

CONSERVE

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Protecting and Restoring Farmland

Western Pennsylvania
Conservancy



water, land, life.

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Cover Photo: Westmoreland County farmland acquired by WPC on Earth Day 2020

Back Cover Photo: Protected farmland in Westmoreland County



Message from the President



This issue of Conserve is dedicated to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy's work on farmland protection.

Farming and farmland are an important part of Pennsylvania's economy, culture and landscape. The Conservancy works to protect farmland and the natural resources associated with farms, and to support and promote the sustainable production of healthy local foods, crops and gardens.

Because many of our region's streams pass through agricultural properties, our watershed conservation staff works with farmers to encourage and implement best conservation practices on

farms and improve stream health. We provide planning, expertise and labor as we implement projects such as riparian tree plantings to reduce runoff into Pennsylvania's streams.

Our land conservation staff has worked for many years to protect farmland in Western Pennsylvania. Often this work has been done as landowners have donated conservation easements over their farm properties to the Conservancy, allowing the land to stay in private hands while being protected from development as the land changes ownership over the years.

In recent years, we have increased our focus on providing local farmers access to farmland in our region. We have several farms that we are leasing to small-scale local farmers, providing them with affordable access to farmland on which to produce organic foods for the Pittsburgh region, and helping the growing local food economy.

Our community gardens and greenspace staff supports community vegetable gardens in our communities as another source of fresh, healthy, local foods. At Fallingwater, our café sources many foods from local farms, supporting the local economy, and we celebrate our local food culture with events such as forest to table dinners. And during this pandemic, when many people are struggling financially, we are helping families in the communities around Fallingwater by holding periodic food distributions in partnership with 412 Food Rescue.

Western Pennsylvania's regional economy, our food supply and our landscape all need farmland now and in the future. We appreciate all that our partners, members and donors – and the farmers in our region – are doing to support our programs and farmland protection efforts.

Thomas D. Saunders
PRESIDENT AND CEO

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy protects and restores exceptional places to provide our region with clean waters and healthy forests, wildlife and natural areas for the benefit of present and future generations. The Conservancy creates green spaces and gardens, contributing to the vitality of our cities and towns, and preserves Fallingwater, a symbol of people living in harmony with nature.



Working to Save, Improve Farmland

In 2007, WPC facilitated the transfer of this 255-acre farm that protects the Loyalhanna Creek watershed, open space and prime agricultural soils in Westmoreland County.

A DRIVE THROUGH RURAL WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA PROVIDES A PICTURESQUE REMINDER THAT AGRICULTURE AND FARMING ARE IMPORTANT TO THE TRADITIONS, WAY OF LIFE AND ECONOMY OF OUR REGION AND STATE.

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Bureau of Farmland Preservation, the agriculture industry provides an estimated \$135 billion in overall annual economic activity for Pennsylvania. Farmland covers 26 percent of the state and provides wildlife habitat for a variety of species, among other conservation benefits.

Because agriculture is a critical component of our state's economy and due to development demands for farmland, saving farmland and working farms for future generations has been a priority at the federal, state and local levels for decades. According to the bureau, Pennsylvania's state agricultural easement program leads the nation in farmland preservation, with more than 550,000 acres and more than 5,300 farms preserved.

The Conservancy is doing its part to protect farmland through its land conservation efforts. Of the more than 262,000 acres permanently protected by the Conservancy since 1932, 6,728 acres are currently farmland.

Shaun Fenlon, vice president of land conservation for the

Conservancy, says many of those acres are protected by conservation easements. Conservation easements are legal agreements that restrict future subdivision and development on land to permanently protect resources and conservation land values, such as forests, wildlife habitat or agricultural land for crop production in perpetuity.

Preserving Farmland via Conservation Easements

The Conservancy has permanently protected nearly 27,000 acres in the Ligonier Valley, of which more than 10,000 were preserved through conservation easements purchased from or donated by private landowners.

The Ligonier Valley is an important natural landscape in Westmoreland County within the Laurel Highlands, located between the Chestnut and Laurel ridges. The forested ridges provide habitat for species of special concern whose habitats are being threatened. This valley is also an important part of the pastoral and agrarian heritage of the region.

"Most of the farmland protection in the Ligonier Valley is achieved through conservation easements," says Shaun. "We work closely with private landowners so that they can keep their working farmland in production, while at the same time



This 116-acre Potter County farm will benefit from new trees to prevent nutrient runoff from entering Little Kettle Creek and three of its tributaries.

“When you care about your land, family and community, everyone can benefit from an enduring gift of protected land,” comments Shaun Fenlon, vice president of land conservation for the Conservancy. “For decades, we’ve been working to conserve the unique features of this valley, which includes keeping farmland intact.”

sustaining a healthier environment for present and future generations.”

“When you care about your land, family and community, everyone can benefit from an enduring gift of protected land,” Shaun comments. “For decades, we’ve been working to conserve the unique features of this valley, which includes keeping farmland intact.”

Improving Farms to Restore Waterways

The Ligonier Valley features two of the Conservancy’s priority watersheds, Tubmill Creek and upper Loyalhanna Creek. Working with farmers to improve stream quality while keeping farms productive is another way the Conservancy assists and interacts with farmland. WPC’s watershed conservation program staff help agricultural producers implement best management practices that reduce



Watershed conservation staff undertake a riparian tree planting on a farm buffering Little Kettle Creek in Potter County to limit nutrient runoff and improve the riparian area.

sedimentation, nutrient overload and other impacts to the region’s rivers and streams.

The Conservancy works closely with farmers to reduce the amount of nutrients running into nearby creeks through use of stream bank fencing, stabilized stream crossings and implementing best practices for managing manure, among other practices such as planting native grasses and shrubs near creeks to create buffer zones to help prevent sediment, nutrients and other pollutants from entering the water.

