Happy Winter! I heard the most inspiring news today from a teacher-farmer here in Massachusetts – they have planted their first seeds of the season on his farm! For those of us on the east coast, that kind of news can almost keep you warm on these 20 degree days.

The Farm-Based Education Association will be three years old in May and there is plenty to celebrate. So many things have evolved in the field of farm-based education and the work we all do has never been more important. As we brace ourselves against the current economic winds, working, productive farms that sustain and nurture people with their food and public programming will continue to be a critical resource for individuals, families, and communities.

Speaking of a critical resource, this year’s NOFA Winter Conference (Northeast Organic Farmers Association) had 300 more attendees than it did last year. Over lunch and some really delicious chocolate, a seasoned teacher-farmer from the Berkshires (and frequent Winter Conference attendee), noted that the crowd at this annual event has never been younger. The increase in attendance seemed to be made up of young people—many fresh out of college. These young adults were looking for a different way to live successfully, mindfully, and responsibly—a better path than the bumpy road of our country’s ailing corporate culture. And here they were exploring farming and farm-based programming!

I hope we will see you at one of our events this year—see the back page for details. Also, keep your eyes open for some exciting new features on our website this spring—think farm-based education 2.0!

Brooke Redmond
Executive Director

P.S. The November Conference announcements and brochures will all be online – we will not be mailing any conference materials. If you don’t occasionally receive e-mail announcements from us and would like to, please send your e-mail address to info@farmbasededucation.org.

The mission of the Farm-Based Education Association is to inspire, nurture and promote farm-based education.
Special Adults, Greener Earth:
Helping the Autistic Population, the Environment, and the Community
by Linda H. Davis

In Massachusetts, and throughout the United States, a care movement is quietly taking place. As parents search for meaningful lives for their adult autistic children, more of them are looking back to the past for the answer, to farming.

The SAGE Crossing Foundation, based in Harvard – SAGE is an acronym for “Special Adults, Greener Earth” – is one of at least two Boston-area groups who have formed 501(c)(3) non-profits to create farmsteads for autistic adults. These groups have been inspired by Bittersweet Farms, in Whitehouse, Ohio, the country’s first farmstead devoted exclusively to the care of autistic adults. Though Bittersweet is going strong after 25 years, and people come from all over the world to study its model, the therapeutic farmstead is still not widely used in this country. Autistic adults tend to live with their families or in group homes, commuting from there to work or to day programs.

So why do anything different? Because autistic people have unique needs. They are often oblivious to danger. Even as adults, they may have to be reminded to look both ways before crossing a street. Many of them cannot take public transportation alone, or work unsupervised. They can be profoundly sensitive to light and sound and crowds. They are, in effect, social misfits. Many of them cannot function well in society. And society’s patience is itself limited.

Rural settings offer a safer, quieter environment and allow many natural opportunities for exercise, which calms the nervous system. Farm work is purposeful. It shows meaningful results — the egg gathered from the chicken ends up on your plate at breakfast.

The daily contact with animals is also highly therapeutic to people with autism. This is something that the horse community, and others who work with animals, have long understood. At Drumlin Farm in Lincoln, MA, a working farm and wildlife sanctuary with miles of walking trails, special needs groups are also served. Sally Farrow, a teacher-naturalist at Drumlin, notes that the benefits of farms to the autistic population are not always immediately evident, but are a wonderful learning environment. Sometimes, an autistic person’s first encounter with a barn stops him: it’s dark inside, full of strange smells and sounds. But when the experience is repeated, the person with autism becomes comfortable. And animals “seem to sense that autistic people are different. An animal that would ordinarily pull back will just stay put.”

“Farm work is purposeful. It shows meaningful results — the egg gathered from the chicken ends up on your plate at breakfast.”

A SAGE Foundation student feeds an eager goat to the autistic person, who otherwise often spends his or her days in a sheltered workshop where performing the same, repetitious task reinforces his or her isolation. Farms, in fact, provide almost limitless opportunities to adapt the environment to the needs of an autistic individual.

