



## Pingree heads to Cuba for farm trip

### Organic products a focus of visit

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE  
BDN STAFF

Growing organic fruits and vegetables is a choice in this country. But in Cuba, a decades-long trade embargo coupled with a food crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union has made it a necessity. And it's one that could change as diplomatic relations on this nearby island are re-established.



Pingree

What have farmers learned in a world without pesticides?

Maine congresswoman Chellie Pingree and 30 heavyweights, including former Deputy U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan, Stonyfield Farm Inc. co-founder Gary Hirshberg and celeb chef Tom Colicchio, are about to find out.

Pingree's office came up with the idea for the four-day trip, organized by the Washington nonprofit Center for Democracy in the Americas.

The group of leaders in organics, such as Luke Donahue of Johnny's Selected Seeds from Maine, left for Cuba on April 30 to see what can be shared, gleaned and put into place. With commercial pressure from U.S. pesticide and fertilizer companies looming, Pingree feels the window is closing for healthy agricultural practices.

"Cuba has been largely organic since the fall of the Soviet Union," she said. "They have no pesticides [and] have moved from growing sugar cane to more diversified farming. There has been a lot of agricultural interest. We want to make sure that many of the U.S. companies that deal with organic agriculture have a foot in the door because once you convert from organic, it's hard to go back."

Moving to Maine after reading back-to-the-land bible "The Good Life" in the '70s, Pingree started an organic farm on North Haven and has been a staunch local food advocate ever since. She has served on the Agriculture Committee and the Agriculture Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee. *Thir-See Cuba, Page C3*

## New farm-to-table idea is brewing in Saco

A former factory and a historic farm join up

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE  
BDN STAFF

They look like farmers — sweaty, bearded, in boots and jeans. But at 11 a.m. on a recent Monday when cold cans of ale were cracked, followed by a series of belches, it was clear these were no MOFGA apprentices.

Brewers, tasting room managers and the sales staff at Biddeford's Banded Horn Brewing Co. had gathered to plant 30 spruce trees on a farm in Saco.

And this was just for starters. "We'll come back and plant 100 later in the fall, maybe even as many as 300," said Banded Horn's owner Ian McConnell. Searching for land to plant spruces, the tips of which the brewer will harvest to make his wildly popular Greenwarden ale, he was about to rent land near a ballfield, when a better offer came in. And here's where the story gets interesting.

Doug Sanford, the owner of the Pepperell Mill Campus, acres of former factories repurposed for commercial and residential use, had just purchased a 62-acre farm in Saco.

Preserving a farm for agriculture, and saving it from the developer's clutch, is no slight undertaking. Doug and his wife, Lauren Cullity-See Farm, Page C2



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Medomak Valley High School students (from left) Briana Luce, Riley Arbour and Cassidy Dever pot heirloom tomatoes during a horticulture class on Wednesday. With more than 800 varieties in its seed bank, the school's Heirloom Seed Project is the oldest and one of the largest high school-based seed saving programs in the country.

## Heirlooms 101

### How a high school program is preserving seeds of the past

BY JULIA BAYLY  
BDN STAFF

When researchers in Scotland needed seeds to grow Bere, a very old barley variety once cultivated for thousands of years in highlands, they looked across the Atlantic to a central Maine high school.

With more than 800 varieties in its seed bank, the Medomak Valley High School Heirloom Seed Project is the oldest and one of the largest high school-based seed-saving programs in the country.

They had exactly what the folks in Scotland were looking for for their heritage seed project.

"We ship seeds all over the world," said Neil Lash, Medomak horticulture professor and director of the program. "It is really an international project."

Any seed or plant from that seed that has been handed down for generations and hand-selected for a special, region-specific trait is considered an "heirloom." According to those who grow them, heirloom seeds are often harder and tastier than the more overly genetically manipulated and modified seeds produced in mass quantities.