“We help farmers decide on strategies and create a plan that best fits their priorities, but all decisions are for the benefit of water quality,” says Jenifer Christman, vice president of watershed conservation for the Conservancy.



Fallen Aspen Farm leases farmland at WPC’s Plain Grove Fens Natural Area in Lawrence County.

“This type of work is targeted to specific geographic areas in the region where a high number of farmers operate near sensitive waterways, such as the Juniata and Loyalhanna river watersheds.” (Read more about this work on pages 9-11.)

Leasing Land to Farmers

Part of the Conservancy’s work in preserving farmland is saving it for use by the next generation of farmers. Through the Conservancy’s farmland access initiative, three farms are made available for lease for growing crops or raising livestock, for organic local food to be supplied to the Pittsburgh region. Leasing programs provide options near urban areas where high land prices make it challenging for farmers to acquire land.

This program supports farmers focused on local foods and helps make land more accessible to newly established farmers interested in small-scale agricultural operations for local markets. Sustainably grown produce and meats from these farms help supply Pittsburgh’s food markets, including local restaurants, food co-ops, farm stands, CSAs and farmers markets.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed further the need for the importance of more locally grown food in the region.

“In addition to the critical need to save farmland,” Shaun says, “we believe there is a current and future need to support our community by introducing more people to farming who can supply locally grown food to the Pittsburgh region.” (Read more about this work on pages 6-8.) ■

“We help farmers decide on strategies and create a plan that best fits their priorities, but all decisions are for the benefit of water quality,” says Jenifer Christman, vice president of watershed conservation for the Conservancy.

Leasing Farmland Offers Opportunities for New Pittsburgh-area Farmers

WPC acquired this 47-acre Mercer County farm located off of I-79 in 2018 to lease to new farmers.

WHILE THE CONSERVANCY HAS PROTECTED FARMLAND FOR DECADES, RECENTLY IT HAS BEGUN TO BUY FARMLAND WITH THE ADDITIONAL GOAL OF MAKING THAT FARMLAND AVAILABLE TO FARMERS AT AFFORDABLE COST THROUGH A CONSERVANCY PROGRAM CALLED THE FARMLAND ACCESS INITIATIVE. THE CONSERVANCY HAS ACQUIRED SEVERAL PROPERTIES THAT IT LEASES TO FARMERS WHO ARE PRODUCING LOCAL ORGANIC FOODS FOR THE PITTSBURGH REGION.

Mike Kuzemchak, now director of operations at Fallingwater, did much of the research for this effort during the time when he managed the Conservancy's Laurel Highlands land protection work. He explored initiatives by the Vermont Land Trust and other land trusts around the country who were not only protecting farmland for open space values, but also making the farmland



Fallen Aspen Farm's cows have free range on 57 acres of WPC's Plain Grove Fens property in Lawrence County.

available to farmers and encouraging production of local foods for their regions.

Mike facilitated workshops with the Conservancy's board of directors regarding this initiative, and the Conservancy sought funds from local foundations, who were interested and generous with their support for the initiative.

This purchase and leasing program is designed to make land more accessible to local farmers interested in supplying crops to support Pittsburgh's food market. Two farms, one in Findley Township, Mercer County and another in South Huntingdon Township, Westmoreland County, have been recently acquired and made available for lease.

The 47-acre Mercer County farm near Grove City, Pa., now has two agriculture operators. The Mwanakuche Farm plans to grow crops, such as peppers, corn and greens, and raise livestock on 13 acres. The Westsylvania Cider Co. will farm about five acres to plant trees for an apple orchard for organic hard cider production. Planting was completed on the first seedlings of Harrison, Hewes Virginia Crab



A recent farm acquisition in Westmoreland County makes 27 acres of fields and pastures available for farmers seeking to grow crops or raise livestock. It will remain a farm as it has since 1827.

and Grimes Golden varieties to start the orchard, which is anticipated to yield apples in about six to 10 years.

The Westmoreland County farm, called Ruffsdale Farm, purchased on Earth Day 2020, has been prepared for leasing and the Conservancy is reviewing proposals from individuals interested in farming the

property.

These farms expand on the Conservancy's practice of leasing farmland at the 400-acre Plain Grove Fens Natural Area in Lawrence County. Currently, Fallen Aspen Farm rents 57 acres of the WPC property to raise produce and livestock for Pittsburgh-area restaurants, farmers markets and other outlets.

Leasing programs provide successful options near urban areas where high land prices make it challenging for farmers, particularly those who are new to the industry, to acquire land.

Tom Saunders, president and CEO of the Conservancy, is also a board member of the Land Trust Alliance and says leasing programs to encourage local food production are established or under consideration by land trusts across the country. Those programs, like the Conservancy's, provide affordable access for small farming operations to lease the farmland they need in order to get into the local foods markets.

"We want to help address the challenge of land access and make affordable land available to farmers who want to grow local foods for the Pittsburgh market," says Tom. "It's our hope that this program can help smaller farming operations and new farmers who are interested in providing food locally, and also have at least a small impact in increasing the focus on healthy local foods in our region's food supply."

The initiative's advisory committee, made up of representatives from the PASA Sustainable Agriculture (formerly Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture), Allegheny County Conservation District, We Conserve PA, National Young Farmers Coalition, Chatham University and others, has been

integral in the effort to attract and engage prospective farmers, share information and provide resources for experienced and beginning farmers.

Tom notes, "It's great to have partners who help advise on matters important to farmers' success."

"The program is a nice bridge between two goals: The Conservancy protects open space, including farmland, and with this program we can also help local farmers wanting to provide fresh, local foods to Pittsburgh-area markets," he adds.