“For this unique population”, says Sally, “who don’t understand social subtleties, and can’t read signals, animals become an ‘intermediary’, a bridge to the human world”.

The presence of animals can work effects greater than any medication. Boo McDaniel, who has been operating the Pony Farm and Horse Power in Temple, New Hampshire for 37 years, recently described a photograph she took of a “very involved” (a term used to describe the level of one’s disability) autistic girl, who is prone to eating dirt, in a rare moment of calm as a rabbit lay against her face. The rabbit’s soothing effect on this girl “astonished everyone” at the Pony Farm.

Amanda Hogan is the Executive Director of the 200-year-old Windrush Farm, a therapeutic equitation facility in Boxford, Massachusetts, which serves not only the autistic population but veterans of the Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. She talked about the transformation of autistic riders on night rides – something that terrifies the other disabled equestrians. When the light fades, and the riding days get shorter, riders are ushered into a fluorescent-lighted arena...
Bringing Local Farm Food to the Mouths of Our Youth: Building the National Farm to School Network

by Dana Hudson

What better way to increase farm-based education and consumption of local farm fresh foods than to get these foods into school cafeterias? Not only does it advance the local food movement and the connection to local farms, it also has long-term health benefits for our children. This great idea has really caught on around the country, and Farm to School projects and activities are rapidly growing in number and size. There are now over 2,000 projects in 40 states, serving youth in urban, suburban and rural communities. Moreover, with the development of the National Farm to School Network, these communities are now speaking with a unified voice.

But it’s no easy task! Farm to School projects are trying to address the many complexities of our food distribution infrastructure as well as the complexities of personal taste. Growing, moving, processing, preparing, serving, and eating food all have to be considered in a comprehensive program. And we’ve learned that educating students with and about local foods is important for them to accept new flavors. Schools are taking kids to the farms, cooking with them in the classroom, growing school gardens, and even cooking and serving food alongside school food service personnel to increase the chances of successful integration of local foods.

Many states are identifying the benefits of Farm to School programs; 18 have passed legislation to support it. Some laws establish state positions to coordinate Farm to School efforts, others develop incentive programs or mandates. These states include California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maryland, Montana, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington.

National legislation is also starting to reflect the grassroots Farm to School movement. The recent Farm Bill has a grant program for community food projects and clarifying language for giving geographic preference to local farms who bid on school contracts. The Farm Bill also expanded funding for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program that many states are using to get local foods in schools. Efforts are underway to include expanded programs for school gardens and Farm to School in the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act that is up for renewal in 2009.

Dana Hudson
Northeast Regional Lead of the National Farm to School Network and founding board member of the FBEA.
Principles of Living Systems

We use the phrase “living systems” as a metaphor, to represent an animate arrangement of parts and processes that continually affect each other over time. There are living systems at all scales, from the smallest plankton, to the human body, to the planet as a whole.

Interdependence: Living systems are made up of interconnected relationships, in which each partner affects and often needs the other.

Systems Integrity: A system is “whole” or it has “integrity” when all the parts and processes essential to its ability to function are present. In living systems, it matters how the parts and processes are arranged (that’s why you don’t get two cows if you cut a cow in half).

Feedback: Living systems are made up of circular processes that create stability by counteracting or lessening change (balancing feedback) or growth or decay by amplifying or reinforcing change (reinforcing feedback).

Biodiversity: Living systems depend on the variety, complexity, and abundance of species to be healthy and resilient.

Cooperation and Partnership: In living systems, species exchange energy and resources through a continual cooperation and partnership.

Living Cycles: A cycle is a circular process that repeats over and over, frequently returning to where it began. The water, nitrogen, carbon and other cycles sustain life, circulate resources, and provide opportunities for renewal.

Rightness of Size (or Optimal Size): The proportions of living systems—their bigness or smallness and their built-in limitations to growth— influence a system’s stability and sustainability.

Waste = Food: In living systems, waste from one system becomes food for another. All materials in nature are valuable, continuously circulating in closed loops of production, use, and recycling.

