initial planting with the goal of scaling up and expanding the operation in order to sell directly to local breweries.
After some initial meetings, Ed and the farmers determined that they might be a good fit. However, before signing a lease, Ed did his due diligence by learning as much as he could about how hops are grown and processed, and how hop production would impact his land. Ed credits the farmers with being forthcoming and open about the details of their operation. He believes that this honesty has helped sustain a positive relationship and recommends that anyone looking to enter a leasing relationship (farmers or landowners) should try to have honest conversations, sparing none of the less desirable details of their plans before signing a lease.

The Columbia Land Conservancy was able to support Ed throughout this process, providing him with boilerplate lease templates and connections to other farmland leasing resources.

Even though Ed’s property was generally suitable for hops growing, some additional improvements have been made to enable the farmers to start their operation. Each year hops grow on long vines that must be supported by trellises made of tall poles and connected by high wires. With Ed’s approval the farmers built the infrastructure they needed to plant their crop, and then turned their attention to finding a consistent source of water. Working in consultation with Ed, they installed a rainwater collection system on the roof of a barn.

This system has provided the farmers with enough water to support their operation and has increased the viability of Eds’ property for future agricultural use by establishing a consistent source of water on the property. Ed has also offered the use of his tractor for mowing, and occasionally helps by clearing the vegetation between rows of hops.

By offering an opportunity to beginning farmers, Ed has learned more about his own land, and has become more engaged in the local agricultural community of Columbia County. His strong commitment to finding a farmer provided him with a unique and rewarding experience that he hopes can be replicated by farmers and landowners participating in the Match Program.

**Lessons Learned**

Learning more about farming can help landowners understand what various farming operations will look like on their land, helping them know what to expect and how to be supportive.

Creative solutions based on good communication of challenges can have mutual benefits for all parties.
COWBERRY CROSSING FARM
How Cows Can Restore a Farm

I’ve learned so much in the past 2 and 1/2 years. I am a better person for it. We are settling in more, growing and achieving so much more than we could imagine.

Denise Pizzini

Denise Pizzini got her start in farming in an unusual location...lower Manhattan. In 2010 she helped establish the Battery Urban Farm with the mission of teaching elementary school children how to grow vegetables, herbs, and flowers. Her experience as an educator inspired her to explore more ways to engage with the farming community, and ultimately brought her upstate to Columbia County to practice her skills and gain experience.

After testing some flowers on leased land, Denise completed Hawthorne Valley’s Farm Beginnings program, and established a permanent location in 2017 at Farm at The Landing in Stuyvesant. Since then, she has been producing flowers, herbs, and specialty crops, selling wholesale and directly to the local community.

The Farm at The Landing had been farmed organically for over 30 years, and home to agricultural activity since the late 18th century. Prior to Denise purchasing the property it had been protected with a conservation easement held by the Columbia Land Conservancy in partnership with Scenic Hudson. This connection proved valuable, and in 2019 Denise received a call from Columbia Land Conservancy staff in their efforts to help a match participant find a home for a small herd of cattle.
Thankfully, Denise was able to answer the call, and since May of 2019, Cowberry Crossing Farm has been raising cattle on about 60 acres of her property. Denise is thrilled with the impact that the cattle have had, clearing brush from forgotten pastures, and fertilizing while they do it. Fencing repairs have also been completed around the perimeter of the farm, allowing livestock to graze previously inaccessible fields. This mutually beneficial relationship has given Cowberry Crossing Farm access to more land, while advancing Denise’s long-term land management goals of improving the health of her land.

Sharing her property with Cowberry Crossing has been a great step forward for Denise, who is striving to create a diverse agricultural environment that could host several farming operations in the future. She hopes to invite more farmers to the Farm at The Landing soon, but is limited by the cost of various infrastructure improvements that must be addressed before engaging with more potential farmers.

Although she is now a landowner, being on the other side of a leasing relationship as a farmer helps Denise appreciate both the benefits and challenges that come with a lease. When she was ready to start her own business in the Hudson Valley, she leased land, allowing her to gain experience and develop skills without taking on the financial burden of purchasing property. She recognizes that the insecurity of a short-term lease can be a challenge to farmers, impacting their decisions to make significant investments in their businesses.