Farmers seeking land to lease should contact the Conservancy at 412-288-2777 for more information. Funding for WPC's farmland access initiative is made possible by the generosity of WPC donors and funders, including the Henry L. Hillman, McCune, Colcom and Katherine Mabis McKenna foundations, and The Heinz Endowments and an anonymous foundation. ■



Farmers can lease this land in Westmorland County for small-scale agricultural operations to support farmers markets and food distributors in the Pittsburgh area.

Mercer County Farm Provides New Opportunities and Challenges



Abdulkadir Chirambo, executive director of the United Somali Bantu of Greater Pittsburgh, will lead a group of farmers to begin planting crops and raising livestock on WPC farmland in Mercer County. Photo courtesy of Brian Cook / Golden Sky Media.

FOR ABDULKADIR CHIRAMBO, FARMING PROVIDES A PURPOSEFUL CONNECTION TO CULTURE, TRADITION AND FAMILY. THAT'S WHY HE IS SO COMMITTED TO MAKING A DIFFERENCE BY ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY ISSUES AND THE LACK OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES IN HIS COMMUNITY.

Abdul is a member of a Somali Bantu immigrant community residing in the City of Pittsburgh's Perry Hilltop neighborhood. He is also the executive director of Mwanakuche Farm, which is the Bantu community's farm in the same neighborhood where tomatoes, collard greens, lettuces, okra, corn and peppers fill a one-acre city lot.

"Food is an important way my community connects to and cares for one another. This is especially important now during this pandemic," says Abdul. "Good food can help heal the soul and get us healthy. We have to help each other in times like this."

Since the community farm's establishment in 2012, food grown at the site has fed his family, community members, neighbors and anyone who visits their farm stand.

"We don't turn anyone away," he says. "If you need food, we'll share it, because food is for everyone. You don't have to speak our language or know our culture to know when food is natural, good and fresh."

And it was that philosophy that encouraged him and three Somalian community elders to want to expand their community farm beyond the city's North Side. They needed more acreage to grow additional crops and raise livestock.

Through existing partnerships with several local organizations, including Grow Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture and Penn State Extension, Abdul sought advice and help to find local farmland. These groups also helped him navigate barriers and challenges often experienced by farmers.

Those connections led him to the Conservancy's Farmland Access Program. Abdul is one of two farmers currently living and working on the 13 acres Mwanakuche Farm is leasing on a Conservancy-owned farm in Findley Township, Mercer County. They began leasing the farm in August 2020 with plans to grow additional

vegetables and raise chickens, goats and pigs. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has made establishing this farm operation more challenging, he is still optimistic about the future.

"We still have a lot of work to do and hopefully once the pandemic is over and the economy turns around, we'll be able to truly start our farming," Abdul says. Mercer County is a perfect location, just an hour from downtown Pittsburgh.

"It feels like I have a real farm now, like I had back home (in Somalia)," he says, and explains that more land will expand operations, grow more food and create jobs for his community.

Abdul admits that farming techniques used in the United States are very different from those in Somalia. In order to obtain a USDA organic certification for the farm, he and his partners are learning new farming practices and operations, such as having a nutrient management plan and installing fencing.

"I appreciate how the Conservancy's staff has provided good information and kindness to us. We've put some of the suggestions into practice," he notes. "It's new and different for us. But, it's going to help our farm be better and healthier in the long run."

He's already begun planting seed and planning for next year's crop with the hopes that both farm locations will help generate and supply fresh food to areas when and where needed.

"It will bring us so much pride when we can see the food we grow in restaurants and farmers markets," he shares.

Abdul is already making a difference, but wants to do even more for his community and future generations.

"Pittsburgh is our home now, but one day I'll have an opportunity to take what I'm learning back to help my family in Somalia," he adds. "I want them to learn new ways to grow bigger, healthier crops and become better organic farmers, too." ■



Horse Owners Help Rein in Water Pollution with Nutrient Management Plans

Horses on a farm in South Mahoning Township, Indiana County drink out of a new water trough installed as an alternative to accessing water from a stream within Ross Run Watershed.



WPC's Watershed Projects Manager Alysha Trexler with her pony, Phoenix, on her farm in Indiana County.

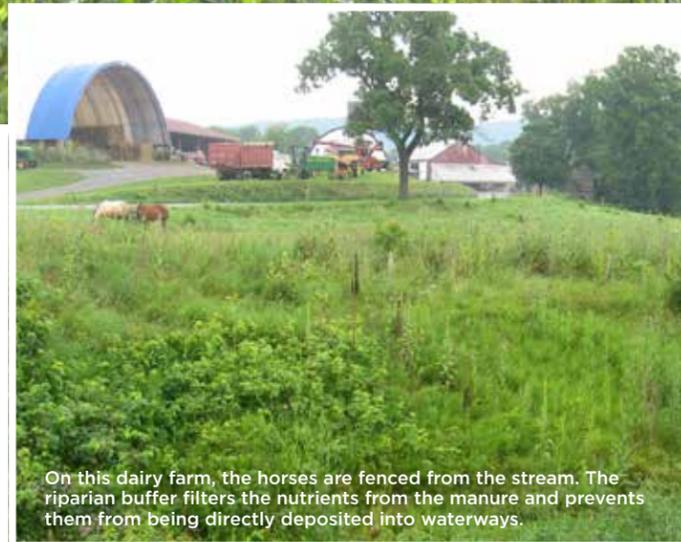
FEW THINGS MAKE A HORSE HAPPIER THAN STANDING IN A BREEZY PASTURE MUNCHING ON TALL GREEN GRASS – EXCEPT MAYBE HAVING A JOB TO DO. THE SIX HORSES AT ALLEGHENY COUNTY'S ROUND HILL PARK AND EXHIBITION FARM IN ELIZABETH, PA. ENJOY BOTH. IN ADDITION TO BRINGING JOY TO THOUSANDS OF VISITORS, THEY ALSO FERTILIZE THE TURF ON WHICH THEY FEED. THE EFFICIENT SYSTEM IS JUST ONE BENEFIT OF A DETAILED NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT PLAN (NMP) ASSEMBLED FOR THE PARK BY THE CONSERVANCY'S WATERSHED CONSERVATION STAFF.