This is only a partial list of enduring understandings related to Living Systems. For other key concepts, go to www.farmbasededucation.org.

In the last 15 years, a growing number of schools in the U.S. and worldwide have begun in earnest to teach students to think about systems — rather than fragments — as the context for exploring complex problems, and for fostering more intentional decision making about the natural world. According to the 150 educator-authors of Benchmarks for Scientific Literacy, thinking about systems — “thinking about a whole in terms of its parts, and, about how the parts relate to one another and to the whole” — is an essential element of scientific literacy that should be mastered by the time students graduate from high school. An increasing number of schools around the country, including several State Departments of Education, are embedding systems concepts into “Education for Sustainability” (EFS) — learning that promotes understanding of the interconnectedness of the environment, economy, and society — and are requiring EFS be included in middle school science standards.

How can farm-based education foster systems literacy? When we become systems literate, we do three things:

1. We see systems, the whole and its parts and processes, as the context for decision making and learning. (We make visible the connections among the chickens, the manure, the soil, the crops, the farmer, etc.)

2. We develop enduring understandings of the principles that guide living systems (see side bar).

3. We approach both simple and complex systems with what educator Art Costa calls “habits of mind” — characteristics of what intelligent people do when confronted with problems whose resolutions are not immediately apparent. For instance, we may begin to anticipate unintended consequences by tracing loops of cause and effect, always asking “what will happen next?” (For more related “habits of mind,” see www.lindabooth-sweeney.net/thinking/habits).

Farms Are Living Systems

A living system is an animate arrangement of parts and processes that continually affect one another over time. Not everything is a system though. If you divide a heap of bricks in half, what do you get? Two heaps. The collection of bricks are a heap, not a system. What do you get if you cut a cow in half? Ask any child over four this question and see what they say. Most children know that you don’t get two cows. Living systems have an integrity; the parts matter, and the way the parts are arranged matters. The great American conservationist Aldo Leopold brought our attention to this integrity when he called for “intelligent tinkering” with the natural world:

The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: “What good is it?” If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.

When we understand what constitutes a living system, we also see that our families, communities, organizations, and farms are all living systems. The parts of a farm are the farmer, animals, crops, insects, soil, weather, and more that are connected to and nested in each other. The farm is part of a larger food production system that includes natural and human resources, waste, food processing, distributors and consumers.

Farmers and farm-based educators can join another living system, a system of learning and teaching, in which students, teachers and other visitors discover how a farm is not a set of interesting but disconnected parts, but a living system nested within larger systems. Farmers know this well. With a little help and a few ideas, they can be remembering what they already know, and then helping young people to make connections beyond the farm, to their everyday lives.

Taking a First Step

Most of us were not taught in school to “think about systems.” Traditional schooling has tended to separate the material world from the social world, reinforcing the notion that knowledge is made up of many unrelated parts. Growing up, I was taught the best way to understand a subject was to analyze it or break it up into parts. I wasn’t taught in school to see systems of multiple causes, effects and unintended
imparts. Yet these are the some of the skills our children will need to build healthy food systems, navigate inter-dependent financial systems and deal with issues of global impact such as climate change. Without these skills, we continue to operate from crisis to crisis, stuck on the problem solving treadmill, where our “solutions” often only create more problems or make the original problem worse.

“The journey of a thousand leagues begins with a single step.” So said Lao Tzu, the famous Chinese Taoist philosopher. Where do we begin? Rather than seeing the farm as a collection of unrelated pieces, how will you encourage, or continue to encourage your visitors to understand how the parts of your farm work together and how your farm is connected to and nested within other systems? How will you use the vibrant and enriching context of the farm, to encourage a child’s natural inclination to look for connections on the farm and among, nature, people, problems, and events? However you choose to encourage systems literacy, please share your ideas with others in the FBEA network. Your fellow farmer-educators and future generations will be grateful that you did!

Acknowledgements: I interviewed several farmer-educators, including Rebecca Gilbert (Native Earth Teaching Farm), Verena Wieloch (Gaining Ground), and Edie and Tom Sisson (Drumlin Farm) for this article. Many thanks for your generous contributions.

