Growing strong: Farm Hub’s First Season to Include Grain Research, Public Outreach at Farm Stand

by Anne Pyburn Craig

Last month, stakeholders in the creation of the Farm Hub Initiative of the Local Economies Project (LEP) came together with thought leaders in agriculture and related fields at Mohonk Mountain House for a two-day retreat as part of the continuing process of refining the project’s direction and role in the larger community.

So what does a 78-year-old grain farmer from Kansas think about the idea of a farm hub in upstate New York? “For one thing,” says Wes Jackson of Salina, “that whole landscape needs somebody to take a rolling pin to it.”

Jackson, who attended the retreat, quickly adds that he’s kidding—he adores our mountainscapes—and he says, “that long valley they have looks like a great place to do a bunch of experiments. And the fact that Cornell University sent two people to spend the full weekend there, to me that … indicates some kind of a commitment. I’m not sure we could get that out of Kansas State.”

Jackson should know. He’s a Ph.D, a lifelong farmer, and founder of the Land Institute, a 38-year old endeavor that is researching how to sculpt grain agriculture into forms that more closely resemble the hardy and sustainable ecosystem of a prairie, “solving a 10 thousand-year-old problem,” as he puts it, partly through the development of perennial edible grains. He’s a member of the World Future Council and a close friend and collaborator of Wendell Berry’s.

Jackson’s presence at the forum is indicative of the seriousness of purpose and the reach of the LEP, backed by the Novo Foundation, in creating the Farm Hub in the first place. It is (as Jackson also notes) early days in the on-the-ground implementation of the Farm Hub, but the green shoots sprouting are strong ones, from carefully chosen strains.

“This project has been in the works for years,” says Michael Rozyne, co-founder and executive director of Red Tomato, a nonprofit established in 1996 and devoted to “connecting farmers and consumers through marketing, trade, and education, and through a passionate belief that a family-farm, locally-based, ecological, fair trade food system is the way to a better tomato.” Rozyne has been involved in marketing small farms’ products for...
three decades, and he gives the LEP high marks so far.

“A tremendous amount of forethought and careful planning and a lot of resources have gone into getting it to the starting line,” Rozyne says. “It’s hard to imagine a similar effort being done with any more planning and inclusion of a more diverse group of people. You can’t judge by how it looks at the start, but they’ve done a tremendous job getting to the starting line on a variety of fronts—location, community relations, how to balance long- and short-term goals, how to get stakeholders on board. It’s an impressive venture.”

Meanwhile on the ground in the Rondout Valley, there is plenty more happening than just talk. In mid-July, locals will be welcomed to the re-opening of what was previously called Gill’s Farm Stand on Route 209, offering the same excellent sweet corn that has won loyal fans in years past—as well as something more.

“We’ll be selling produce grown at the Farm Hub, as well as some local food products,” says LEP spokesperson Brooke Pickering-Cole. “Most of all, in this transitional year, we’re looking forward to inviting the community to visit and find out about our plans for the Farm Hub. We’ll have information there about the Farm Hub, and also a map of the farm showing our 2014 cover cropping and research projects. We also plan to have information about our partner organizations available—kind of a mini-hub.”

The cover cropping research Pickering-Cole is talking about is part of the Cornell Small Grains Project, a nearly century-old undertaking focused on utilizing “appropriate technologies encompassing molecular genetics, physiology, pathology, and breeding to develop strategies that contribute to the development of superior crop varieties.” The research is being directed by Cornell College of Agriculture and Life Sciences’ Dr. Mark Sorrels, and carried out on the ground by Cornell Cooperative Extension Vegetable and Field Crop educator Justin O’Dea. O’Dea and his colleagues hosted a Small Grains Field Day last month that drew some 60 participants—a wonderful turnout, he says, for a CCE event—to the Migliorelli Farm in the morning and the Farm Hub in the afternoon to discuss the furtherance of Hudson Valley grain production.

O’Dea and everyone else involved recognizes that the humid, hilly Northeast will never reclaim the title of America’s primary breadbasket from Jackson’s midwestern territory. But there are powerful reasons for re-establishing a smaller scale presence for small grains. “Once you begin to have all the ducks in a row—equipment, markets, infrastructure management—small grain should be more economical to produce than fruits and veggies,” O’Dea says. “People that are at the beginning of the learning curve probably won’t find it economical right away; there is an art and a wisdom and a knowledge base that you have to learn to produce for human consumption. But grains are also a nice cool season annual, good for crop rotation for vegetable growers, and that can break pest and disease cycles.

“Also, it’s a dry commodity that can be stored and the grower can sell it at different times of the year, which diversifies their marketing scheme, and, if it’s done right, can add resiliency. You can move grain when your other income is low or when the price is right. There is a lot of learning curve in this climate; we’re trying to give people as much information as we can to minimize risk.”

