

THE NEW FARMER NARRATIVE PROJECT

Journeys Into Farming

What is the New Farmer Narrative Project?

The *New Farmer Narrative Project* explores the journeys that have led people to start or take over farms in Columbia County. Through a series of interviews and farm tours with 20 new Columbia County farmers, and surveys distributed to many new farmers in the area, this project seeks to enhance understanding of new farmers and their journeys.

Farmers were selected for this project based on many criteria to ensure a diverse representation, including years of operation, enterprises, geography, age, gender and farming background. As the New Farm Map shows, there are many more new farmers than we were able to interview for this project – a testament to the growth of new farms in this area.

The panels in this exhibit tell the stories of new farmers who have started or taken over farms in the last 10 years, through their own words.

Why new farmers?

There is a common perception of agriculture as a vocation in decline. For much of the 20th century farms *were* disappearing, which in turn caused dramatic changes in the rural landscape. Over the last decade, though, this trend seems to be turning around—the number of farms has been increasing, both in Columbia County and nationwide. More farms are appearing, and people from all walks of life are being drawn to agriculture once again. We feel it is important that we seek to better understand and support these new farmers, as they will shape rural landscapes and communities for decades to come.

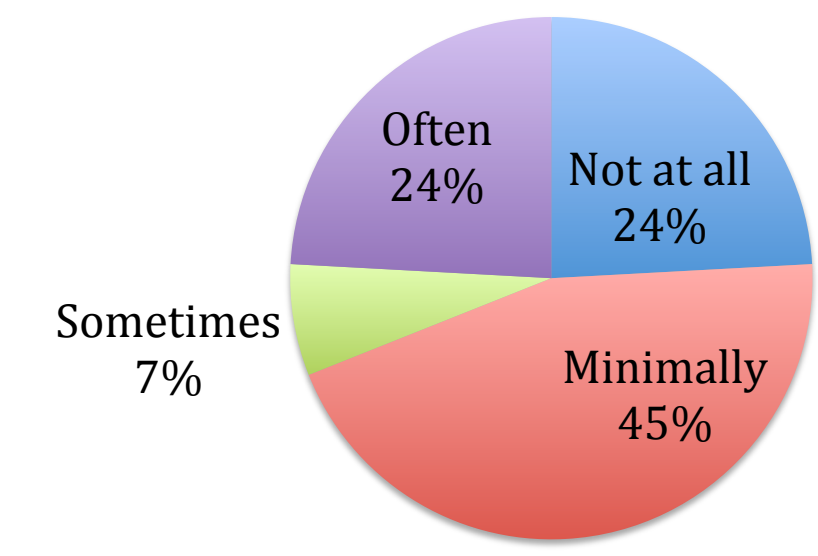
Who are we?

The *Hawthorne Valley Farmscape Ecology Program* is a small research and outreach initiative dedicated to helping people explore the ecological, agricultural and cultural landscape of Columbia County. We study the local food system as one way to encourage a holistic understanding of our landscape. New farmers will play a crucial role in the future of this landscape. Through this narrative-based project, we seek to deepen understanding of the experiences of these new farmers and foster thoughtful engagement with our agricultural future.

Who are the new faces entering agriculture in the area?

New farmers in the area come from diverse backgrounds. They grew up in suburbs, big cities, and rural environments, with varying levels of exposure to agriculture as children. A few knew from an early age that their future was in agriculture, but most had key experiences as teenagers or adults that led them into farming. It's not easy to generalize about this group, and in truth, one of the most exciting and inspiring things about this new face of agriculture is the diverse set of experiences that have led them down their paths into farming.

Were you involved in food production growing up?



How are new farmers learning to farm?

"Farming actually requires small amounts of knowledge of so many different things, and when you just come across one area that you haven't encountered before, it's hard to figure out the most efficient and cheap way to go about fixing your problems."