Denise emphasizes the importance of establishing clear pathways of communication within any leasing relationship to ensure that when conflict arises, there is an established way forward. Building a protocol for conflict resolution into a leasing agreement can create accountability during disagreements and empowers both farmers and landowners to be as open and honest as possible about their personal needs and business goals.

Lessons Learned
Communication is key! Farmers and landowners may want to consider establishing clear pathways for conflict resolution directly in their lease.

Grazing can improve soils and farm viability; farm diversity is important for healthy soils.
PERSEVERANCE
And Opportunity

Farming had long intrigued Paul Glesta, who signed up for the Match Program in 2015 after purchasing a new home in Columbia County which included a 3-acre field and a beautiful barn which sat across the street.

Paul recognized that his property represented a unique opportunity to explore his interest in agriculture, and he quickly moved to cover crop, rotating through plantings of rye and sudex (a grass) to regenerate and preserve the field while keeping it viable for farming. With the understanding that he would not be able to commit the time necessary to start farming himself, he also made significant investments in his barn, replacing the doors and installing electricity with the hope of making his property more attractive to a leasing farmer.
In 2017 Paul registered for the Match Program, and started meeting farmers interested in the possibility of working on his land. Paul talked with many farmers over the next two years, but was ultimately unable to make a connection. Although a lack of on-site housing and water access on the property limited the pool of farmers, Paul remained patient, periodically reconnecting with Columbia Land Conservancy staff and engaging with new farmers in the program. Finally in 2018, Paul connected with a new farmer, Erik, hoping to get his start in agriculture growing garlic. After a few in-person meetings to discuss and review a business plan, Paul started drafting a lease using lease templates passed along by Columbia Land Conservancy staff. To make sure he hadn’t missed any crucial elements, he hired a lawyer to review it at no cost to the farmer.

That process proved extremely valuable, and brought to light many issues that neither he nor the leasing farmer had considered. Paul and Erik eventually agreed to a 3-year lease. Though a first-time farmer, Erik planted, tended, and harvested a successful crop of hardneck garlic in his first season. Unfortunately, personal commitments kept Erik from completing a second season.

Although his match was short lived, Paul isn’t discouraged. Since joining the program in 2017, he has learned more about farmland leasing and the complexities involved in creating successful matching relationships. He has also benefited from the transition of the Match Program to an online platform, where he is free to interact with farmers on his own schedule.

Despite the ease of an online interaction, Paul encourages farmland owners looking for farmers to lease their land to be open and engaged when meeting potential farmers. In his mind, getting to know someone and talking seriously with them about the possibility of a leasing relationship is the only way to find a good fit.

**Lessons Learned**

Be open, engaged and persistent when searching for a farmer.

Finding farmland leasing arrangements takes time and patience, but can be a true learning process for all.
Susan Arterian Chang began her journey of becoming a landowner in 2017, when she fell in love with Columbia County’s landscapes while renting a house in Canaan. The following year she began work on “Hudson River Flows,” a place-based online storytelling platform. “Hudson River Flows” was begun as an exploration of the regenerative food movement in our region. Through Susan’s many conversations with leaders of the movement, she became acutely conscious of the crisis the regional food system is facing as more and more farmland is sold off to residential and commercial development.

In early 2019 she was introduced to the Columbia Land Conservancy through colleagues at Breathe Deep Farm in Claverack. Staff helped Susan identify a 70-acre farm property in Ancram that had been on the market for several years and was highly vulnerable to being sold for development purposes.

“I experienced the magic of the property immediately, but it was only over a period of months that I began to believe it was a place that I wanted not only to protect from development, but to play a part in regenerating,” says Susan.
In September 2019 she purchased what is now Taking Care Farm. The farm is comprised of prime soils as well as scattered woodlots and a streamside zone. A stream runs next to Taking Care Farm and into the Roeliff Jansen Kill, a major tributary of the Hudson River. Taking Care Farm is adjacent to Thompson-Finch Farm, which was recently purchased by the Conservancy after a community-wide fundraising campaign, described further in this report. Thompson-Finch Farm is now permanently protected and leased to the previous farmers in a 99-year secure ground lease arrangement that allows them to build equity in their infrastructure and improvements.

