

A Spirit Moves on the Land: Locally Grown Produce



By [PETER APPLEBOME](#)
November 26, 2008

POMONA, N.Y.

Yes, the name Pomona comes from the Roman goddess of fruit, a reminder of the days four decades ago when apple orchards and farms dotted the countryside at the foot of the Ramapo Mountains in Rockland County.

But in a suburban county where the number of farms has gone from 900 in the 1920s to 406 in 1950 to — depending on which ones you care to count — about a half dozen now, it’s a little hard at first to imagine why anyone would have seen much point in forming the [Rockland Farm Alliance](#) last year.

To be honest, the effort, which began with a local couple interested in growing crops on their six-acre property, which used to be an apple orchard, still seems more like a wispy node of the grow-local, natural-foods ethos than anything certain to go anywhere. Still, when 230 people showed up on a frigid night last week for the group’s first open meeting, you definitely had the sense that the couple, John McDowell and Alexandra Spadea, might be on to something.

So on this day that’s all about giving thanks and consuming vast quantities of food, there’s a small glimpse of something in the air in the

effort to figure out a benign way to turn the clock back in one suburban county only 25 miles from Manhattan.

“This is a little like trying to save an endangered species,” said Mr. McDowell, a musician and composer. “But to get 230 people out for a meeting like this is amazing. The interest is definitely there. The big riddle is: how do you do it? Particularly given the cost of land, how do you make money as a farmer without some huge subsidy or being a millionaire who doesn’t mind losing money?”

What Mr. McDowell and Ms. Spadea call Camp Hill Farm is, for the most part, a one-acre plot surrounded by wire fencing to keep the deer out. In beds double-dug two feet deep, aerated, irrigated, composted and tended for what they call organic/biodynamic farming, they grow tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, carrots, beans, brussels sprouts, fennel and peas — over 30,000 pounds this year. Most is sold to one Manhattan restaurant, Palma in Greenwich Village; to the local [Hungry Hollow food co-op](#); and to neighbors who participate in a community-supported agriculture program and pay \$50 each week for a bushel basket of produce.

They soon sensed an interest far beyond their little undertaking — part environmental and energy-conscious, part health-oriented, part gustatory — based on the reawakening of interest in locally grown foods. Soon the Rockland Farm Alliance was born.

Yes, Rockland is thoroughly suburban, but about a third of the county remains open land, much of it parkland, and about 20 percent is prime farmland not under cultivation. And clearly, there are young people intensely interested in a new model of urban and periurban, small-scale agriculture that will never replace the wheat fields of Kansas but perhaps has a future nonetheless.

So, Virginia Kasinki of the Glynwood Center in Putnam County, which promotes local agriculture, said that at first, she scoffed at the notion of agriculture in Rockland County. But the more she learned about local resources, particularly the open parkland, the more interested she became.

“You can grow a lot on smaller parcels,” she said. “This isn’t cute. It’s a form of agriculture.”

Linda Concklin Hill, whose family farm, the [Orchards of Concklin](#), dates to 1711, said that while it’s impossible to imagine large-scale farming making a comeback, she could see a future in a small-scale version.

And Mike Kantor, a recent graduate of [Vassar College](#) who tends 10 acres of crops at an elder-care center in Rockland, said many young people don’t expect to buy farmland in the Hudson Valley but are interested in farming nonetheless. The hard part is matching them with the available land. (It turns out that across the river in Westchester, the [Stone Barns Center](#) is sponsoring a Young Farmers Conference, “Reviving the Culture of Agriculture,” on Thursday and Friday next week, the kind of event that would have seemed far more likely a century ago.)

Harriet Cornell, chairwoman of the Rockland County Legislature, who addressed the meeting last week, said she was excited about the prospects for a new type of local agriculture,

which could take various forms, perhaps including the use of publicly owned lands.

“I was amazed at the turnout,” she said. “How this plays out, I can’t say, but potentially I think it has a wonderful future.”

Mr. McDowell and Ms. Spadea live in a farmhouse that dates to the 1780s, now full of African drums and recording equipment. In truth, there’s not much of a model for making their version of suburban agriculture work other than some modest urban gardens.

Still, on a chilly afternoon this week, they were out with their daughter, Luna, 3, picking the last of the brussels sprouts and checking their maple syrup evaporator, greenhouse and walk-in cooler.

It’s a long way from a business that could support them or anyone else. But this year the growing was good, the progress was there, and they’re still a bit stunned by the turnout for the farm alliance meeting — all very good reasons at the end of this long, rough year to stop, marvel and give thanks.