For new farmers who didn't grow up farming, there is an added challenge of learning a wide range of knowledge and skills. Aspiring farmers take many different approaches to learn to farm, but whatever the strategy, the learning process is a crucial component in building a viable farm business. According to our survey, the **top three sources** of knowledge and experience for new farmers were:

1. Internships and apprenticeships
2. Self-education (e.g. reading, trial and error)
3. Experienced farmers and mentors

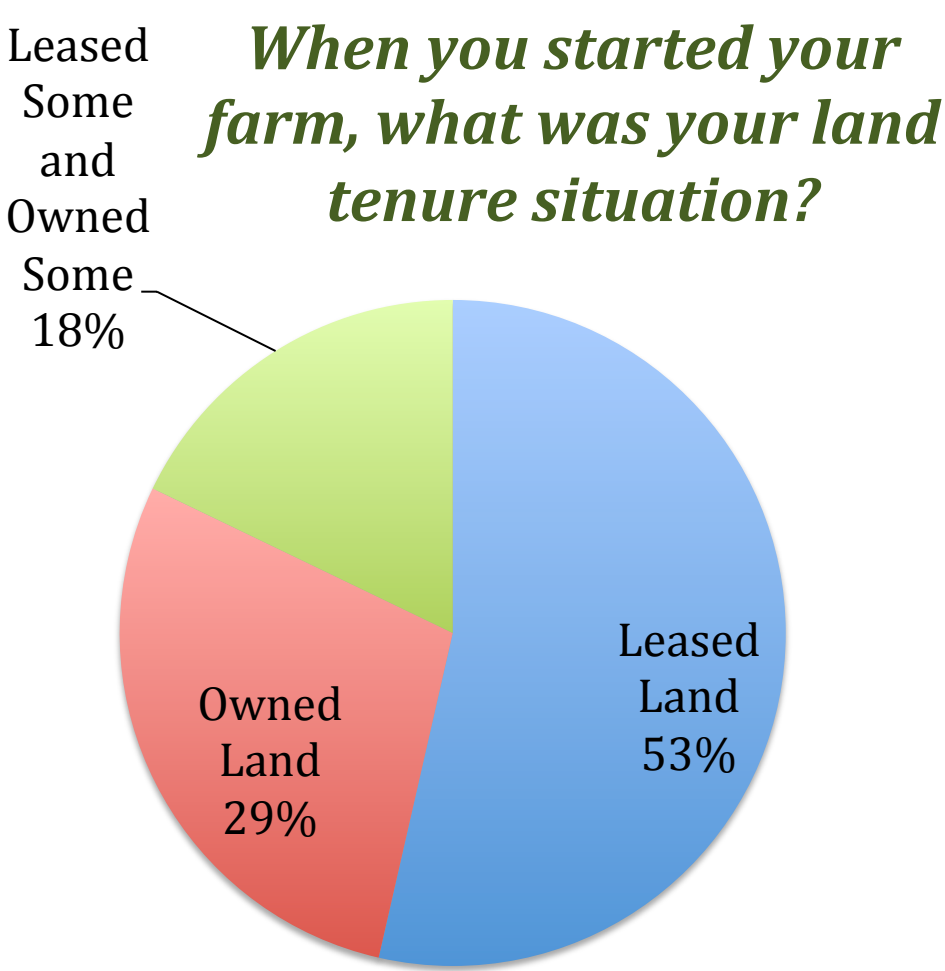


How are new farmers accessing land?

For new farmers who do not already own farmland, land prices can be prohibitively expensive. Many new farmers choose instead to lease farmland, and matches between farmers and landowners are sometimes facilitated by organizations like the Columbia Land Conservancy. These kinds of relationships can be pivotal for new farming operations. However, leasing land isn't always ideal—it means building a good relationship with the landowner, and may not have long-term security, which in turn affects how a farmer can manage the farm.

"It's a constant struggle of wanting to set up more long-term things and not having long-term security. Most of my investment has been in moveable infrastructure, since I don't have any sort of long-term lease. Everything I've invested in, I can probably sell or take with me."

"I want to have a plan about how to look at a piece of land in the long-term, with rotations and nutrients and all that stuff, but [on the property I am short-term leasing] I am just trying to get food produced, and I don't really have a long-term plan for this piece of land, so it's pretty much just in the moment."



THE APPRENTICESHIP EXPERIENCE

A common way of learning to farm is through apprenticeship. In their interviews, new farmers described many benefits of apprenticing:

- Intense immersion in learning to farm;
- Learning and making mistakes with low personal risk; and
- Developing a mentoring relationship with an experienced farmer.

