

The Farm Institute's Pilot Parcels Project

Final Report for CNE12-098

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation

Funds awarded in 2012: \$14,520.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2013

Region: Northeast

State: Massachusetts

Project Leader:

[Jonathan Previant](#)

The Farm Institute

Project Information

Summary:

Pilot Parcels Project Summary

The Pilot Parcels Project at The Farm Institute (TFI) on Martha's Vineyard made small plots available to five farmers to experiment with new crops or growing processes. Pilot Parcels provided participants with a small stipend to purchase seeds and equipment, access to water, soil preparation and both on site consulting and formal training sessions. The project solicited participants by newspaper coverage and word of mouth and had seven applicants for the five one acre plots offered. These included a CSA market garden, a cut flower garden, an exploration of stone amendments to a plot of potatoes and beans, a trial plot of oilseed crops and a market garden growing heirloom vegetables and grain crops. The latter two experiments were not sustained due to weed influx and summer job pressure. Three of the plots were considered successful, and two reported doing better than breaking even financially. In addition to the five tenants, a smaller plot was created for a group from the Vineyard Community Supports (VCS) to experiment with a garden plot. VCS is a group that supports adults with disabilities on Martha's Vineyard. This was a very successful exploration and plans are underway to expand this project next year.

Two educational events were presented in the fall and well attended by both the Pilot Parcels participants by many additional Vineyard. These were in collaboration with other agriculture organizations and were considered a great success.

Project Objectives:

The overall goal of the project was to explore the impact of providing low risk access to land and support for innovative farm enterprises where agriculture competes with high-end vacationers for resources. Additional goals were to assess whether this effort is a good use of Katama Farm resources and whether TFI can continue to support and expand community use of its leased land.

Measurable goals were as follows:

To provide the opportunity for farmers to assess the sustainability of innovative

crops or processes in an area of restricted access to farmland.

There is no question that the use of Pilot Parcels project answered many important questions for the 5 people who were chosen from the 7. The reports on three of the projects are attached and are also described in the newsletter attached under the outreach section. For the two projects not able to fully complete their projects, one lesson is just how big a commitment an acre of land really is. For these projects, the need to make a living versus exploring the possibility of making a living from a piece of land didn't work. We all learned from their efforts to try this.

To assess whether the project provides ideas for more productive use of the Katama farmland to help meet the Island's goals of food self-sufficiency.

The Farm Institute learned many lessons from this project. If we can encourage experienced growers to use our land and share both their expertise and perhaps some of their crops or a modest rent, it makes sense to have these kinds of tenants. Our summer camp, of 100 children each week, and a heavy livestock operation makes it very difficult to maintain small garden crops for sale to visitors or for a market. Watching the techniques used by Teri, growing flowers, and Lily and her CSA garden, were a great part of our curriculum for both campers and visitors. In addition Pat's experiment with soil amendments made us think ahead to our plans for pasture improvements in the future. We are also very interested in developing oil seed and grain crops on our land but realize we have work to do on weed control before this will be possible.

To assess whether TFI can support the continuing or expanding of this Pilot Parcels project.

We feel the Pilot Parcels model can become a continued part of our operations. Lily and Teri are both planning on returning to plots and we will welcome them. In addition, we are making almost an acre available to Vineyard Community Supports program for people with disabilities. They are raising funds to build more raised beds and will be out with the other farmers next year. This unanticipated project enhances not just agricultural goals, but our goals for being an inclusive program and exposing our visitors and campers to people with disabilities working along side nondisabled partners to raise food.

Measurable Goals;

1. At least 7 farmers will apply for 5 plots. Seven people did apply for the 5 plots chosen. We were surprised there weren't more applicants given the common theme that there is a shortage of land for farming. Our notice perhaps went out somewhat late. We are also finding that conservation groups and private owners are beginning to make small acreages available for livestock and gardening projects which may be helping this situation as well.

2. At least two of the Pilot Parcels projects will break even financially, not counting the unpaid labor of the participants and not including the \$500 stipend in either the income or as a deduction from expenses.