Linda Booth Sweeney, Ed.D. is a systems educator, researcher, and writer dedicated to helping people of all ages learn to embed everyday decisions with deeper understanding of living systems principles.

Find three systems-thinking activities at FBEA’s website: www.farmbasededucation.org to do with visitors to your farm, and learn more about Linda Booth Sweeney and systems education.

Hope is at the Root in Winter
by Phoebe Garfinkel, Food Systems Coordinator at Shelburne Farms and Board Member for the Vermont Fresh Network

There is no question that eating locally in northern latitudes gets more challenging as the temperature drops: here in Vermont our fields experience a deep freeze and animals huddle in the barns to keep warm. But just because your garden is asleep doesn’t mean you should abandon all hope! There are still plenty of sweet, nutritious root vegetables to enjoy as the winds howl. The following recipe, adapted from Cooking with Shelburne Farms: Food and Stories from Vermont, is just one way to enjoy a crisp mouthful of vegetables in the cold months. Served as a side dish to nearly any sautéed or broiled meat or fish, this dish reminds us of just how good local can taste.

Cellaring roots is one of the best ways to make sure you and your family can enjoy the benefits of local, farm-raised food throughout the winter. Some root cellars are fancy, stone-built rooms, but your vegetables don’t need such special treatment. A cool, dark room with high humidity will do the trick. It is too late to cellar roots this year, but my guess is that your local farmer has stashed away some of the fall harvest. Go ahead and ask—she just may sell you a 10 pound bag of mixed roots. For more information on root cellaring, see Elliot Coleman’s book, Four Season Harvest.

Phoebe Garfinkel lives at 44.476N where she enjoys cooking, eating and cross-country skiing when the temperature begins to plunge.

Recipe: Winter Root Slaw
from Cooking with Shelburne Farms: Food and Stories from Vermont used by permission of Viking Studio (Penguin Group USA). Copyright Melissa Pasanen and Shelburne Farms, 2007.

1 ½ cup crème fraîche
2 ½ Tbsp. cider vinegar
1 Tbsp. + 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
1 tsp. sugar
1 tsp. coarse kosher salt plus more to taste
3-4 small parsnips (about ¾ lbs.), trimmed and peeled
3 medium carrots (about ½ lbs.), trimmed and peeled
1 small celery root (celeriac, about ¼ lbs.)
6 scallions, white and light green parts only, thinly sliced

1. In a large serving bowl, whisk together the crème fraîche, cider vinegar, mustard, sugar and salt.
2. Cut the parsnips and carrots into 2-inch matchsticks, or grate on a box grater. As you cut or grate them, add the vegetables to the dressing and toss to coat.
3. Using a sharp knife or very good peeler, peel the knobby skin from the celery root and cut or grate per above. Add the celery root to the dressing and toss to coat.
4. Toss in scallions. Refrigerate at least 1 hour and up to 2 days. Before serving, adjust seasoning to taste.

FBEA in Edutopia Magazine!
Edutopia.org recently featured the Farm-Based Education Association in an article by Bernice Yeung, titled, “Cultivating Minds: Food-Related Curricula Take Root Nationwide.” Link to the full article from the Publication Resource Page of the FBEA website, or at: www.edutopia.org/food-school-garden-farm-curriculum. The article was published November 5, 2008 © Edutopia.org. The George Lucas Educational Foundation.

Everybody Eats! Find Your Local Farm: Volunteers from the Farm School, the Food Project, the FBEA, the Minute Man National Historical Park, and Gaining Ground volunteered at the summer Bruce Springsteen Concert at Foxboro stadium.
The Symbiosis of the Educational Farm and the Conservation Commission: Land’s Sake and the Town of Weston, Massachusetts

by Grey Lee

Land’s Sake is an educational farm in Weston, MA, operating on town land since 1980. Most people know us as the main farm where we have a retail farm stand, CSA distribution tent, and where we host many educational tours. Less visible to the public are our educational programs at schools and other work sites, as well as our forestry work: tending to trails, harvesting firewood in the winter, our maple program, and our land care branch. Staff members offer ecological horticulture services for private and institutional clients and maintain open space on behalf of the town. We enjoy a close relationship with the Town Government through the Conservation Commission, which oversees a contract we bid on and have won for many years. Many people consider the farm the “heart of Weston” and a keystone in maintaining a country atmosphere in this suburban landscape.

