

You can now read 10 articles in a month for free on BostonGlobe.com. Read as much as you want anywhere and anytime for just 99¢.

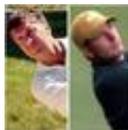
The Boston Globe

Business



METRO

Gordon College insults our intelligence



BUSINESS

Two golfers face US charges of insider trading



BUSINESS

The saga of I Market Bask

Longing to farm in Mass.? A service finds land

Map-based service finds suitable land, introduces property owners to future tenants

By Michael Prager | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 03, 2012



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Susan Shay (left) leased land she owns in Groton to Seona Ngufor for farming. Ngufor has just completed her first growing season.

GROTON — Susan and Paul Shay bought their four-acre dream spread years ago, with the idea of returning some of the land to farming. But other than for a brief period of being leased to hay farmers, the land had lain fallow for several decades.

Meanwhile, when Seona Ngufor immigrated to America 10 years ago, she held onto the idea she would take up farming — as in her native Cameroon — if only she could get access to a farmable plot.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

Ngufor has just completed her first season, during which she grew eggplants, tomatoes, and other vegetables and greens on a portion of the Shays' property along the Nashua River.

They were brought together by an unusual matchmaking service that uses geographic information system mapping data to pair would-be farmers with property owners who have extra land.

The matching service is the work of the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, a nonprofit organization in Lowell that trains farmers in organic growing and helps them find a plot to work.

The group has previously found tillable land by asking farmers if they could spare a corner of their property.

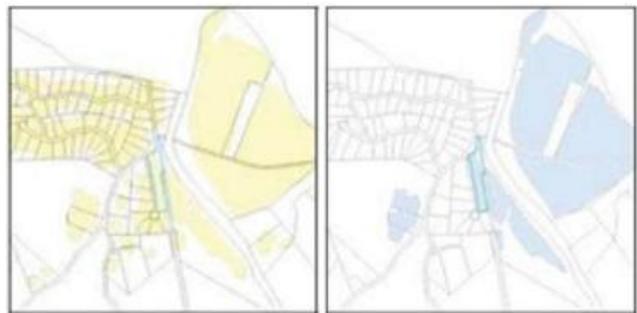
Program coordinator Becca Weaver said New Entry realized there were many more land candidates in the suburbs near Lowell, where farms had been subdivided into homesteads.

IN GROTON, the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project uses a geographic information systems mapping program to sift through all the property in town to find available land such as at the Shay property (in blue below) that can be used for farming.



The top map layer identifies all the land in a section of Groton by individual parcels.

One screen filters for only that land with soil suitable for growing crops.



Another screen then identifies suitability based on past use, available space, zoning, and other criteria.

An additional screen finds large fallow tracts or parcels with agricultural uses.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

“Driving the I-495 belt and seeing so much suburban development of what used to be viable farmland, and realizing that a lot of farmers can have a profitable farm business on an acre or less, we just saw that this could be a valuable use of space,” Weaver said.

New Entry uses GIS mapping data to screen for potential farm plots.

The map sets contain a long list of criteria to distinguish individual parcels. For example, New Entry can filter the parcels based on size, ownership, zoned usage, and the quality of the soil.

The system is so sophisticated it can pick out suburban homesteads with large patches of unused land, so New Entry was no longer limited to looking at obvious candidates, such as existing farms.

The screenings are used to narrow the farmland hunt to the best candidates to approach about allowing use their land.

Once New Entry identifies sites, it approaches agricultural officials in the towns involved to work with landowners interested in turning over property to farmers.

In Groton, for example, New Entry and the town's agricultural commission hosted an information session with property owners. The Shays were invited because their large, open homestead was identified as a possible site for farming.

The session featured information on land leases and nonfarming landlords' experience.

Fittingly, the meeting was held at the Groton Grange, an 1800s beacon for agriculture that was recently renovated.

"There was a lot of information, a lot of resources," said Susan Shay, 63, a programmer and analyst at a medical malpractice insurer in Boston.

"We were very excited, and spoke to Becca immediately afterward and signed up."

Soon enough, Weaver brought Ngufor, 56, who had taken the New Entry training program, to meet the Shays.

"We covered a lot of ground and felt comfortable with her from the very beginning," Shay said.

The Shays were so eager to see some of their land used for farming that they drove an easy bargain: rent of \$1 a year, in exchange for a free go at whatever is growing.

"That was a very good deal," said Ngufor, a mother of six.

She has worked as an assistant at nursing homes and in home care, but always hoped to return to raising crops, as she did with her mother when she was younger.

"I like to see the crops grow," she said. "And when you buy from the supermarket, you don't know what you're getting. To sell to other people and know that I'm selling them healthy food" is rewarding.

At the beginning of the growing season, Ngufor would farm on nights and weekends, and planted more than a dozen different crops.

In peak season, she turned fully from nursing to nursery, working six days a week.

She sold her produce at farmers markets around the state and through a community-supported agriculture program that New Entry runs.

She said she made a smaller profit than she had anticipated, but enough to persuade her to try again next year.

New Entry has since matched another farmer with land in Groton and is expanding to Concord and Topsfield, as well as to Westport and Dartmouth via a collaboration with the Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership.

Weaver said that New Entry hopes to place three to five beginning farmers a year.