



Farm Manager Carol LaLiberte makes pressed apple cider with members of the Roxbury-Weston pre-school. Pictured: Mildred Canady and four-year-old Justin Houston, October 9, 1991. (Courtesy Weston Historical Society)

Land's Sake Turns 30

Editor's note: Much of the information in this article is taken from Brian Donahue's 1999 book Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms & Forests in a New England Town. Donahue is an environmental historian, Associate Professor of American Environmental Studies at Brandeis University, and a co-founder of Land's Sake in 1980. In Reclaiming the Commons, he skillfully interweaves autobiography, social and environmental history, philosophy, and ecology with the history of agriculture and community farming in Weston and New England.

Land's Sake evolved out of 1960s social and environmental activism. Bill McElwain, a Harvard-educated one-time carrot farmer and affordable housing advocate, began Green Power Farm in 1970 as a way to enlist volunteer labor to grow healthy food on unused Weston land, to be donated or sold cheaply to inner city residents. About the same time, the town established the Youth Commission to tackle teen drug abuse and disaffection. McElwain was hired as project director, and Green Power became a town-run program enlisting young people to plant, weed, and harvest during their summer vacations.

Also in the early 1970s, Weston purchased hundreds of acres of conservation land as part of an ambitious land acquisition plan. To determine how to manage all that land, the Conservation Commission formed a study committee consisting of Julie Hyde, a Weston native raised on a farm; Brian Donahue, McElwain's assistant at Green Power; and Doug Henderson, a retired diplomat who had returned to his boyhood home. Because the Town did not wish to add to its payroll, the committee regrouped and eventually settled on the idea of an independent non-profit membership organization that could contract to manage the conservation land.

Another co-founder, Martha Gogel, found a lawyer to help with the incorporation. The organization was christened "Land's Sake" after a favorite expression of Doug Henderson's mother. In *Reclaiming the Commons*, Brian Donahue explains the group's three central principles: to "provide ecologically sound care of land in Weston, involve the community and particularly young people with the land, and make the program pay its own way as far as possible through the sale of products and services." The fledgling organization had little capital and no commitment from the Conservation Commission.

The Case Farm "was born more or less by accident," according to Donahue. Peter Ashton, newly appointed director of the Arnold Arboretum's Case Estates, was looking for a way to avoid selling the "Forty Acre Field" at Wellesley and Newton Streets. Ashton felt that actively farming the land might generate income and lessen pressure to sell, and the Arboretum agreed to allow Land's Sake to give it a try. In the spring of 1981, head farmer Brian Donahue and a small group of high school students planted a few acres with strawberries, raspberries, butternut squash, and even a few hybrid cantaloupes. To earn income for the organization, Gogel and Henderson tilled gardens for new members. Over the next four

Right: James "Bear" Burnes, long-time president of Land's Sake, making cider, October 1991 (Courtesy Weston Historical Society)





Left: Laurie DiMartino and her babysitter, Jane McCarney, picking strawberries at Land's Sake, July 1991. Right page: Steve Miller and John Potter with the draft horses, collecting winter squash. (Courtesy Weston Historical Society).

years the total acreage under cultivation gradually increased to ten, about half in raspberries and strawberries.

Despite much hard work, the farm failed to turn a profit. Land's Sake declined to use chemical herbicides and pesticides. Gradually the fields were cleaned of perennial weeds by cultivation, but until then, forgoing pesticides hurt the berry crops. The Arboretum initially refused permission to erect a farm stand but finally allowed a small stand in the fall of 1984. Marketing was a challenge. One year, Martha Gogel persuaded Harvard's dining service to buy quantities of butternut squash, which Land's Sake had to deliver peeled. One evening a week, a group would gather in someone's kitchen for an evening of peeling, cubing, and bagging, but even this was not profitable. According to Donahue, they began to feel that "Maybe it really wasn't possible to be ecologically responsible, educational, and profitable all at once."

In the spring of 1985, after four years and with no profit in sight, the Arboretum decided to lease the land to a commercial grower. Knowing how important the farm had become to Land's Sake, Donahue was able to retain use of one acre along the road to grow flowers and specialty crops that would not compete directly with the farmer. Later that spring, the Arboretum announced that it would be putting the property up for sale.

In the spring and summer of 1985, the commercial grower, Tom Hansen opened a larger farm stand and sold produce grown on the Case land and on his farm in Framingham. Reduced to one acre, Land's Sake grew flowers and "odd ball vegetables" which Donahue describes this way:

[we grew] "yellow tomatoes, white eggplants, apple cucumbers, and bottle gourds, tiny Jack-Be-Little pumpkins and huge Atlantic Giant squumkins. If it was guaranteed to come up the wrong size or color, we planted it.

Having a colorful flower garden right next to the road made it all the more upsetting to townspeople when Harvard began conducting perc tests to see how many lots could be developed. The flowers were also a financial success. That year, Land's Sake earned \$25,000 from one acre, compared to \$20,000 the previous year on ten acres.