Apprenticing isn't for everyone—with obligations like children or student loan payments, it can be hard to leave a more stable life for the low pay and transience that apprenticeship requires. Some farmers also felt that apprentices could be abused as a source of cheap labor.

"Apprenticeships are a challenge because if you're working on a for-profit farm, there's a strong push to get things done. It's hard to find time to train people, and I think apprenticeships are often abused."

FARM JARGON—KEY WORDS AND PHRASES FOR UNDERSTANDING THIS EXHIBIT

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): CSA is a model of food distribution that provides a guaranteed market for farms by directly connecting producers and consumers. Members pay a fee (often in advance) and receive a periodic "share" of vegetables, fruit, meat, or other farm products.

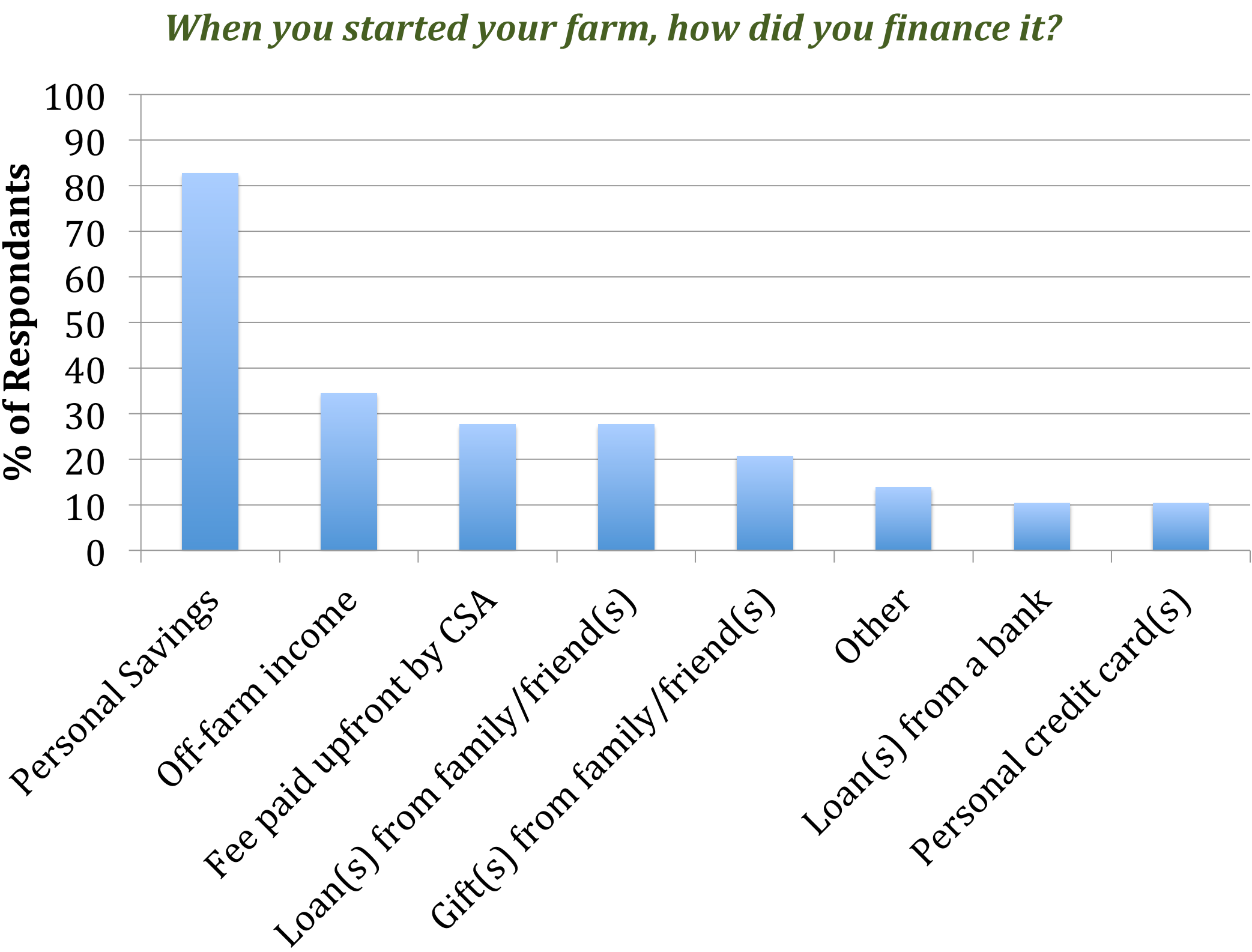
Columbia Land Conservancy (CLC): CLC is a nonprofit organization that works with the community to conserve the farmland, forests, wildlife habitat, and rural character of Columbia County. They have a Farmer Landowner Match Program that has been instrumental in helping new farmers find land in the county. Many of the farmers featured either found land through CLC or at some point used their services in the process of finding land.