From their final reports, two of the projects did better than break even. Lily Walter kept the best records and ended up with \$4500 profit. We would deduct our \$500 contribution to her expenses, but she still did better than break even. Teri's budget report showed a \$2500 profit, meaning \$2000 with TFI's contribution. However she still had inventory to be distributed including dried flowers so she would be in the break-even category.

3. Support provided by TFI and the consultation expertise provided will be related to positively by participants.

We were only able to get responses from Teri and Lily, but the responses were very high. Next year we will also make sure to get reviews from attendees at the events.

- [Lily Budget Report](#)
- [Teri Budget Report](#)

Introduction:

Pilot Parcels Introduction

The Farm Institute is a 200-acre working farm on the Vineyard's Katama plains. With only 900 of the Island's 47,000 acres in food production, the demand for local grown products is strong and expanding. However there are great barriers to farmers trying to advance the goal of food self-sufficiency, not the least is access to land and cost of production. There is not a lot of room for experimentation. Crops must pay, and for the most part the pay comes from summer clientele. The Farm Institute was able to carve out part of its acres to offer to new farmers or farmers needing to expand and experiment with new crops. The support from NESARE allowed this to be a no low-risk proposition, with the grant and farm staff providing financial and labor support, and water, as well as both casual and more formal education. See map of area used for the Pilot Parcels project.

- [Pilot Parcels Aerial map](#)

Research

Materials and methods:

The methods used in carrying out the Pilot Parcels Project are covered in the following diary kept by the project coordinator, Garden Manager Rebecca Sanders.

Feb 2012

- Grant is awarded mid-month
- Meet with project director Jon Previant to discuss details of the grant including possible sites, possible participants and projects we'd like to see undertaken
- Site selection takes place and the 1-acre plots in the field are staked
- Press releases go out to island papers and the website
- The invitation and application is shared with the public

March 2012

- Soil samples from field plots are collected and mailed to University of Massachusetts for testing
- Applications are received and reviewed by farm staff
- Field tours and interviews take place with all applicants
- Participants are selected and notified
- Participant orientation takes place to assign plots, review farm policies and grant expectations, and assess tool, equipment and irrigation needs

April 2012

- Lease / grant contracts signed by participants
- Soil test results received and shared with participants
- Initial disking of the field plots takes place
- Additional disking and tilling completed 10 days later
- Fencing workday to install 3-D deer fencing around field

- Irrigation system is put into place: water lines laid out
- Lily and Pat begin work on their plots immediately; Lily building her no-till raised beds, and Pat amending the soil with mineral rock powders

May 2012

- Lily works daily on her plot, along with her 2 assistants, on the no-till and reduced till beds, planting seedlings, and tilling her control section with her walk behind tractor
- Pat present regularly to plant and tend sweet potatoes, fava beans
- Anna and Dan here on weekends to tend their plot: they place several hives and 2 bee colonies at the center of their acre
- Alex and Katrina order sunflower seeds and lime
- Teri begins building her flowerbeds with her rototiller
- Remainder of Pat's plot (7/8ths of the acre) tilled a 2nd time as the weeds are becoming problematic

June 2012

- Lily's plot fully planted and she is now running her business "Slip Away Farm" from her 1 acre piece. She harvests regularly for her CSA and the West Tisbury market
- Pat here several times to check up on his sweet potatoes and fava beans and do Brix testing
- Anna and Dan plant tomatoes and set up sprinklers on their plot
- Alex and Katrina's entire plot is tilled again with the rotovator as they have not begun planting and the weeds are well established
- Teri begins drip tape installation and planting of flower seedlings in $\frac{1}{4}$ of her plot
- $\frac{3}{4}$ of Teri's plot is tilled again as she has not been able to complete planting and weed pressure is very high
- Perimeter of 4-acre field is mowed for easier access to the plots
- Alex and Katrina spread 2800 lbs. of lime across their entire plot and begin to lay drip tape irrigation