For years, our watershed conservation team has partnered with local conservation districts and the state office of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service to offer agriculture best management practices (ag BMPs), including on-site consultation and tailored suggestions such as stream bank fencing, stabilized stream crossings, roof runoff management, waste storage and general barnyard management. Conservancy Watershed Conservation Vice President Jenifer Christman says, "We are available to assist all landowners who are interested in improving or protecting the streams that flow through their properties. BMPs that decrease sediment and nutrients can be effective almost immediately."

Around 2005, the team began writing NMPs, which are one component of ag BMPs. They provide expertise in identifying and treating non-point source pollution, which results when rainfall or snowmelt runs over land or through the ground, picks up pollutants such as excess nutrients and fertilizers from agricultural operations and deposits them into rivers, lakes, wetlands or groundwater. They study the nutrients, look



Soil samples help determine the amount of nutrients that may be applied to the fields.



On this dairy farm, the horses are fenced from the stream. The riparian buffer filters the nutrients from the manure and prevents them from being directly deposited into waterways.

"Sometimes horse owners and owners of equestrian facilities are not aware that their horses, like all other animals, produce nutrients that pollute rivers and streams."



Manure spreaders like this one at Round Hill Park and Exhibition Farm in Allegheny County are part of effective nutrient management plans.

for erosion issues on fields and write the NMP, which is an extensive report with recommendations and guidelines to help limit pollution into rivers and streams.

Watershed Projects Manager Alysha Trexler is one of three Conservancy staff certified to develop NMPs through the Pennsylvania State Conservation Commission. She is updating the plan for Round Hill, which also manages the manure from horses of the Allegheny County Mounted Patrol Unit and the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police Mounted Patrol. She's pleased to work with a county-level municipality that serves as a positive example for horse owners statewide.

"Sometimes horse owners and owners of equestrian facilities are not aware that their horses, like all other animals, produce nutrients that pollute rivers and streams," Alysha explains. Large scale cattle and swine operations are often the focus of discussions about water-polluting nutrient runoff, she says, but horses also produce manure, which can be detrimental to the environment if not carefully managed.

About six years ago, says Round Hill Manager Chris Roland, the park contacted WPC about creating a plan to manage manure in an efficient, environmentally friendly way, including keeping it from polluting nearby streams.

"The soil tests help you understand what you can do better," Chris says, explaining that each farm's NMP contains a site map, soil tests results and other information, with space to track changes and progression. "It's humbling to see what you're doing wrong and worth it to see the positives going forward."

Approximately 3.1 million acres are farmed in Pennsylvania's 43-county section of the Chesapeake Bay watershed, according to the PA Department of Environmental Protection. Agriculture-

related runoff is a leading cause of water pollution for the watershed. Across Pennsylvania, approximately 223,628 horses are housed on farms, race tracks, sanctuaries, boarding stables, breeding farms and personal stables.

Pennsylvania law states that agricultural operations that have two or more animal "units" per acre must have a NMP. "One animal unit is 1,000 pounds per acre," Alysha explains. "About five pigs make a unit, but a horse is usually more than one animal unit."

Sometimes farmers or animal owners that are below the threshold for required NMPs do them voluntarily or in order to access state grant funding for other programs.

Alysha notes that facilities with voluntary NMP status are as important to reducing water pollution as larger ones. "If no small operations had nutrient management plans, there would be a huge problem." Even the manure produced by one horse needs to be responsibly managed, says Alysha, who owns a farm in Indiana County.

"Horse owners who care about the environment need to also be good, responsible consumers," Alysha says. "They might ask a boarding facility owner, 'How do you manage your nutrients? Are they kept away from streams?', and if an answer isn't one that is good for the environment and the horses, they could choose a different facility or ask that facility to try to improve." The same concept can be used by restaurant owners and shoppers at farmers markets, she says. "Buyers of meat products can ask if the farm providing their food is managing nutrients responsibly."

Many horse owners install fencing to limit horses' access to streams, or a combination of fencing and vegetation to trap nutrient runoff. Chris says Round Hill also plants riparian trees and grasses to filter and trap nutrients from polluting Douglass Run.

Alysha says a NMP can help animal owners finesse their technique, such as moving manure to a safe place keep it from polluting rivers and streams. "It's also important for the

animals' health," she notes. "Taking manure to the field, rather than allowing it to sit in the same spot, minimizes pests such as rodents and flies."

Chris says the upfront cost of a NMP is small related to the payoff. "Hay is expensive, feed costs are rising. The longer you can keep horses on good grass, the fewer your expenses and the horses are happy and occupied."

He says Round Hill has decreased fertilizer expenses by 40 percent since having a NMP, and stabilizing the fields' pH and nitrogen levels means less maintenance. "Horse manure is less bulky than other manure, so it doesn't clog the equipment and it's easier to spread consistently." He also noted a crop increase in yields per bushel.

Alysha agrees that the environmental benefits of NMPs outweigh upfront costs. "Once animal owners are managing nutrients responsibly, they can say, 'I have a water-friendly product.'" ■

Local Farm Influence at a World Heritage Site



Guests at a forest to table dinner in October enjoyed offerings such as smoked trout mousse and trout caviar on cucumber, seared foie gras and country venison terrine.