New farmer: For the purposes of this project, a new farmer is defined as someone who has started or taken over a farm in the last 10 years.

World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF): WWOOF is a network that facilitates placement of volunteers on sustainable farms.

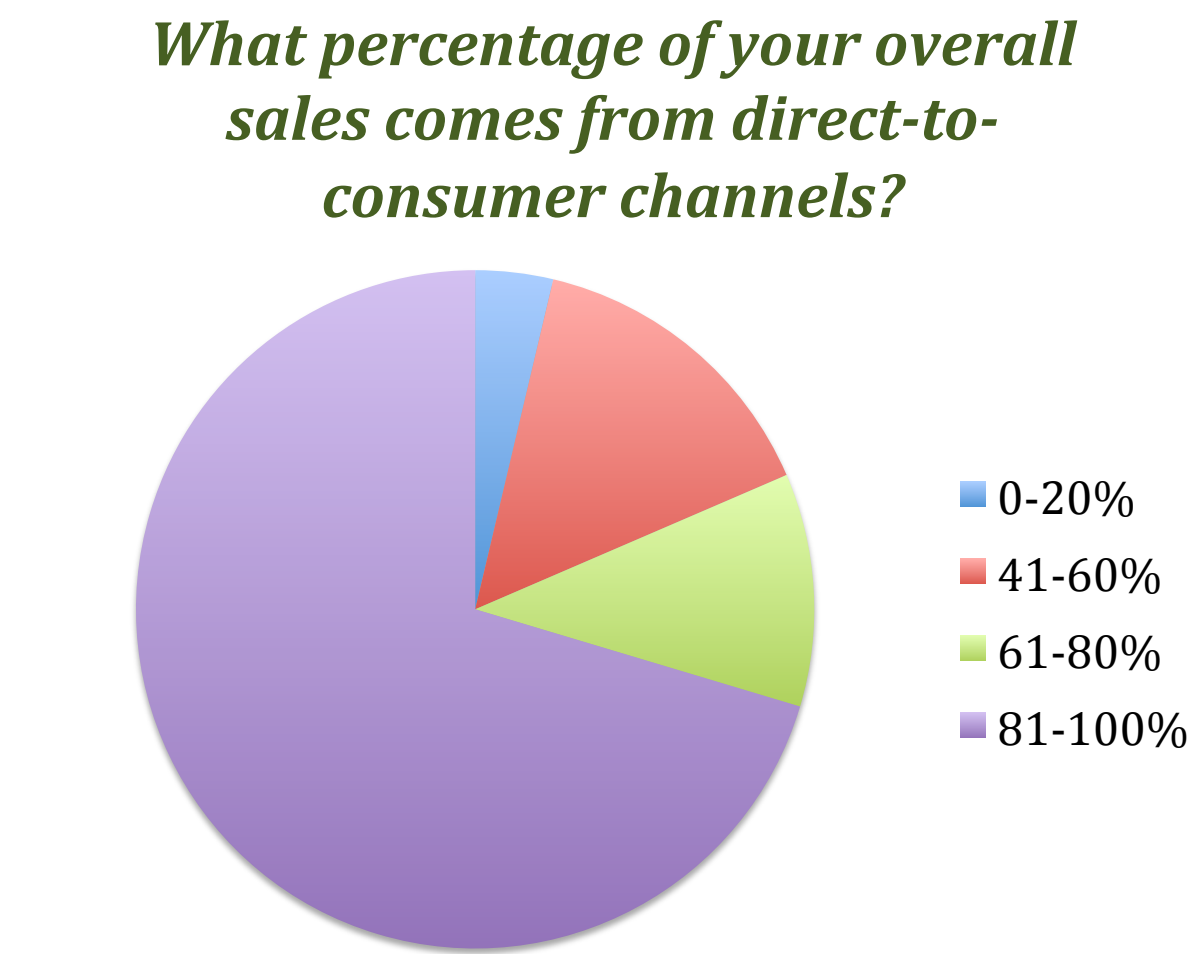
How do new farmers finance their businesses?