July 2012

- Deer fencing is removed from 4 acre field as it has become overgrown with weeds, has proven difficult to maintain, and the deer pressure is minimal
- Perimeter of 4-acre field is mowed again
- Lily continues her tilling experiment and her planting and harvesting with success
- Pat harvests sweet potatoes (more Brix testing) and plants cowpeas
- Anna and Dan seldom present after cultivating and planting a circular section in the center of their plot ($\frac{1}{12}$ th of the acre)
- Alex and Katrina spread 2800 lbs. of lime across their entire plot and begin to lay drip tape irrigation
- Teri completes with planting $\frac{1}{2}$ of her acre plot and is here on a daily basis to tend and harvest her flowers. The other $\frac{1}{2}$ of her acre is tilled a final time, and her cover cropping experiment begins
- First invoice for expenses submitted to NESARE and first round of participant reimbursements takes place

August 2012

- Lily continues to work daily with her assistants on her tilling experiment in her highly productive acre
- Pat has finished his work in the field
- Anna and Dan not present this month
- Alex and Katrina have completed laying drip tape and succeed in planting roughly 200 feet of a single row of sunflower seeds
- Teri continues to be here daily and successfully grows and harvests large quantities

of cut flowers while assessing the effects of cover cropping in between the rows
-Planning and preparation begins for our 1st Pilot Parcels workshop

September 2012

- Lily and Teri continue to be a daily presence – and a great asset – to the busy farm.
- Pat provides data from the results of his mineralization experiment
- Alex and Katrina, and Anna and Dan, not present at the farm this month
- The first pilot parcel workshop: “ The Bio- Extensive Farm – An Evening with David Fisher” takes place at the Ag Hall in West Tisbury to the great satisfaction of the viewers. Roughly 35 people are in attendance for this slide show and discussion, which entails weed management, cover cropping and draft horsepower on the working farm.

October 2012

- Lily and Teri continue to work their plots until late in the month
- Alex and Katrina return to remove drip tape from their plot
- Cleanup of irrigation equipment in the field takes place
- Second invoice of expenses submitted to NESARE

November 2012

- Lily and Teri finish work in their plots and remove remaining fencing and irrigation equipment from the fields
- Planning and preparation begins for the 2nd Pilot Parcels workshop

December 2012

- The second Pilot Parcels workshop: “The BioNutrient Rich Crop Production Workshop” with Derek Christianson takes place at the Ag Hall in West Tisbury, once again, to an attentive audience of farmers and home gardeners. Nearly 30 people are in attendance and express great interest in the topics covered: mainly soil chemistry and making mineral amendments to improve soil fertility
- Lily, Pat and Teri submit final reports on the success of their pilot parcel projects
- Lily and Teri express an interest in returning to the farm next summer to continue their projects. We are exploring arrangements to make this possible.
- Second round of participant reimbursements are made
- Year-end report, third and final invoice of expenses, and final report and project publication being prepared.

Research results and discussion:

The mission of TFI is to educate and engage children and adults in sustainable agriculture through the diverse activities of a working farm. The Pilot Parcels Project was a big step forward in establishing TFI as an island-wide resource for farmers and gardeners interested in sustainable food production.

The two public educational events were well attended, and partnering with the Martha’s Vineyard Agricultural Society and Island Grown Initiative on the second event was symbolic of the collaborations that are critical for this very small farm community.

While not all five projects were successfully completed, the lessons learned were important to share. One critical lesson is that a one-acre plot farmed with modest equipment is a great deal of work. New farmers and gardeners may not be fully aware of this, and TFI in the future would need to help potential tenants understand the labor involved; even something as concrete as walking diagonally across the one-acre plot to firmly grasp the size of it. An additional lesson is that stipend money provided to participants as a reimbursement for expenses as incurred may have stifled some motivation. Stipend money offered at the end of the grant period

might be more effective in encouraging participants to complete their projects and turn in their final reports.

TFI is a year round destination for the Island schools, youth organizations, tourists, conservation groups and the 1000 children aged 5 to 15 who attend the farm's summer camp. The Pilot Parcels, located along the road to the farm, served not just as an experiment for the tenants, but as an educational display for all these visitors. Workers on the plots always stopped to explain what they were doing and welcomed questions. The projects were part of daily tours offered in the summer and there was great interest in what was being done.

