

# Common Hands Farm

Dan McManus & Tess Parker -  
Journey into Farming

HUDSON



## Farming Journey

### Originally from:

**Dan:** Hillsdale, NY

**Tess:** New Hampshire

**Types of Training:** Self-education, volunteering, and internships

**Land Search Length:** 2 years

**Land Source:** Leased land

## Common Hands Farm

**First Year:** 2011

**Location:** Hudson, NY

**Land Base:** 3-4 Acres

**Markets:** Local farmers' markets (Philmont, Chatham, Red Barn Roadside Market, 347 Warren St. in Hudson), CSA pickups at those markets and in NYC, and wholesale to Field Goods

**Products:** Vegetables, herbs, mushrooms, and flowers



Common Hands has many volunteers through their participation in World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF).

## EARLY EXPERIENCES

**Dan:** "I grew up around a lot of really inspiring farms and communities that had farming as a centerpiece. I was just kind of born into it, I guess, but I didn't want to be a farmer until much later."

**Tess:** "I didn't grow up in a very rural area, but it was accessible to me. I never knew what I wanted to do, but I always had this need to be outside. I always felt comfortable roaming through fields and orchards."

## TURNING TOWARDS FARMING

**Dan:** "Art has always been a really big part of my life, and through my artwork I was kind of led to farming, especially through a really important turning point in my life. [I was] working in Detroit, which is essentially a massive food desert, and in doing this sculptural community piece there, what really arose was that food is the most important thing right now for places like Detroit. Food and community. And so this sculpture became an urban garden space, and I decided as an artist to use growing food as a medium... I got a place in Chatham with about eight or so of my friends and started growing vegetables. [I went on] to manage a vegetable garden at Pleroma Farm, where I was for one season. And that's how Tess and I met, because I was looking for people to really carry this idea forward, and also bring a dimension into it beyond farming, which is this sense of sacredness for the land and coalescence of local communities around food."

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: LAND, FINANCING, MARKETS

In their first season, Common Hands farmed on several pieces of land, which they found through the Columbia Land Conservancy and word of mouth.

**Dan:** "We were really fortunate to be working with Donna Williams from Field Goods, who does subscription shares, delivered to people's workplaces, and we supplied a bunch of vegetables for her this year, and she lent us money in the beginning of the season to get our operation off the ground." In addition to selling to Field Goods, Common Hands also sold at several local farmers' markets.

## APPROACH TO LEARNING

**Tess:** "I didn't have any formal training or anything. It's really fun to be your own self-pioneer of your own life, moving forward into new territory. There's so much information around you. You just learn so much just from sharing and picking up on details and observing."

**Dan:** "I guess I've always had that mentality of just going and starting things, even if it's really dumb... Sometimes it would be a lot easier to do it the right way and apprentice with somebody, but in doing it the way that we've done it, we've uncovered something new, which is this whole open source model of working and learning with the community. There's a whole community of resources around us, in which this area is just amazingly abundant. And so we almost see a curriculum in what we do now, which is constantly bettering ourselves, and offering it to other people who want to come and explore that with us... We had a lot of people come and either consult with us, or we did a lot of field trips to other farms. We were actively working with a couple of different mentors. I've also done a lot of reading and research, almost as if it's my self-taught degree."



This year Common Hands will have CSA pickups at farmers' markets. **Dan:** "People can buy a special farmers' market share, which means that they can have more selection in what they get in their share."

## CHALLENGES

**Dan:** "With Pleroma, all of the nuts and bolts of having a good operation were in place. This year was the real challenge...coming from a situation of having everything and kind of taking [it] for granted. We definitely had a lot of losses in this past year that could have been saved by resources and proper planning. We had a very vulnerable system because we didn't leave room for a lot of 'what ifs'... The pieces of land we were trying to grow on were too scattered."

**Tess:** "It was 20 minutes each way from the house, and it was just really difficult to be responsible for taking [volunteers] to and from the field."

**Dan:** "The places where we were farming were also difficult because they had no guarantee of a long-term future, so we didn't really want to be putting a lot into these pieces of land when we didn't know how long we could have them for."

**Tess:** "A lot of really wonderful people came to us [to volunteer], but we didn't have enough stability in our whole structure to really welcome people in, in the right way."

**Dan:** "We're really grateful for everyone who came this year and put up with our chaos, but in looking towards another season, we were like, 'We can only do this again if we reign in the chaos, if we find a right piece of land, find the funding to do this properly.' What I envisioned three years ago was a really rough shadow of what's taking place now. I put a lot of ideas out there, way too many ideas, and now it's sort of really boiling down to, what do we really want? What is really achievable? It's putting things in perspective and really taking the time to make sure that everything that we do is really done with love and done with the right intention and with the proper amount of observation and interaction."

## MOVING FORWARD

This year, Dan and Tess have found a new land situation that provides a more stable base for their farm, while opening up new market opportunities, including a CSA with a variety of flexible share options.

**Dan:** "We have amazing soil. We have a pretty good relationship with our new landowner. We've been really lucky to fall into this situation, and with that comes a huge responsibility. It opens up a lot of possibilities, but it also really puts the pressure on. This year is going to require a lot of discipline to come through on the crops that we're committing to, and not overwork ourselves to the point where we can't manage things."

**Tess:** "I want to become a stable business, and then I want to work on developing our educational curriculum and having a really strong community around that, because I love working with people, I love putting on events, and bringing opportunities for learning and discussion and growing all the time."

## Creating Community



**Tess:** "We want our farm to be, as it grows, a place of gathering, like a social space or just a venue for local people to gather. And a venue for people to share their skills and knowledge."

## Common Hands Farm



**Greenhouse:** They have sited the greenhouse on the lower land by their fields, with help from an investment by the landowner.



## Why farm?

**Tess:** "For me, it's being on the brink of so much knowledge and history and tradition, and coming to learn and own it for myself, and getting so much confidence from starting to do so many more things, learning more skills, being more creative with the resources around me." **Dan:** "I have an opportunity to constantly play a key role in my community. It's just something that's really needed right now, and that need didn't just come from my community, it came mostly from myself. I think that I really came to want to farm to connect myself to my own nutrition, to what really nourishes [me] and nourishes my body."