New farmers surveyed needed a median of \$20,000 to finance the first year of their businesses. Most new farmers did not take out loans from banks, either because they did not want to go into debt or were unable to access these loans. An overwhelming majority at least partially funded their farms from personal savings. It can be hard to save money while doing farm work, and many of the new farmers in Columbia County are starting their farms after other careers or while working second jobs. While this may ease the way financially, it means that many new farmers are learning to farm later in life.



How do new farmers sell their products?

Columbia County’s new farmers have overwhelmingly chosen to market



their products through “direct-to-consumer” marketing channels such as CSA, farmers’ markets, and farm stands. They allow farmers to receive more of the profit from their products and develop relationships with the people that eat their food. Many new farmers described a noticeable shift in attitudes towards farming, with much greater support and appreciation of farmers in recent years.

“ People that support you at the farmers’ market really are the regulars, and it’s neat because you get to know those people well. There are a few people who I saw every single week all summer, so I get to know a little bit about their families and their hobbies, and I talk gardening with a lot of people, which was fun.”

There was, however, some concern that the support didn’t always translate financially.



“ If I had known that this was what I was going to do in college, I would have begun work on it then. There’s more to it than most people realize. You have to run a business and deal with people on a lot of levels, and it takes a lot of practice.”

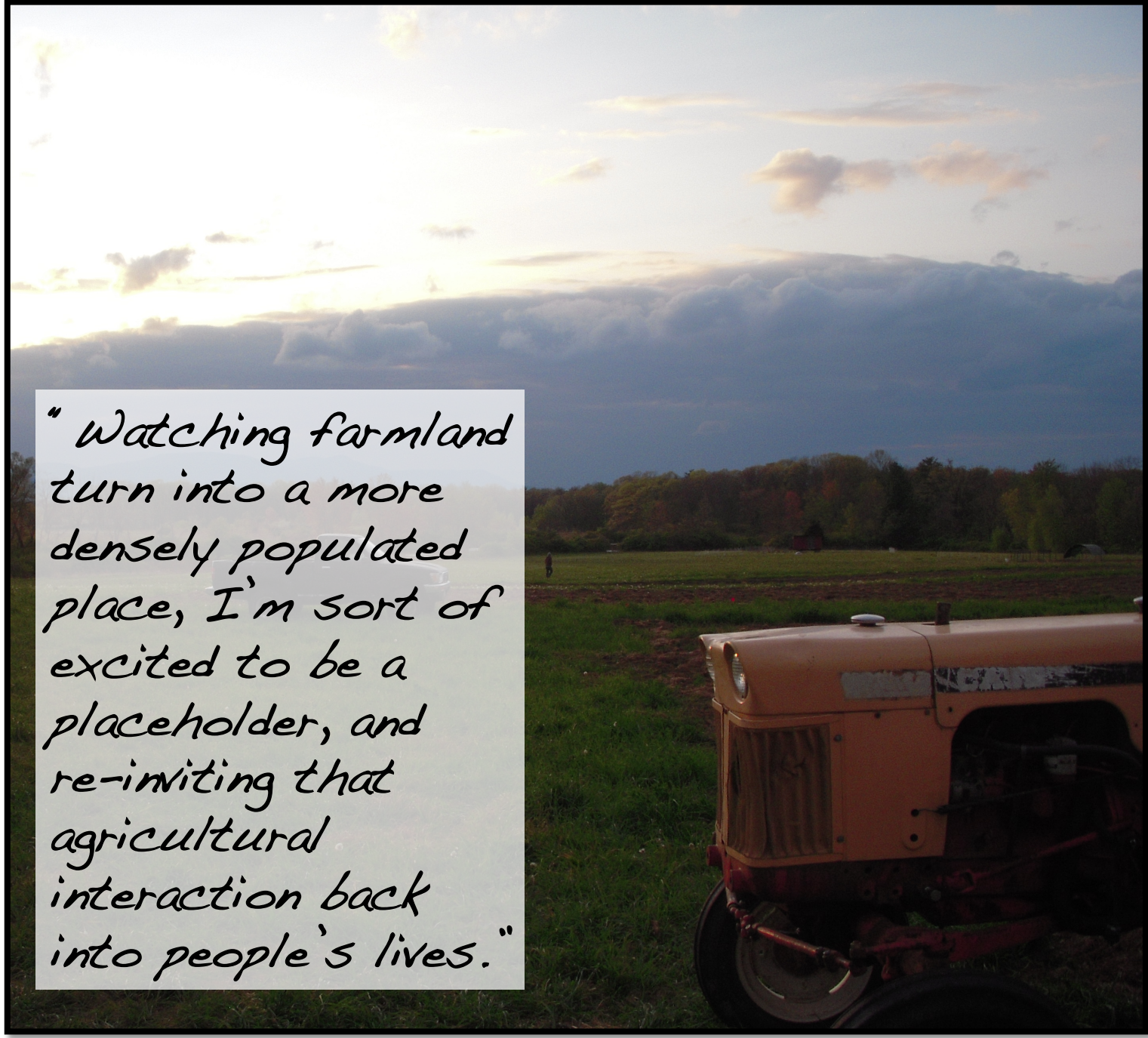
Starting to farm later in life can also be difficult, with additional obligations and limited flexibility.

