

Mount Grace and Red Fire Farm: A Whole Farm Affordability Campaign



Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust is Launching the Quiet Phase of a Capital Campaign to Raise \$400,000 for Mount Grace's Purchase of 122 Acres of Montague Farm Land.

Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust's first effort to protect whole farm affordability, the Red Fire Farm Project, addresses the urgent local need for permanently affordable working farms. This innovative conservation project will help establish procedures and a range of models, based on Equity Trust's efforts, that can be applied to other farm conservation projects throughout our region.

Utilizing a land tenure model in which ownership of the farm will be divided, with Mount Grace owning the land and Red Fire Farm owning the farmhouse, barn, and other farm infrastructure, this project addresses current shortcomings in farm conservation options.

By holding farmland as a community resource over the long term, Mount Grace will help ensure that working farms are able to provide the Pioneer Valley with healthy, locally grown food in perpetuity.

Affordable Access to Land and Infrastructure

Secure, affordable access to land is one of the major challenges facing young and entering farmers today. In Massachusetts, the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program (APR) has gone a long way towards making farmland affordable. While APRs can dramatically reduce the cost of agricultural land, there has been no equivalent tool in place to ensure that whole farms, including the necessary buildings and infrastructure, are affordable.

If we are to ensure that our local communities have future access to fresh, locally-grown produce, we must make certain that farmers are able to afford the land and infrastructure they need to run a successful farm business.

High Conservation Values

The project property, located in Montague, contains 45 acres of prime agricultural soils and 79 acres of forest at the confluence of the Sawmill and Connecticut Rivers. This land has some of the best agricultural soils in the world, as well as several barns, greenhouses, an office, and a farm house. The land also includes nearly 1,000 feet of frontage on the Connecticut River, and more than 1,800 feet of frontage on the Saw Mill River. These riparian areas are designated as high priority habitat for rare and endangered species in Massachusetts, including frequently-sighted bald eagles.

Red Fire Farm

Red Fire Farm is a certified organic, mixed vegetable, berry, and flower farm owned and managed by Ryan and Sarah Voiland. Over the last ten years Red Fire Farm has built a thriving organic farm in Granby, Massachusetts. The farm sells primarily through a Community Supported Agriculture program which serves more than 900 shareholders in the communities of the Pioneer Valley as well as the greater Boston area. The farm hosts several yearly festivals, including the popular Tomato Festival, which drew over 1,200 people to the farm last August. *However, the farm's viability is at risk, as they have been operating with only a year-to-year lease on the majority of their farmland.* This land insecurity is unsustainable for the farm business. In response to the continual threat of losing most of their productive farmland to development, Ryan and Sarah acquired the 108-acre former Tuvek farm along the Connecticut River in Montague and the adjacent 14-acre Blue Meadow Nursery property and greenhouses and an unsustainable amount of debt.

The Challenge and a New Model of Ownership

While the Montague farm will meet the growing needs of Red Fire Farm, the high purchase price for each of these prime agricultural properties is driven by its attractiveness as a residential setting and is unsustainable for a farm business. *Without a creative solution, that can be replicated and applied to other farms, the long-term viability of farming in the region will continue to diminish.*

For these reasons, Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust and Red Fire Farm are partnering to pilot a cutting edge model of shared ownership:

Mount Grace will purchase the land from Red Fire Farm to hold as a community resource for long-term public benefit. Red Fire Farm will retain ownership of the farm's built infrastructure including the house, office, barns, and greenhouses and any future improvements. Mount Grace will then lease, at market rates, the farmland back to Red Fire Farm under a 99-year inheritable land-lease that requires the land to be actively farmed by the leaseholder. As the owner of the land, Mount Grace will continue its longstanding practice of paying property taxes to the town at the Chapter 61A, agricultural use rate.

Red Fire Farm will grant Mount Grace a permanent Affordability Restriction, in the form of an Option at Agricultural Value, on the farm infrastructure, ensuring that the buildings are always sold to the next lease-holding farmer for a fair and affordable agricultural price. The land-lease payment will be at market rate as determined by an independent appraisal and will cover all ownership costs.

The Red Fire Farm project is an opportunity for innovation.

While we have conserved 100's of acres of farmland over the past 24 years, this model ushers in a new era of permanently protecting working farms as a community resource.

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“If farms are to be preserved for farmers, they must be kept affordable for farmers. The disturbing reality is that, in many real estate markets today, active farming is dying off because farms are being sold to non-farmers for prices that are not affordable for farmers. This fact is an obvious problem not only for aspiring farmers who are unable to purchase farms but for local communities that have an interest in preserving a viable agricultural economy and access to locally produced food.”

Preserving Farms for Farmers, Equity Trust, Inc., 2009