One unexpected outcome with important implications was the relationship that developed between TFI and the Seven Hills disability program on the Vineyard. Originally, a direct care staff member applied to work a full acre with four or five of the adults in the program. It was eventually decided that a smaller scale project with better accessibility would be more appropriate. The group instead worked within the farm's teaching garden, "The Friendship Garden", and tended both a 20 x 20 plot and a large wheelchair accessible raised bed. The project was a great success and advanced the strategic goal of the Farm to improve access for people with disabilities. The plots were well managed and showed how productive a small garden can be. The Seven Hills group distributed produce to elder services agencies and other nonprofits. Plans are underway to expand the program to a full acre in 2013 and become part of the farmers market. TFI will help raise funds to build raised beds in the plot and the Seven Hills program will include working at the farm in their Individual Program Plans as part of the vocational education component.

We feel Lily Walter was a great example of what it takes to make a one-acre project successful, and also, given her particular stamina and organizational abilities, how hard it can be anyway. Lily is going to take over a small farm on Chappaquiddick with a CSA and community store that she has achieved through a partnership with the Martha's Vineyard Landbank. Her year at TFI gave her a lot of experience in make that possible. Since she still has difficulty in finding really tillable land, she will continue to use an acre of TFI grant as a tenant farmer.

Participation Summary

Education & Outreach Activities and Participation Summary

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

The Pilot Parcels project did an excellent job with publications and outreach for the project. We feel this benefited not just TFI and the participants, but also allowed conservation groups and private citizens to learn about the project. From the beginning, both weekly publications, The Vineyard Gazette and the Martha's Vineyard Times took an interest in the project and in some of the participants specifically. We used both posters at local facilities, our website and newspaper notices to advertise the educational events and they were both well attended. Our final dissemination piece goes to members of the Agricultural Society, Conservation groups on the Island and to individual farmers who have supported the project. See attached samples of our final dissemination product and newspaper coverage of the project.

- [Pilot Parcels Dissemination Report](#)
- [MV Times Story](#)
- [Plotting her future](#)
- [Vineyard Supports Article](#)

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

See Above

Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

Potential Contributions

See other sections

Future Recommendations

Project Coordinator Rebecca Sanders has provided comment on the lessons learned from our first Pilot Parcels year.

Our focus in bringing Pilot Parcels to the community was to attract innovative and experimental projects that would teach us more about efficient ways to grow food and conserve resources. Participants engaged in projects that included both growing non-traditional crops as well as using alternative approaches to soil fertility and water conservation. The project was a success in that it gave growers an opportunity they may not have had otherwise, and valuable knowledge and insight was gained through their work.

These are some lessons that I learned from managing the Pilot Parcels and hope to share with other farmers interested in undertaking a project such as this one.

One acre is big, too big for folks who have never farmed before. An acre also can't be a part time project, a problem for Vineyarders who need to make a living in the summer. In order to avoid setting people up for failure, it's good to start small.

Prepare the soil well in advance. We got a late start and it proved to be problematic. The soil should be disked and the seedbed prepped so participants can get into their plots by mid April.

Soil samples should be taken as early as possible so amendments can be made before planting begins. Our test results showed that the pH of the plots was low to start with (5.9) and lacking in phosphorous and certain trace minerals.

Weed pressure was very intense, and had a cover crop gone in at the outset of the growing season, the problem would have been more manageable.

The group process works. We all benefitted from each other. Pat taught everyone how to use the refractometer. Alex shared his truck with us during our workday. Anna and Dan brought their beehives and set them up in their plot. Teri was expert at setting up drip tape and Lily and her crew at setting up deer fencing. Everyone had skills and resources to share.

The workshops presented in conjunction with Pilot Parcels were a great success and showed a need for more. When people come together to learn from talented

growers and share their own experiences, it's rewarding for all.
Thanks to NESARE for making this project possible. The Farm Institute will continue to find ways to share its land and its resources with Vineyard farmers.

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