In the contractual arrangement, Land’s Sake has a license to raise vegetables and run a farm stand on one 40-acre parcel most commonly identified as Land’s Sake, and to cultivate three other public parcels of farmland in other parts of town. Under the contract, the Town pays us for raising up to 22,000 pounds of vegetables for distribution to the needy. We are also reimbursed for providing educational work on the farm to local children in our summer program. Land’s Sake maintains the public park-like grounds of the main farm, which once was a private arboretum, and mows several public fields around town to keep them open and beautiful. In a separate contract, we manage a maple syrup operation where we pay youth to help us collect and process sap and are reimbursed for a certain amount of expenses related to sugaring. (See chart for a summary of this contract.) In yet another arrangement, we are licensed to use a small town-owned farmhouse as staff housing, office space, and as a base of operations.

The Conservation Commission of Weston is a seven-member volunteer board that oversees the town’s conservation land and administers the Wetlands Protection Act on behalf of the Board of Selectmen. Much of their time is spent working with property owners to ensure best practices and protection of wetlands during building projects. They have one paid staff administrator but no grounds staff. Through the contract with Land’s Sake, the Commission is able to ensure their domains are well tended, and at a relative discount from what it would cost if Town employees were to perform the work. By having an educational non-profit maintain a working landscape that brings the public onto the land for events, programming and shopping, the Commission ensures that the benefits of protected land are leveraged into actual experiences by members of the community.

Land’s Sake and the Weston Conservation Commission have worked together for almost 30 years, which has demanded tremendous institutional support by the individual Commissioners who see the benefits of working with an outside party. Land’s Sake takes care of staffing, equipment and other infrastructure issues and the Commission has cost-effective and efficient control over what gets done and when. Land’s Sake appreciates a landlord who would otherwise leave their land in a state of static custody. As a community-serving non-profit, it would be otherwise impossible to afford market-rate rents and concurrently provide educational outreach based on vegetable production and land management. The community enjoys numerous benefits: the beauty of the working landscape, a farm dedicated to educating people about agriculture, ecology and local history, and well managed and welcoming public land for recreational and aesthetic purposes.

As the community farm movement gains traction, we are happy to share our story with those exploring similar scenarios in their own communities.

Grey Lee is the Executive Director of Land’s Sake and is a founding board member of the FBEA.
Farm-Based Education: A Global Snapshot
Learning about Rural History and Culture in Tuscany
by Erin Cinelli

As you turn off the main road and begin to climb the long driveway up to the Castello complex at Spannocchia, keep an eye out for flashes of white and black striped animals. You may see one of our Cinta Senese pigs, one of the heritage breeds of farm animals raised by the Tenuta di Spannocchia, a 1,100-acre organic agricultural estate nestled in the Montagnola Senese region of Tuscany, just south of the medieval city of Siena. Spannocchia has been owned by just two families throughout its history, the Spannocchi family—one of the prominent banking families in Siena in the early Renaissance—and the Cinelli family, the owners since 1925. After the Italian government abolished the Mezzadria tenant farming system in the 1950’s, the Cinelli family decided to convert Spannocchia into an educational center. The first visiting students in the 1960’s focused on Etruscan archaeology, but current visitors can get a glimpse of all aspects of Tuscan rural culture and sustainable agriculture. The Spannocchia Foundation, a US-based non-profit that raises funds through its membership to support education and enrichment activities offered at the Castello, was founded in 2002 to encourage global dialogue about sustaining cultural landscapes for future generations through the example of Tenuta di Spannocchia.