VISITORS FINISH THEIR JOURNEY TO FALLINGWATER ON A COUNTRY ROAD IN FAYETTE COUNTY, PA. BARNS DOT THE LANDSCAPE; ACRES OF CORN ARE INTERSPERSED WITH HILLSIDES WHERE CONTENTED CATTLE GRAZE. PEOPLE MIGHT NOT REALIZE SUCH SCENES ARE INTIMATELY CONNECTED TO THE ARCHITECTURAL WONDER THEY'RE ABOUT TO BEHOLD. THE KAUFMANN FAMILY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FARMERS AND LAND THAT SURROUND FALLINGWATER HELPED SHAPE THE PRINCIPLES OF FOOD SERVED ON THE SITE – THAT DELICIOUS, HEALTHY DISHES BEGIN WITH LOCALLY GROWN, HIGH-QUALITY INGREDIENTS.

The movement to source local, sustainably grown ingredients is not a new concept for Tom Shuttlesworth, executive chef at Fallingwater since 2006. Chef Tom, a Fayette County native and New England Culinary Institute-trained chef with a career spanning the United States and Europe, was inspired by Fallingwater during a grade school trip. "Coming back to work at Fallingwater, while working for a land conservancy that preserves the integrity and beauty of the natural world, was a home run," he says. He notes that incorporating locally farmed food goes hand-in-hand with the Conservancy's mission of environmental stewardship. It also reinforces the purpose of the WPC's farmland access initiative, a program to help small farmers access affordable farmland where they can raise food sustainably.

In the tradition of the Kaufmann family and their cook, Elsie Henderson, Tom buys many ingredients from local farmers and foragers to create dishes for the Fallingwater Café and special dinners. The Kaufmanns had close relationships with local farmers who provided beef, lamb and chickens. Fresh eggs graced the breakfast table, vegetables grown on site provided colorful side dishes and in-season fruits, such as blackberries and peaches, rounded out desserts. Edgar Kaufmann Sr. bought a nearby barn, added a silo and milking parlor in the early 1940s and, until 1951, raised Jersey cows for fresh milk.



The Fallingwater Café sources ingredients from local farms.



This 1946 photo shows the barn near Fallingwater where Edgar Kaufmann Sr. raised Jersey cows for fresh milk and cream. Fallingwater Archive, Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. Gift of Donna M. Miner.

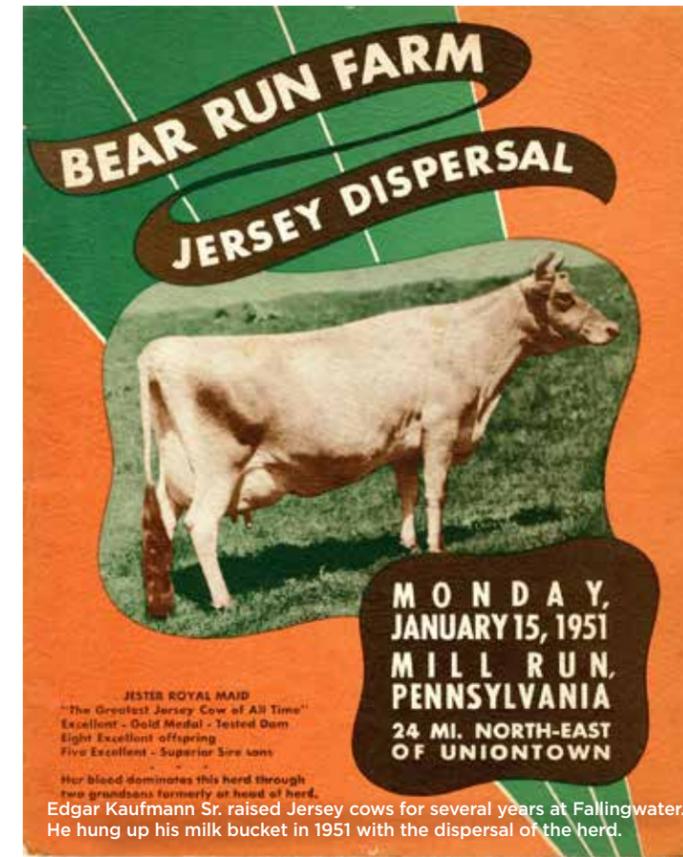
Highlighting local, seasonal ingredients is still the key to serving great food, Tom says. Visitors to the café enjoy such offerings as chick pea-kale tartine with melted fontina, roast chicken with harissa-spiked hummus and local greens, and chocolate hazelnut cake with mascarpone-fig icing.

Footprints Farms in Glade, Fayette County, Pa., has sold ingredients to Fallingwater for about six years, including eggs, chickens and hams, and produce grown in small batches, such as greens and garlic scapes.

"We fell in love with producing our own food," says owner Jeremy Swartzfager, adding that humans universally desire creating something from and connecting to the earth. In point, he observes in Edgar Kaufmann Sr. that "a man's heart was longing to connect with cattle in a milking parlor to produce the best milk he could."

Tom also uses aggregators to source local items. Paragon Foods in Warrendale, Allegheny County, Pa., sources from 100 miles around Fallingwater to supply produce and dairy. (Paragon has also partnered with Fallingwater and 412 Food Rescue to distribute food boxes at Fallingwater to area families in need, as has Sysco Foods.)

For special events, such as the forest to table dinners held in October, most highlighted ingredients are locally sourced, including foraged chanterelles and garlic, and rabbit from Wild Purveyors in Pittsburgh. Dandelion greens, red chard, dried



apples and corn meal came from Franklin Sustainable Farms in Franklin County. Fresh cheeses often come from an Amish cooperative in nearby Ohio, Goat Rodeo Farm & Dairy north of Pittsburgh and FireFly Farms in Deep Creek, Md.

"During such dinners, we're trying for the feel and history of the Appalachian area," says Tom, whose studies of Appalachian food traditions influence his cooking. "People in the past took so much care in getting their lambs raised and their jellies made. It's fascinating how much remains the same. Today, we still look to serve the best local food, but face additional challenges created by environmental changes like earlier springs, hotter summers and later frosts."