In any given year, Lash has between 20 and 30 students working with the seed



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More than 800 varieties of seeds line shelves in a cooler at Medomak Valley High School.

project, which began in 1991 and grew out of a horticulture class that began 20 years earlier. The idea, Lash said, is to teach the students how to grow, collect, preserve and pass along heirloom seeds to the next generation of gardeners.

What began in a classroom and single greenhouse has expanded into the current 2-acre garden, two greenhouses and an arboretum.

"Our students are actually doing something about preserving biodiversity," Lash said. "They are not just studying it. Our seeds are very historical and include varieties from 38 different [Native American] tribes and, this year, seven crops traced to the Inca Indians."

Every year, Lash said, his students pour over the selections offered through Seed Savers Exchange to select seeds for the upcoming growing season.

"They look for the ones with the most historical connections that we can then use to connect the [students] to a historical or a geographical reference point," he

said. "It gives them a chance to not just talk about that history, but actually get involved with historical seed preservation."

Over the summer Lash's students work in the center's greenhouses, nurturing plants in highly controlled conditions to avoid any cross-pollination. In the fall, the seeds from those plants are harvested and made available through an international seed exchange program.

"We are supplying seeds to gardens around the world that you read about in the paper," Lash said. "Our seeds end up in some pretty famous places [and] one year we gave a pea plant to Monticello that could be traced back to a plant Thomas Jefferson planted in 1773."

Medomak seeds have also gone to gardens in Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, Quebec City's 400th anniversary garden, The Nordic Seed Bank in Sweden, The Taiwan Agricultural Institute, The University of Guelph in Ontario, The *See Heirloom, Page C2*



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Grandpa Admire's lettuce is a butterhead lettuce passed through generations of a North Missouri family, and is now grown at Medomak Valley High School's Heirloom Seed Project.

## Love of alpacas leads to Aroostook cottage business

BY JULIA BAYLY  
BDN STAFF

The 17 alpacas at Andy and Roxanne Tardie's small farmstead stood around expectantly, albeit a tad skeptical, at their fence Wednesday.

"Alpacas are kind of like cats," Andy Tardie said. "They're not all that cuddly and will often only come up to you if there's something in it for them."

Native to the Andes of South America and resembling a small llama, alpacas are bred specifically for their fiber, which is similar to wool but softer and less greasy in its raw state.

The Tardies run Aroostook Fiber Works, where they practice textile alchemy, spinning alpaca and other natural fibers into roving, yarn and felt.

"We've had the alpacas for six years," Tardie said. "That's where it all began."

Tardie, a former auto body repairman, said his wife came home from the Northern Maine Fair in 2012 and announced she was "in love with alpacas" after a baby al-

paca fell asleep on her feet.

One year and several farm visits later, the Tardies purchased the two male and two bred female alpacas.

Soon after the couple was looking for mills to spin the animal's wool.

**Watch the video**  
bangordailynews.com

"We found some mills in Maine, but the turnaround time was very, very long," he said. "So, me being me, I figured there must be something to this milling business, and we began looking into it."

Two years later, he was on the road to Wisconsin to pick up a collection of machines to clean, card, twist and spin the fiber into usable yarn.

"I had no idea how any of it worked," Tardie said with a laugh. "But we hired a gentleman from Belfast Mini Mills to come up to train us. You could not ask for better people."

By 2015 the milling machines were up and running in Tardie's former auto body shop on Route 163 and the couple felt confident to



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After a long winter, a trio of alpacas at Aroostook Fiber Works enjoys some spring sun Wednesday. Andy Tardie and his wife, Roxanne, turn the alpacas' fiber and fiber from clients into yarn, roving and felt at their Ashland mill.

open their business. By the end of last year Aroostook Fiber Works had milled hundreds of pounds of fiber, and Tardie said business was booming, with raw alpaca,

sheep, goat and rabbit fiber — and even dog fur — arriving daily from around the country.

"Right now I have wool ready *See Fiber, Page C2*