There are activities at Spannocchia to suit all tastes and interests. We offer weekly tours of the Cinta Senese pork production operation, which includes visits to the animal enclosures and seasonal farrowing areas, the salumi production kitchen, and the meat curing room. (Salumi is an umbrella term for traditional Italian salt-cured pork products like prosciutto, pancetta, salami, lardo, soppressata, etc.) The tour concludes with a guided tasting of Spannocchia’s organic salumi products. Participants learn about our efforts to preserve traditional methods of farming, our commitment to organic agriculture, and the role that Spannocchia Foundation members play in supporting our efforts to preserve heritage farm animal breeds.

We also offer guided tours of our vegetable production operation, including the kitchen garden, fruit orchard, and large-scale production plots. These tours focus on explaining our efforts to produce vegetables for our kitchen in a sustainable, integrated way, using the resources available to us from our land and the Mediterranean climate, including a discussion about composting at Spannocchia.

Weekly cooking classes feature Spannocchia products and traditional Tuscan recipes prepared under the guidance of long-time Spannocchia chef, Loredana Betti. Classes include a tour of the garden, instruction in the preparation of a four-course luncheon, and recipes of the items prepared. Participants enjoy the fruits of their labor at the end of the class, along with organic wine and vin santo produced at Spannocchia. Loredana grew up at Spannocchia in the 1950’s when she and her family were tenant farmers on the property. As a young girl, she learned how to prepare the traditional fare of the region and eventually developed a talent notable even in this area, where almost everybody seems capable of culinary magic!

For local residents, the Castello hosts seasonal festivals, including a May Day celebration with traditional songs and music to welcome spring, guided nature tours several times a year, and fattoria didattica (educational farm) programs for local school children of all ages. We have hosted members of the Farm-Based Education Association at Spannocchia over the years. Some have been regular guests looking for a vacation that would be relaxing and inspiring at the same time, while others have been long-term collaborators, such as the Farm School, which sends its apprentice farmers to Spannocchia for several weeks each February to learn about cultivating vegetables in a Mediterranean climate while western Massachusetts is still covered in a cold layer of snow. We have also hosted FBEA members at Spannocchia around the time of Slow Food’s Terra Madre gathering — many attendees try to expand their trip to Italy to explore different regions, and visit producers in regions outside of Turin, where Slow Food is based. It is a wonderful opportunity for us to show what we are doing at Spannocchia to visitors who really understand and appreciate our activities! We also offer opportunities for 1-2 week volunteer stays, which have proved to be very popular, and fill up quickly with travelers interested in being part of a community and contributing to life on the farm during their travels in Italy.

There are many ways to visit Spannocchia—we offer farmhouse rentals, a bed and breakfast, an internship program for young adults interested in learning about sustainable agriculture, volunteering for a week or two on the farm, or daily visits for those interested in exploring the property on their own or hiking on our many trails and farm roads. Just remember to keep an eye out for the pigs foraging in the woods!

Erin Cinelli is the Executive Director of the Spannocchia Foundation and is a founding board member of the FBEA.
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Upcoming Events
More details at: www.farmbasededucation.org

APRIL 18–19, 2009
Workshop & Farm Tours: “Farming & the Arts”
Hawthorne Valley Farm, Ghent, NY
This two-day workshop will focus on how to incorporate the arts and artistic interpretation into the public programs and overall ethos of farm-based education. It will include: breakout sessions on creative arts on the farm (literature, poetry, music, painting, fiber arts, etc.), facilitated discussions on how farm-based education programs use creativity and imagination to make meaning and cultivate knowledge in their educational and service-oriented programming, and tours of area farm-based programs.

NOVEMBER 12–15, 2009
The Farm-Based Education Conference
Hosted by Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, with events at the Doubletree Hotel, Tarrytown (35 miles north of NYC). The conference will feature a keynote speaker, workshops, great local food, entertainment and tours of public access farms in the region. This year’s conference is made possible through the generous support of our sponsors, including the 1772 Foundation, preserving and enhancing American historical entities for future generations to enjoy. www.1772foundation.org. Questions? contact info@farmbasededucation.org

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