To develop that information, O’Dea will be growing 30 different small grain varieties a year on the Farm Hub property—wheat, barley, rye, and some ancient grain varieties such as emmert, spelt, and einkorn—over the next four years.

“Each space is three acres, split in half, one half managed conventionally and the other half using organic practices, although we are not going to be certified organic,” says O’Dea. “We’re working on selecting out varieties that will work well for Hudson Valley growers and be suitable for a given end use. The grain harvested will be provided to select end users. We are working with three bakers, a brewer, a malter and a distiller who’ll run trials on the varieties that they get from us, run tastings for professionals in their fields, and give us feedback.”
In mentioning that half the grain will be grown using organic techniques and half using conventional ones, O'Dea is touching on one of the Big Questions that has been asked by many locals about the Farm Hub Initiative's direction. But it's a question that many of the wise minds gathered at Mohonk—whose numbers also included Rondout Valley growers Bruce Davenport, Chris Kelder, and Amy Hepworth—consider something of a moot point. The idea, as Hepworth opined in an earlier Farm Hub article in this space, is to grow as well and productively as possible while maintaining the health of the land. At the cutting edge of research, as on many a smaller farm all over the planet, the distinction between “organic” and “conventional” gets fuzzy when you’re using a mix of ancient and ultramodern good ideas.

“As far as I know, no local organic growers have been short-minded enough to take a visible ‘organic or bust’ stance about the Farm Hub,” reports a source close to the project who spoke on condition of anonymity.” And most anyone who actually grows for a living understands that there are multiple overlaps in practices, and black-and-white thinking about this just doesn’t work.”

Dina Falconi, author of Foraging and Feasting and a strong advocate of sustainability, went to the Mohonk event and liked what she heard. “A lot of local growers are not organic and there is a lot of fear around what may happen, but I think the money is going to be used to support what is already in place. I don’t see any danger except that it may take a long time to do what they are wanting to do. If we can eventually find a way to successfully grow strawberries without fungicide, that’s great for everyone.

“Maybe I’ve been naively taken in, but I do feel trust. There’s a dreamlike quality: Money descends and liberates a piece of land with no self interest except making a better world. There is a fear factor about trusting big money that comes in, but the goal is to create an agricultural think tank that can teach the region and the rest of the world about growing food. We’re in a state of evolution and need to use what we’ve got.

“I strongly support organic vision as much as I can, but I still buy from conventional growers. It’s not about organic versus non-organic, it’s about ideas beyond that. The triple bottom line mandates feeding the people, the soil and the ecosystem—as you grow food, are you also taking care of ecological and human health? But if we can’t grow food, that [question is] no use. I think [the Farm Hub] has the potential to advance our understanding on these issues into the future. Put the right directors into right places…We have vision, now we need implementation.”

Collaboration, education and investment are clearly well under way. The Rondout Valley Growers Association reports in its newsletter that the Local Economies Foundation has awarded $726,000 to the Rondout schools to pioneer an Agriculture and Food Science Initiative, to include “the creation of interpretive outdoor trails for educational use, building an educational/research greenhouse and development of a Food Science facility. The project will span a three-year timeline, beginning with the trail construction.”

Educators are thrilled to have the resources to seed the next crop of future farmers, and Pickering-Cole says the school initiative fits hand-in-glove with the Farm Hub’s mission. “We anticipate that over time the Farm Hub will be a resource for and a complement to the Roundout Valley Central School District curriculum and to that of other schools,” she says, noting that the presence of five-star farmers and ardent educators was a factor in the Novo Foundation’s selection of the Gill Farm location in the first place.”

http://www.countrywisdomnews.com/2014/07/growing-strong-farm-hubs-first-season.html
develop programming we’ll be looking at how we can interface with students both on and off the Farm Hub. Hopefully, the fact that the Farm Hub will have a professional farmer training program will inspire younger people to think about agriculture as a career path.”

Wes Jackson—whose efforts at the Land Institute to develop perennial grain species have been making considerable progress over the years—is a firm believer that the kind of inclusive and collaborative approach being taken by the LEP and its partners is the way to make significant progress. “People say to me ‘You’ve got to get to the big agribusiness concerns, you’ve got to take out Monsanto,’ and so on, but we don’t need to get to anybody, we just need to do our work,” he says. “We draw a line and create a ‘them’ and an ‘us,’ but we’re all in this together, beneficiaries of the good and suffering through the bad...Wherever our side can get help I am willing to take it. I’m optimistic enough to know that if there’s money going into this effort and people are interested and well meaning, a lot of good things can happen. This may be just what that area’s been waiting for.”

Oh, and we’re all invited to Salina in late September for the Prairie Festival, the Land Institute’s annual “intellectual hootenanny” of agricultural thought leaders, and to check out some landscape that doesn’t need a rolling pin.

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