



Chickens a good step to food self-rule

BY ANTHONY BRINO
BDN STAFF

Once a staple of rural life that fell out of necessity, keeping chickens for eggs is something more people are doing in Aroostook County, according to Linda Trickey, agricultural assistant with the University of Maine Cooperative Extension.

Chickens are part of the surging interest in local farming and food, according to Trickey, who works with small-scale farmers and gardeners through Aroostook County. “I’m seeing more people interested in growing as much of their own food as they can,” Trickey said.

It was only a few generations ago that many households across Maine raised chickens, pigs and cows for food, though not necessarily because they wanted to. In the years after World War II, “it was a sign of affluence to go to the store and buy those things,” Trickey said.

“But it’s starting to come back. People are realizing the value of growing your own food.”

As a livestock, chickens are a good entryway into food sufficiency, Trickey said.

“Having a flock of backyard chickens is easy. You don’t need a lot of room. Once you’ve tasted a fresh egg from your own hen, there’s nothing like it.”

The basics: In a coop, Trickey recommends having enough room for 3 square feet per bird, with straw or wood shavings as ground bedding. She recommends one nest for every four or five birds to lay their eggs and 10 inches per bird for a roost, an elevated bar the chickens sleep on. Outside, either free ranging or in fenced-in area around the coops, the birds need 5 to 6 square feet per bird, Trickey said. A flock of at least six birds is recommended, because they’re social animals and rely on each other for heat, Trickey said.

Chickens need to be fed a grain-based mixture that can be supplemented with nonmeat kitchen scraps, as well as a range of insects and other small creatures they may find in foraging. They also need to have their coops cleaned, with the wood shavings used as bedding swept out and managed for compost.

Other than that, chickens are relatively low-maintenance and cold-hardy, only needing a coop with good ventilation and no drafts, Trickey said. “They can withstand an awful lot of cold.”

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BDN FILE
A flock of chickens in Pam Remy’s South Portland backyard.



GABOR DEGRE | BDN

Jack Hill and his wife, Eileen Hill, at Hilltop Farm in Monroe on Tuesday. Hill has been a dairy farmer for 50 years and now, at age 75, is ready to retire. However, he would like to see his 500 acres remain a farm instead of being subdivided into house lots.

Who will run the farm?

Monroe farmer wants to retire, which begs a larger question

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
BDN STAFF

Twice a day, when it’s time for dairy farmer Jack Hill to milk his small herd of registered Jersey cows, he moves around his old milking pen and climbs up to check the creamy milk in the holding tank with the agility and ease of a man in his 30s.

But he’s not in his 30s. He’s 75, and has been working the 500 acres of Hilltop Farm in Monroe for 50 years. Hill, who does not want to see the forests and rolling green fields of his farm be broken up into subdivisions, doesn’t have a successor to take over the hard, everyday work of running a dairy farm. And while the spirited dairyman would like to retire one day, he is discovering that is easier said than done.

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“This farm here would be good for development, but we don’t want to see that happen,” he said. “They only make so much land. Once it goes under the blacktop, they won’t make any more.”

Unfortunately, Hill’s situation is far from unique in the state of Maine, according to a recent study done by the Washington, D.C.-based American Farmland Trust and Keene, New Hampshire-based Land For Good, two nonprofit organizations that aim to protect farmland and help farmers. According to the study, which used data from the U.S. Census of Agriculture and farmer focus groups, nearly 30 percent of New England’s farmers are likely to stop farming in the next decade, and nine out of 10 of them are farming without a young farmer alongside.

Looming crisis

While the good news story of Maine’s growing crop of young farmers has attracted headlines, the difficulties of the state’s older farmers have not always been as well understood or documented. In Maine, where farmers who are 65 and older manage 527,000 acres and own a collective \$1 billion in land and agricultural infrastructure, the difficulties in finding a successful strategy for retirement or transition could lead to a crisis, according to Erica Buswell of the Maine Farmland Trust.

“It’s absolutely a big concern,” Buswell, whose Belfast-based agency works to protect



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Cows in one of the pastures at Hilltop Farm in Monroe.

farmland and support farmers in Maine, said. “I think it’s really the founding focus of our work related to land protection. We know 400,000 acres of farmland will potentially be in transition in the next decade, simply due to the age of the farmland owners. It really is huge. But the study that AFP and Land For Good did was still surprising to us in some ways. We didn’t know so many farmers don’t really have anybody to take over their farm. There’s just nobody.”