He notes that public awareness about locally grown food has risen in recent years. "We've been thrilled to increase our usage of local farms and look forward to growing alongside the region's farmers and craftspeople."

Small farms such as Footprints Farms get exposure to global visitors who taste their offerings at a site recently added to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

"People come from around the world to see what Frank Lloyd Wright and the Kaufmanns put together," Jeremy says, "and it's all celebrated right there at the café!"

The farms-and-Fallingwater symbiosis is cause for celebration, agrees Tom. "Sustainable farming is a way to return to balance and appreciate the very ground beneath our feet. It's a way to take what you need and pass it on, rather than simply take." ■

WPC Partnership with Grow Pittsburgh Sustains Community Vegetable Gardens



A grant awarded to the Rosalinda Sauro Sirianni Garden in Allegheny County provided funding to replace the plastic on the high tunnel, which extends the growing season for certain vegetables, providing more food for families in need.



The Glen Hazel Community Garden received funds for a new garden shed.



Volunteers for the Gardens of Millvale help make efficient use of funds to raise healthy food for the community.



The Gardens of Millvale received funding for raised beds.

A HILLSIDE GARDEN IN BELLEVUE, ALLEGHENY COUNTY BURSTS WITH FALL BOUNTY: BUSHELS OF RED TOMATOES, MOUNDS OF YELLOW ZUCCHINI AND BUNCHES OF ORANGE CARROTS WITH FEATHERY GREEN TOPS. SINCE 2011, THE ROSALINDA SAURO SIRIANNI (RSS) GARDEN HAS PRODUCED MORE THAN 40,000 POUNDS OF ORGANIC PRODUCE FOR DISTRIBUTION AT THREE FOOD PANTRIES RUN BY NORTH HILLS COMMUNITY OUTREACH. THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA CONSERVANCY HAS PLAYED A PART IN THE GARDEN'S ABILITY TO PROVIDE NUTRITIOUS FOOD TO THOUSANDS OF FAMILIES IN NEED.

A hillside garden in Bellevue, Allegheny County bursts with fall bounty: bushels of red tomatoes, mounds of yellow zucchini and bunches of orange carrots with feathery green tops. Since 2011, the Rosalinda Sauro Sirianni (RSS) Garden has produced more than 40,000 pounds of organic produce for distribution at three food pantries run by North Hills Community Outreach. The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy has played a part in the garden's ability to provide nutritious food to thousands of families in need.

The RSS garden has received seven grants from the Community Garden Sustainability Fund (CGSF), a collaborative effort between the Conservancy and Grow Pittsburgh that provides materials and technical support to help existing community vegetable gardens in Pittsburgh and the region improve their sites. Grow Pittsburgh, a

nonprofit organization, teaches people how to garden and promotes the benefits of neighborhoods gardens.

RSS Garden coordinator Alyssa Crawford says the garden has received sustainability funds to purchase organic compost and straw that improve soil quality, tools and high tunnel plastic with installation assistance, which allows the garden to extend the growing season for certain plants. "The plastic needs to be replaced every few years as the UV protection deteriorates," Alyssa explains.

The Conservancy's involvement with the CGSF grew from its history of helping communities access fresh, nutritious food. With unemployment escalating around the time the steel industry began to show signs of collapse in 1978, WPC began coordinating community vegetable gardens as a way to reuse vacant land to help residents make community connections and feel

pride in producing affordable, healthy food.

About seven years ago, explains Brian Charles, community outreach assistant for WPC's community gardens and greenspace program, the Conservancy and Grow Pittsburgh partnered to create the CGSF. "We realized there wasn't a network or fund to help support existing community vegetable gardens in Allegheny County," he adds. The Conservancy also provides technical support for new community vegetable gardens projects through Grow Pittsburgh's Allegheny Grows and City Growers programs.

Grow Pittsburgh and WPC have supported more than 107 existing gardens by investing more than \$150,000 in the CGSF, of which the Conservancy has contributed \$56,000. In 2020, the fund supported 53 projects at 45 gardens. The dollar investment

does not account for thousands of hours in staff support for technical assistance.

To receive sustainability funds, "Gardens must exist already and need to have grown food for a year on their site that is donated to the broader community" Brian says.

The fund grants a total of \$25,000 annually. Applicant gardens can request funds for one project; grants range from \$200 to \$1,200. Applications are open twice annually, March to April and July to September. Brian says the number of applications has steadily increased to 30 in recent rounds.

"More people are realizing the benefits of community vegetable gardening," he says. "They've provided an overwhelming benefit to community health and personal health and nutrition. There's a big need in Pittsburgh for equitable access to healthy food. Working on this fund has made me realize how many people are passionate about healthy, local food."

Cynthia Carrow, Conservancy vice president of government and community relations, says, "The partnership has enabled the sustainability of vegetable gardens in communities where nutritious, locally grown food production is important to the residents,

especially during economically challenging times."

Common funding requests include seeds, raised bed repair, compost, mulch and soil amendments, gardening tools, rain barrels and rain gutters, fencing materials and informational signage. These often

Grow Pittsburgh and WPC have supported more than 107 existing gardens by investing more than \$150,000 in the CGSF, of which the Conservancy has contributed \$56,000.

require professional expertise and the Conservancy has developed relationships with vendors of those items. Occasionally a garden receives funds for a more unusual project, such as beehives for Garden on Gearing in

Beltzhoover, which harvests honey for the community.

Alyssa Kail, community garden sustainability coordinator at Grow Pittsburgh, says WPC staff bring knowledge and relationships with material suppliers, and the partnership helps Grow Pittsburgh stay connected to other environmental organizations. "They have experience working with volunteer groups and garden coordinators, which helps us to fulfill CGSF requests efficiently, supporting as many gardens as possible," Alyssa adds.