“ Our age was a huge obstacle. When you’re at a certain age, you have resources, but you’ve got kids, too, and it’s not that easy to suddenly learn farming in the mid-life.”

How do new farmers contribute to their communities?

Beyond growing food to feed their neighbors, many new farmers contribute to their communities in other ways:

- Providing social space for customers;
- Hosting events;
- Leading workshops;
- Hosting volunteer days;
- Preserving farmland;
- Providing jobs;
- Supporting other local businesses; and
- Contributing to economic revitalization.



THE “COOL” FACTOR

In their interviews, new farmers frequently spoke about how farming is suddenly quite trendy.



“ There’s a lot of positive feedback from people that you wouldn’t always get in a normal job. Handing somebody a bunch of carrots, they think you’re a magician.”

“ Our friends that come and visit us at the farm are very excited about it, and I think some of them are inspired to do it, too.”

While they do appreciate the support of local farms and local food, some farmers expressed frustration with the romanticization of farming.

“ It’s a little bit infuriating when a lot of our friends see what we’re doing and they’re like, ‘ Oh, I’m going to start a farm, too,’ and I think, ‘ What are you talking about? You can’t start a farm. You have no idea what you’re doing.’ There’s a lot about farming that people don’t see. I think that idealism is important, but farming is hard.”

The *New Farmer Narrative Project* is a project of the **Hawthorne Valley Farmscape Ecology Program**. Interviews were conducted by Anna Duhon and Ginny Moore. We owe **thanks** to many people—the farmers, first and foremost, for taking time from their busy lives to speak with us. Many thanks also to Hilary Corsun, Marissa Codey, Rachel Schneider, Severine von Tscharner Fleming, Steve Hadcock, and FEP colleagues for their input and help. Many **photographs** were contributed by farmers, but special thanks to Sue Libsch, Mike Libsch, and Terri Loewenthal for the photos of New Leaf Farm, to Meghan McCann and Brooke Slezak for the photos of Sol Flower Farm, to Marcia Ronsani for the photos of Lineage Farm, and to Chris Dreyfus for the photos of Hand Hollow Farm. **For more information, contact:** anna@hawthornevalleyfarm.org - 518-672-7994 – www.hawthornevalleyfarm.org/fep
Research Notes: This project is intended to be educational and is not an endorsement of any of the depicted farms. The data for the above charts were gathered in a survey distributed to new farmers in Columbia County and surrounding areas in spring of 2012. A more detailed report is forthcoming.