Once part of a large dairy farm, in recent years Taking Care Farm had been rented to a commodity grower in a soy and corn rotation. Without cover crops or much in the way of amendments, the soil had become depleted and Susan envisioned a process to regenerate its health. Her first step was to arrange for a contract farmer to plant a cover crop of winter rye and to begin the transition to organic farming. Since then, she has entered into a long-term contract with a neighboring grain farmer who shares her passion for soil health and regenerative practices. He will be planting a clover cover crop to hold the soil and increase its nutrient value and microbiology, and ultimately intends to obtain organic certification for the land.

Susan is also beginning to think about plans for the woodlots, hedgerows, and streamside zones of the property, where she hopes to create better habitats for pollinators and other beneficial insects that will in turn improve the overall health of the farmscape. She will be building a small house on the farm property close to the hedgerow where she hopes to plant a pollinator-friendly wildflower garden.

As part of CLC’s Farmland Advisor program, CLC staff arranged for a field visit with a group of volunteer farm advisors to help Susan formulate her plans for the property. One of the ideas that came out of that meeting was to explore the possibility of experimenting with alley cropping or livestock grazing between crop rows on some parts of the land.

For her longer-term plans, Susan is open to working with a second farmer who might want to use an acre or two to try out a farming enterprise at low risk. She is in conversation with groups such as the GrowNYC FarmRoots program, which trains immigrants and urban farmers to explore possible collaborations. CLC staff are working with Susan to secure funding from New York State to purchase the development rights on the farm, which would ensure Taking Care Farm would be permanently protected from conversion to fragmented estate lots.

**Acquiring farmland or woodland property provides a great opportunity to engage in a project of self-education and self-discovery. It has motivated me to learn more about soil health, agroforestry, pollinator habitats and so much more, because acquiring that knowledge will enable me to play a more meaningful and active role in my land’s stewardship.**

Susan Arterian Chang
THOMPSON-FINCH FARM
A Beloved Farm Secured for the Future

It was really amazing to work with a group of people who actually wanted to work together...who wanted to talk and listen to one another, and collaborate on this project to make (the ground lease) something really good.

Don and Marnie MacLean

Thompson-Finch Farm is a 205-acre organic farm located in Ancram, Columbia County. A Centennial Farm in operation since 1859, Thompson-Finch is one of the oldest and largest organic you-pick fruit and vegetable operations in the northeast. The farm is well-known regionally, attracting thousands of customers who enjoy picking their own strawberries and blueberries. Don and Marnie MacLean are the long-time owners of the business, and had been operating their farm on land leased from Marnie’s family for 38 years until 2019, when a complex family transfer and high real estate prices threatened the life of their business and loss of their land.

“We had arrangements with the family to try and have security when the generational change occurred…but those plans didn’t really work out the way we expected, and we had to scramble to come up with an alternative plan,” say Don and Marnie.

Fortunately, Don and Marnie were able to foresee these obstacles before it was too late for action. They engaged multiple conservation groups, including the Columbia Land Conservancy, to find a solution to these challenges that would both protect the land they called home, and keep it farmed into the future.

In collaboration with the farmers and Equity Trust, the Columbia Land Conservancy led a community-wide effort to raise the $1.5 million dollars needed to save the farm, and purchased the farm in March 2019 protecting it with a conservation held by Dutchess Land Conservancy. This unique project was done in partnership with Equity Trust, and with the additional collaboration and support of Scenic Hudson Land Trust, Dutchess Land Conservancy, and more than 300 supporters, foundations, and local businesses. Once purchased and protected, the farm was leased back to Don and Marnie through the use of an innovative farmland leasing tool, an agricultural ground lease.
It is a rare moment when what you absolutely must do out of necessity turns out to also be the best thing and the thing you truly want to do. Faced with the certainty that the land we had been farming for over three decades would be sold, we turned to the Columbia Land Conservancy and Equity Trust in search of a way of saving the farm from sale and development. We have worked together to create a dynamic plan that does much more than save the farm for us. We can keep the farm affordable for generations of future farmers and preserve that which so many have come to love. A place of food, beauty, friendship, and sanctuary.

