



Linda and Larry Faillace, owners of Ag-Innovations, tend their sheep in a field in East Warren. The herd is part of the RootsWork project.

RootsWork: Working Toward Sustainable Agriculture

Story by DAVID W. SMITH

Photo by SANDY MACYS

"It's a place where people can drive through and observe and learn," said Wade. "We hope that it will bring out the agricultural roots of the community."

Wade is planting winter rye, which will act as a natural fertilizer in the spring. Perennials are also being moved in from another part of the garden. In addition to the common garden, where vegetables are available to anyone who puts in some work, there will be land set aside for people to lease.

In years past, farming was a rural community's lifeline and the center of its economy and culture. The grange was a place for all that to come together.

Just as investment brokers flock to Wall Street, the grange was a common area where farmers met to make deals, talk shop, celebrate and meet each other's families.

Now some residents in East Warren have created RootsWork, a community project that intends to bring back a place for farmers to meet and share, and with it a sense of the agricultural history of the land they live on.

Located at the junction of the East Warren road and the Roxbury Mountain road where the town center of Warren used to be, the RootsWork project hopes to educate a community which has long surrendered its economy to tourism and service industries about the practices which created it. They also hope to stimulate interest and research in new ideas about farming and sustainability.

"I think that the whole RootsWork group feels that people have become so separate from where the food they eat comes from," said Larry Faillace after he and his wife Linda, struggled to reattach a section of barbed wire fence that wouldn't quite reach.

"One of the long term goals is to replace this fence," he said.

RootsWork certainly has more ambitious plans than a new fence, and the Faillaces pointed out proposals and ongoing projects as they lead a brief tour across one of the pastures of the project's 91 acres. They move away from their own sheep herd, past cows grazing up to the community "display" garden where RootsWork chairman Mason Wade is busy working the byproducts of a cider pressing session into the soil with a rototiller.

Facing the Roxbury road is a 101 year-old white building, once the East Warren schoolhouse. This is the oldest remaining building in the area and will be restored into an office and community museum when state septic permits are issued.

"Hopefully they should be approved in the next few days," said Wade.

For now, the building is locked up, but materials for a kit barn which will adjoin the building are being assembled. They hope to erect the barn in a few weeks.

"RootsWork has a goal that is really more earth friendly. We're putting more into the land than we're taking away."

Linda Faillace

RootsWork began taking shape over the last two years, getting by on the donations and labor of a changing group of about 30 volunteers. The organization is in the process of securing a lease for the property from Anne Just, a former state representative from the area who was active in many agricultural committees about 15 years ago.

"Way back then she had an idea of this land being used for what we are trying to do — a sustainable agricultural project," said Wade.

Wade, an organic landscaper, discussed the project with Just when he was hired to do some work for her about 2 1/2 years ago. That same day, Wade attended a selectboard meeting and the use of the schoolhouse building was discussed. Soon the idea of RootsWork was formulated in numerous meetings of interested residents and bylaws were drawn up.

The primary intention of the project was that it be a membership-driven undertaking. Decision-making would be accomplished democratically by as many members as possible. The grounds would be open for farmers and entrepreneurs interested in experimenting with ambitious projects or for people who just wanted to stroll on one of the proposed hiking and skiing trails, observe, and perhaps learn a bit about farming.

"Some people are members just because they think it's a great idea and they want to be a part of it," said Larry.

The Faillaces are heading up the most ambitious project currently underway at RootsWork.

The couple have a Warren-based sheep breeding company called Ag-Innovations. They hope to introduce sheep raising as a viable alternative to the difficulties of bovine agriculture and the dairy industry.

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Roots Work

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"We want to show people that you can make money with a sheep operation," said Linda, a RootsWork board member.

The United States imports a great deal of cheeses made from sheep's milk like romano and feta according to the Faillaces. They hope to convince farmers that the quality and quantity of sheep's milk can be vastly improved by selective breeding.

RootsWork has offered them a section of pasture to keep a flock of 12 sheep separate from the rest of their flock in Warren.

These sheep, an American-type Dorset breed, will be artificially inseminated with sperm from a Belgian Texel breed (or "Beltex"). They hope to show how this cross-breeding dramatically improves the milk production, meat and wool of the Dorset offspring. The Beltex sheep - the only flock in north America - were recently imported by the Faillaces. The flock must be kept separate from all other breeds, and if the ram were brought into contact with the Dorsets, it would not be allowed to return to the Beltex flock.

"(RootsWork) gives us the opportunity to have this land separate from our own flock," said Larry.

Larry, who has a doctorate in animal science, said he believes himself to be the only person trained in artificial sheep insemination in the northeastern United States.

The Faillaces also are big proponents of rotational grazing. They move the paddock the sheep (and "Ollie" the guardian llama) graze in every two days or so. This forces the sheep to graze more evenly, and spreads fertilizer over a larger portion of land. They show before-and-after photographs of their own land which is much healthier and greener due to rotational grazing.

"RootsWork has a goal that is really more earth friendly," said Linda. "We're putting more into the land than we're taking away."

The sheep will be housed over the display garden this winter, and the soil will be "tilled" by pigs in the spring. Sheep manure is an excellent fertilizer and pigs are natural rooters.

Wade said RootsWork is waiting for various town grant applications to come through which will help with funding and he hopes to increase membership through a series of local demonstrations and fund-raisers in the near future. All interested parties are welcome.



David W. Smith of Montpelier is a regular contributor to The Country Courier.

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