The fund also helps garden groups make connections. When representatives from 12 community gardens attended an informational session in March at WPC's Pittsburgh office to learn about the application process, Brian says, "People discussed issues with others who had the same problems, and they were able to help each other."

For more information on the Community Garden Sustainability Fund, contact Brian Charles at bcharles@paconserve.org. ■

Farm Leasing is the Right Choice for Local Farmers



Jake Kristophel co-owns Fallen Aspen Farm with his wife, Desiree, where they sustainably raise livestock and grow organic produce. Their farm is located on WPC's Plain Grove Fens property in Lawrence County.



A DECADE AGO, JAKE KRISTOPHEL AND HIS WIFE, DESIREE, DEFIED THE ODDS AND BECAME NEW FARMERS. ALTHOUGH THEY WERE REARED WITH A FARMING ETHIC, JAKE ADMITS THEY WEREN'T READY FOR THE CHALLENGES OF STARTING OUT IN THE INDUSTRY.



Jake and Desiree's pigs and goats are happy to eat and roam freely on their 57-acre farm.

"It was tough, we endured many challenges and made endless sacrifices," Jake shares. "It's hard work, but we absolutely love what we do."

They co-own Fallen Aspen Farm, a small-scale vegetable, fruit, egg, poultry and livestock operation, located on the Conservancy's Plain Grove Fens Natural Area in Lawrence County where they lease 57 acres. The farm is part of the Conservancy's Farmland Access Initiative that's aimed at leasing available farmland to new farmers or those wishing to increase their capacity.

In operation on the site since October 2014, the farm distributes products through direct sales, including at local restaurants, scheduled farm pick-ups and deliveries in and around the Pittsburgh area.

For example, the East End Food Co-op, located in the Point Breeze section of Pittsburgh, sells three different types of sausage and ground pork ethically raised at Fallen Aspen Farm.

Popular on Facebook and Instagram, Jake and Desiree market their farm with engaging content that showcases product availability, photos of crops and nature around the farm, and updates on farm activities and a few of their popular goats, chickens, pigs and rabbits. As they engage with online customers, which Jake describes as "one of the fun parts of being a farmer," they are also mindful of

New trees start to take root on the 394-acre property that hosts Fallen Aspen Farm.



inspiring others to choose the field of farming. However, for those interested in becoming farmers, he cautions about the importance of financial and business planning.

"Purchasing land and equipment to operate a farm is among the biggest financial challenges most new farmers will face," says Jake. "The option to lease land made farming more attractive and affordable for us, and leasing continues to be the right choice for our small business."

He also encourages new farmers to build a sense of community

with other local farmers as resources and for support.

"Know your market and start small and, from there, perfect that before moving on to the next project for revenue," he advises. "Meet your neighbors or any other farmers in the area, take their advice and don't be afraid to ask for their help. Build a community so you and everyone can be more sustainable and less likely to depend on outside resources."

To learn more about Fallen Aspen Farm and see what products are available for purchase, visit fallenaspennfarm.com. ■

Local Groups Aim to Help New Farmers

SOME MIGHT SAY RICH, FERTILE SOIL AND SEED ARE ALL A NEW FARMER NEEDS TO SUCCESSFULLY START A FARMING OPERATION. BUT, ESTABLISHED FARMERS KNOW THAT HAVING AN OPERATION PLAN, A NETWORK OF SUPPORT AND RESOURCES ARE AMONG THE VERY FIRST NEEDS FOR NEW OR EXPANDING FARMERS.

Farmers should plan for their farm five to 10 years into the future, says Adrienne Nelson, the Western Pennsylvania coordinator for the National Young Farmers Coalition.

Her organization develops resources, training and online tools for young and beginning farmers, including guidebooks on federal programs and regulations, workshops and training sessions. The coalition also provides a cooperatively farmer-owned software application to help solve fundamental marketing challenges.

"By working with farmers for years, we've learned a lot of great things," says Adrienne. "We pass that valuable information to new and beginning farmers." Some of that information includes risk management and environmental considerations, plus discussions on science and innovation in agriculture.

PASA Sustainable Agriculture also works to help share resources to make organic farming easier. PASA recently launched a two-year statewide program, called the Diversified Vegetable Apprenticeship Program, that pairs novice farmers with established farmers.

The two-year program combines paid, on-the-job training with related technical coursework in several disciplines like business management, herd health, dairy nutrition, soil and more.

To explore best practices during current unprecedented challenges, PASA will share lessons learned at a January 2021 virtual sustainable agriculture conference.

"These are difficult times for local farmers and sharing experiences and resources is important now more than ever," says Dan Dalton, who manages educational programming, member outreach and research coordination for PASA in Western Pennsylvania.

In addition to the websites of the organizations listed above, new and expanding farmers can take advantage of resources and checklists on the U.S. Department of Agriculture website, newfarmers.usda.gov. The site also provides information specifically for women, youth and veterans.

Farmers seeking land to farm should contact the Conservancy at 412-288-2777 for more information. ■



WPC Partners to Help Local Families Receive Fresh Food

Staff at Fallingwater distribute food boxes to local residents through a partnership with 412 Food Rescue.

ACCORDING TO THE GREATER PITTSBURGH COMMUNITY FOOD BANK, ONE IN FIVE PITTSBURGHERS AND 14 PERCENT OF ALLEGHENY COUNTY HOUSEHOLDS ARE FOOD INSECURE. FOOD INSECURITY IS DEFINED AS A LACK OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES AND CONSISTENT ACCESS TO ENOUGH FRESH AND HEALTHY FOOD. UNFORTUNATELY, IN THE WAKE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND AN ECONOMIC DOWNTURN, FOOD INSECURITY IS ON THE RISE NATIONALLY.