**Since 1999, the
Maine Farmland Trust has
helped to protect more than
47,000 acres of farmland**

Farmers often want to keep farming until they don’t have that choice anymore, she said. “A lot of farmers don’t want to stop farming until they’re physically incapable of doing so,” Buswell said.

Since 1999, the Maine Farmland Trust has helped to protect more than 47,000 acres of farmland and has participated in 193 projects involving agricultural conservation easements, and Hill is hoping Hilltop Farm may be added to that list. To date, the group has named 218 “Forever Farms,” or farms with easements to ensure the land forever will be available for farming. Once the easements are in place, they extinguish the ability to develop

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Inside

Hire a team of goats to landscape your yard **C3**

Always hoping for a better season

Putting in a garden is an act of faith

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
BDN STAFF

Last weekend, we finally put in our garden.

It’s about time, the tiny seeds and seedlings seemed to shout at me as my partner and I tucked them into the rich brown dirt we have worked now for three seasons. We planted them in tidy, carefully measured and labeled rows that correlated to the sketch Jim had penciled on graph paper before translating it to real life. That is just what happens when your co-gardener and partner is an archaeologist used to doing precise field work for a living.

It’s not so much par for the course for me, a person who generally approaches gardening — and life — in a more haphazard, hopeful way. I planted my first garden in Belfast, where we live, three springs ago essentially as an elaborate way of procrastinating moving from one house to another. If the green beans and peas I planted grew, it would be a happy accident. And grow they did.

That first summer the garden grew lush and lovely, the seeds sprouting and sending green tendrils up to stretch out in the sunshine. We harvested more green beans than we knew what to do with, sugar snap peas, hot peppers and cherry tomatoes.

Last spring we doubled the size of our garden and amended the soil with a truckload of rich composted manure purchased from a Waldo County farm. We had good luck with some plants, blessed again with heaps of green beans and anew with piles of carrots in all colors. Other crops didn’t work out. Every cucumber, summer squash and zucchini we planted started out well and then withered, beset by all manner of pests and disease.

But we carry on with our garden dreaming, undaunted by last summer’s missteps. I know we’ll make some missteps this year, too, even as the towering pile of seed packets bears witness to our growing ambitions. We have planted four kinds of carrots, three kinds of green beans and two varieties of peas. We have garlic, green and tall; collard greens, spinach, and both green and white onions. I sowed seeds for dill, cilantro and spicy edible marigolds. A friend generously shared some of his kale seedlings and another friend let us have some promising onion starts and an abundance of extra seeds.

We put in hot peppers and heirloom tomatoes, covering the soil with black plastic to give the hot-weather-loving seedlings a good start in a cool Maine spring. We put in potatoes, hoping that the potato bugs will let us get a good crop out of the season.

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ABOUT A BARN



KATHLEEN PIERCE | BDN

Split Rock Distilling is in a 50-year-old barn that has been home to multiple businesses over the years.

Discover Maine’s first organic distillery inside midcoast barn

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE
BDN STAFF

NEWCASTLE — In a well-used gambrel-roof barn on Route 1 in Newcastle, an organic distillery is being developed by two midcoast men. It will open in early July.

Watch the video
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Topher Mallory and Matt Page, who bonded over a love of rock climbing, knew the 50-year-old barn would be an ideal distillery. The price, size and location were right for their grain-based, organic operation. What the two friends didn’t know was the many ways the barn would shape their mission.

“As we ripped back the barn and saw the space, it inspired us to look past where we started with our business,” said Mallory, who also is the chief operating officer of the Maine clothing and jewelry chain Mexicali Blues.

He has worked nights and weekends to get Split Rock Distilling ready for market and visitors.

“It was amazing that we were able to relook at our distillation equipment and go bigger, but with more variety,” Mallory said.

The mundane vinyl siding was taken off to reveal the barn’s original wood exterior, and in keeping with the clean-cut taste of Split Rock’s natural spirits, the outside was painted a classic red, trimmed in white.

Inside the barn, last home to a tangle of businesses including screenprinting, sign making and wood carving, a gleaming vodka and whiskey column, hybrid still, gin basket and condenser anchor the space.

Striving to become Maine’s first organic distiller while turning a hodgepodge interior into an efficient booze barn has been a nonstop two-year endeavor.

“We had budget limitations, but at the end of the day, it is who we are as entrepreneurs that inspired taking on the restoration project, and what our brand is rooted in — an intimate handmade mentality,” said Mallory.

That mentality was tested during the frigid winter of 2014 and 2015. Blood

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