Don and Marnie MacLean

A ground lease allows them to retain ownership of and continue building equity in the structures and improvements on the farm, and continue farming and growing their business. For Don and Marnie, the use of a ground lease alleviated the financial burden of farm ownership, while providing secure land tenure through the establishment of a 99-year ground lease.

When they retire, Don and Marnie will have the ability to sell their business and the on-farm infrastructure to the next farmers, who will be granted another 99-year lease. In the event that the Columbia Land Conservancy becomes responsible for finding the next farmer, the participants in the Farmer Landowner Match Program will serve as an important resource by providing a list of eligible and qualified buyers.

“We are really glad that farmers have a strong voice in the transition process, and that we can really be the drivers of that process if we want to, but we’re also glad if for some reason we couldn’t or didn’t want to be involved, that CLC could assume that responsibility,” say Don and Marnie.

The Columbia Land Conservancy is one of very few conservation organizations around the country that has completed a ground lease on agricultural land. The model, while challenging to put into practice primarily because of the cost of the initial farm purchases, is an innovative way to address two common challenges facing young and beginning farmers today: access and affordability. In the future the farm could be leased by multiple farming operations, providing opportunities for farmers to secure land access without competing to purchase land on the open market. This ambitious project was made possible through the hard work of dedicated staff, the support of the multiple project partners and local community, and Don and Marnie MacLean, who had the foresight and commitment not only to protect the land they love, but to pass it forward.

Lesson Learned

Ground leases are a unique and impactful strategy that give more flexibility to farming landowners, as well as conservation organizations.
CONCLUSION

Measuring the impact of the Columbia Land Conservancy’s FARM Program work can be a challenge. Reporting the number of successful farmland matches, or the acreage of land leased through the program, while important, does not capture the qualitative outcomes and very human impact of this program. This collection of stories reflects the experiences of only a few of the landowners and farmers who have participated in the FARM Program. It provides insight into the range of benefits the program offers our community. The messages of determination, perseverance, and commitment by farmers and those committed to supporting farmers are broadly shared.

Besides keeping farmland in active production and permanently protected for agricultural use, our FARM Program has been extremely valuable in delivering much-needed support and resources to both farmers and landowners. Through this program, Columbia Land Conservancy staff provide critical links between farmers and non-operating landowners, and offer services such as maintaining a library of lease templates, mediation services, and business planning options.

Our staff are continually inspired by the hard work, commitment and dedication of the many participants of our programs. The diversity of experiences, knowledge, skills and background that they collectively bring to the table provide the basis and framework for a deep level of engagement and positive change in how farmers are able to use and secure land. As we continue to find new ways to diversify and improve our services, welcome new participants, and expand the options we have to offer, our programmatic philosophy remains grounded in a shared commitment to protecting the farms and farmland that define and sustain our community.
**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

*Farmer Landowner Match Program (Programmatic Details)*

The Farmer Landowner Match Program is an online database operated through a joint website and direct staff assistance presence. Participants register themselves on the website and craft individual profiles. Farmers are asked to detail their farming experience, business plans, land requirements, and geographic preferences. Landowners are asked to describe the characteristics of their land, their own experience with agriculture, and the types of farm operations they are open to hosting on their property. When their profiles are complete, participants submit them to be reviewed by Columbia Land Conservancy staff.

Columbia Land Conservancy staff review submitted profiles, often scheduling an introductory phone call or meeting. This phone call enables staff to learn more about participants while gathering any information absent from a submitted profile. After staff review and update the profile, it is published to the site and participants are free to browse land or farmer profiles independently. Participants are also able to connect with each other directly through the site. Staff offer support throughout the process, assisting participants with registration, profile completion, mapping services, land and farmer searchers, drafting farm leases, navigating agricultural tax laws, and land evaluation. In the event participants require or could benefit from advice beyond the organizational capacity of our program, staff connect participants with other local service providers. In this way the Match Program functions through a regional network of organizations and individuals, expanding the resources available to participants and helping to create interconnections within the farm network.