Although food access and hunger relief is not the Conservancy's primary mission, Conservancy president and CEO Tom Saunders initiated a partnership with 412 Food Rescue, a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit, to use the Fallingwater site as a distribution location for families in need of fresh produce, dairy and meat.

Staff at Fallingwater participate in the distributions. Tom says, "We are so glad we can provide our site and assistance for these food distributions during this difficult time." Since June, Fallingwater has partnered with 412 Food Rescue to help families from Fayette County and beyond. Anyone who needs food can come to the distribution.

Two other Conservancy initiatives help combat food insecurity as well, including the ongoing partnership

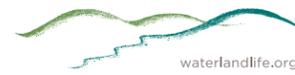


Local residents drove through the Fallingwater campus to receive fresh produce, dairy products and meat.

with Grow Pittsburgh to help establish or sustain community vegetable gardens (see article, page 14), and the farmland access initiative to support farmers who want to supply local fresh foods to the Pittsburgh market (see article, page 6).

"There are many organizations around the region who are doing the day-to-day work to combat this issue in our communities," Tom adds. "We're pleased to be able to partner and offer our resources to help." ■

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy



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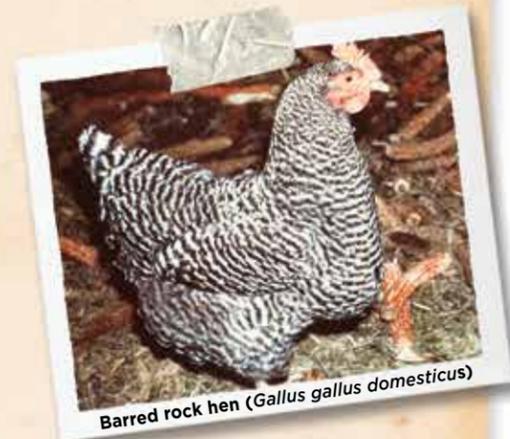
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The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy protects and restores exceptional places to provide our region with clean waters and healthy forests, wildlife and natural areas for the benefit of present and future generations. The Conservancy creates green spaces and gardens, contributing to the vitality of our cities and towns, and preserves Fallingwater, a symbol of people living in harmony with nature.

I Miss Chickens

field notes
by Charles Bier



Barred rock hen (*Gallus gallus domesticus*)

I remember years ago backpacking alone into the Quehanna Wild Area of Central Pennsylvania. That is where I caught my first rattlesnake and experienced my first real dark night sky. As a naturalist, I am rejuvenated and find solitude in wild places. Yet in agrarian landscapes, I find humanity. Frankly, I have been somewhat concerned that alone in a vast forested wilderness I eventually feel lonely. Then again, we did evolve in the savannahs of Africa as social animals, right? And that's how I explain my wilderness angst.

As a child, I had early experiences on farms and grew to enjoy the animals, crop fields, tractors and chores. I tried to help bale hay when I was not much larger than the square bales. I developed a love for farms, which also had a degree of Mother Nature involved. Farms are places where one can engage with important things, like soil, water, crop plants, animals and food, and play a role in relationships and interactions. In many ways the agrarian life is a natural one, too.

So, when I met Terry, my dairy farmer wife-to-be, who was also enthused by wild places, courtship was an easy mix of making maple syrup, milking cows, shearing sheep and organic gardening. There were long nature walks and wilderness backpacking, but also strolls along fence rows and through pastures. And always, there were chickens.

We went on to develop what I called our quasi-homestead. Much of our food was grown or raised. The gardening expanded, there were additions of spinning and weaving, a milk cow or two, and heating with only firewood were all part of life. And, there were always chickens.

In many ways, chickens are the perfect farm animal, especially the heirloom egg-laying breeds. Chickens are small and reside low on the food chain, and eggs are pretty much a perfect food. They are easy to house and chicken manure is a wonderful fertilizer for the garden and fruit trees. Our chickens loved the free-range life and we let them roam the grounds when possible. They savored scratching around to eat lots of bugs, which we considered to be free feed. Chickens also have fewer environmental impacts than other livestock, including in terms of climate change. Caring for chickens is also a meaningful chore to assign to children. Lots of education involved. And you might find out that all of your chickens then have names, like Mr. Piper or Cherry-Chocolate-Chickadee.

Chickens can also be a link between nature and the farm in other ways, albeit some instances a little troubling. On two occasions we had a wintering northern goshawk visit and kill a hen. Well, at least we got excellent looks at that amazing predator as they had their chicken dinner. Then there was the time I looked out the window on a rainy day only to see a red fox making off with one of our chickens. I yelled, "Hey you!" and it dropped the chicken, which quickly scurried under a bush.

Chickens can also strengthen your human relationships. The local corner store appreciated having our eggs to sell at a reasonable price. Friends and family were always pleased to receive the gift of a dozen fresh free-range eggs.

I have not lived with chickens for some years now, but I am always thinking of ordering some chicks and raising up a flock of Rhode Island Reds or Barred Rocks. Yes, I miss chickens, but at least I still have lots of chicken memories. ■

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy



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WaterLandLife.org

**note to printer:
FSC placement**



GIVE BACK TO NATURE THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

Nature has given us endless opportunities to escape our screens and our indoor spaces during this long and trying year. As you think about your year-end charitable giving this holiday season, consider giving back to nature by making a special donation to support the Conservancy. Your gift will help us protect the places you love in Western Pennsylvania.

It's easy to do. You can use the enclosed envelope, or you can give online by clicking "Donate" at WaterLandLife.org. To learn more about membership benefits and giving levels, contact the WPC development office at 1-866-564-6972 or membership@paconserve.org.

**Please make your donation by December 31.
Thank you for making a difference!**

