



Community Agriculture: Thurber Farm, Brattleboro

Excerpted from *Changed Lives, Strengthened Communities Ten Years of Partnership with the Freeman Foundation* published by the Vermont Land Trust and the Preservation Trust of Vermont in June 2004.

Reprinted with permission from the Vermont Land Trust.

Snow falls heavily on Ames Hill Road in West Brattleboro. Round Mountain rises in a smooth pitch to the north, Ginseng Hill, a bit higher and rougher, to the south. Between the two sits Lilac Ridge Farm, its farmhouses and barns overlooking the white sweep of dormant fields.

Ross Thurber climbs out of his rumbling pickup and crosses the yard to shake hands. He gestures to the upper farmhouse where his mother, Beverly, his wife, Amanda, and the kids are waiting. The snow falls harder as Ross and his father, Stuart, trail me up a winding drive to the house, where a black dog waggles and jumps in the dooryard. Beverly Thurber greets me at the door. Chairs are brought in from other rooms and we all sit at the table holding hot mugs of Good Earth tea.

Stuart Thurber was born on this farm. He explains how his parents bought the first 75 acres in 1937 after five generations of farming in Guilford, a few miles to the south. In 1949, the lower farm was added, increasing the acreage to 275. A year after Beverly and Stuart married, they bought “the Johnson place” across the road, considerably increasing their land base. Ross and Amanda were married in 1996. In 1998 they entered a partnership with Bev and Stu, ensuring their eventual inheritance of the farm. That same year, when a rare opportunity arose, the Thurbers readily seized it.

At the end of Ames Hill Road, 100 acres of woodland known as the Covey Farm had come up for sale. “We weren’t planning to buy land,” says Bev. “Then we found out that developers were looking at it, and suddenly we became quite interested.” A grant from the Freeman Foundation to buy the development rights on the Thurbers’ property not only aided in the purchase of the Covey Farm, but also allowed the family to invest in new facilities and diversify their operation. What’s more, the sale of development rights provided some “peace of mind” for Beverly and Stuart’s retirement years.

Though nearly 600 contiguous acres in all, their farm is small on a 21st century scale. How do they manage? Beverly sums up the success of their diversified farm in a

few precious words: “Communication,” “coordination” and “balance.” Amanda, for example, manages a vegetable and cut flower business and, with her mother-in-law’s help, raises her two young children. In an effort to foster positive relationships within the community, she has also led school groups on interactive sugaring and gardening tours. Beverly takes care of the Christmas trees and the marketing end of the operation, while Ross and Stuart handle most of the milking and sugaring.

They’ve also started delivering flowers and produce directly to the Brattleboro Food Co-op and to local restaurants through the Vermont Fresh Network, which links chefs and farmers all over the state. “It gives you more of a buzz to be able to deliver right into the restaurant or right into the café,” says Ross. “People are very happy and grateful for it. And it’s a direct way to get people to support what we do. That relationship is a lot more satisfying for both parties.”

Stuart notes some of the advantages of offering a diversified product line. The price of vegetables, cut flowers and syrup sold in local markets can be managed independently of broader market trends. Thus, the farmer can set his own prices based on his familiarity with the buyer. Wholesale milk prices, on the other hand, are determined by corporate pricing standards. The Thurbers don’t have to depend solely on numbers they can’t control, and in this way, it has made them more resilient. “You may lose some carrots one year,” says Stuart, with a shrug, “but the whole operation doesn’t fall apart.”

Amanda believes that the Brattleboro community—and their commitment to serving the community—has a lot to do with the farm’s success. Residents have shown their support by shopping at the Saturday farmers’ market in the summer, which has been newly revitalized thanks to the participation of more local producers. The family’s 1,500-tap sugarbush provides ample syrup stock, and their timber, which they cut themselves, is sold to Vermont framers and mills. A trusted source of quality farm products, the Thurbers work hard to uphold this trust. As a result, the community’s connection to agriculture has been strengthened.

Ross stresses the importance of maintaining good relations with neighbors. He explains that, ultimately, conservation in a community means compromise. People have different priorities, backgrounds, beliefs and occupations. In order to make good decisions on behalf of the land, however, we have to set aside some of these differences

and learn to see what we have in common. “You need to have the poets and the plumbers knowing each other,” he says, laughing.

“And within the family, it’s good to have goals in common,” says Amanda, decisively, “to set them out, and revisit them often. Our ethic is to start with a relatively low capital input and a lot of hard work. Then when some idea proves its mettle, it becomes integrated into the whole farm.” Each day, at any given time of year, there are an endless variety of jobs to be done. But the Thurburs welcome the challenges that family and community farming brings.

We are quiet for a moment, watching as Ross and Amanda’s daughter Isabella tries to teach her brother Henry how to walk. Amanda looks at me, and smiles. “Good ideas make new ideas happen.”