Harvard agreed to give the Town a right of first refusal and set the price at \$3.5 million for thirty-five acres. At a special Town Meeting in the fall of 1985, the bond issue to purchase the land passed easily despite the financial conservatism of the times. Weston residents voted to tax themselves \$100 per year for 20 years to save the farm they had come to appreciate.

In 1991, Green Power Farm was merged with Land's Sake, which now runs the Green Power program on about 15 acres of land on Merriam Street. Each sum-



mer, middle schoolers pay for the privilege of working from one to eight weeks in the fields, growing crops that are donated to a nearby food pantry. In 2009, Green Power produced 2,955 pounds of produce ranging from arugula to zucchini and including popcorn and soybeans, with a total estimated value of approximately \$8,151.

The "Forty Acre Field" was purchased for municipal purposes and could be used for a school or other town purpose other than farming or conservation. Land's Sake leases the land and contracts with the Conservation Commission to farm it. While not an official town farm, Land's Sake has become a town institution that presently cultivates about 25 acres. Since 1986, the farm has been completely

organic—although no longer legally certified as such. The soil is improved, not with chemical fertilizers but with compost, approved organic fertilizers, and “green manure” crops that are plowed back into the soil to improve its nutrient content.

During his tenure as Land’s Sake director, from 1981 to 1992, Brian Donahue and his wife, Faith Rand, formed a “neighborhood sheep partnership.” Owners of pasture land donated money to Land’s Sake for the purchase of ewes and portable electric fencing. Donahue and Rand moved the flock from pasture to pasture and, in winter, to a barn on Ripley Lane owned by Ralph and Shirley Earle. Rand

kept the wool in exchange for her labor, and sales of freezer lamb and tanned sheepskins paid for the expenses. In *Reclaiming the Commons*, Donahue observed that “Nothing brings rural character back to life like putting a few sheep in an old field.”

In the early 1990s, Land’s Sake experimented with using a team of Suffolk draft



Above: Glen Hutchinson taping maple trees, February 1992. (Courtesy Weston Historical Society) At left, Faith Rand feeding Land’s Sake sheep (Courtesy Land’s Sake, c. 1980s)



Unidentified shoppers buying asparagus, May 1987 (Courtesy Weston Historical Society)

horses to supplement its tractor. But after about a decade raising sheep and a few years keeping horses, Land's Sake decided to eliminate livestock. In addition to the cost and extra staff time needed, the lack of a barn was a major handicap.

Since the early 1980s, the Weston Forest & Trail Association has contracted with Land's Sake to maintain Weston's 65 miles of trails. The Conservation Commission also contracts with Land's Sake to manage parts of the town forest. From 1989 to 1992, the forestry program was headed by John Potter, who was splitting

wood with Land's Sake at age sixteen and returned after graduating from Yale with a progressive forestry education. As part of Potter's master's thesis, he inventoried the town's forest, identifying 1440 accessible acres. Potter prepared a long-term management plan emphasizing diversity of tree species and ages. Today, about five to ten acres are harvested each year, not by clear cutting but rather by a series of thinnings spaced over several decades. Land's Sake typically produces about fifty cords of firewood a year, which covers the cost of thinning and increases the value of the remaining timber. For several years, Land's Sake experimented with milling lumber, which was sold to local woodworkers or used for building the farm stand and other construction projects. The staff also plants Christmas trees that members can chop down themselves, for a fee.

Maple sugaring began in the 1970s as part of Green Power. Middle school students tap trees in February and for the next few weeks help boil down the sap in a small sugarhouse built by Bill McElwain in 1973 next to the middle school parking lot. The supply of pure Weston-made syrup sells out quickly at the late March "Sugaring Off" party.

In its first decade, Land's Sake took up the challenge of restoring an old orchard on the newly purchased Weston College land. Volunteers and staff pruned and fertilized existing trees and planted new ones, of old varieties. The goal was to have sufficient apples to produce cider using a 19th century cider press originally

acquired by Green Power. But apples have proven difficult to grow organically, and today the orchard bears only intermittently. Recently a few new fruit trees have been planted under the direction of Eagle Scout Will Jacobs.

As mentioned earlier, Land's Sake has been handicapped over the years by the absence of a barn and the fact that its operations are spread all over town. In addition to the Merriam Street and Case Fields, the group has leased the Melone Homestead at 27 Crescent Street from the Conservation Commission since 1990. This small 19th century house came with the Sears Conservation Land purchased by the town in the mid-1970s. Land's Sake uses the space for an office and housing for one or two staff. They operate a nearby greenhouse used to start seedlings that are later transplanted to the Case Field. The house was recently restored using Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds. In the late 1990s, Land's Sake assisted the Mosher family in renovating their old barn adjacent to Case Field in return for using the space for vehicle and equipment storage.

In 2006, Land's Sake began a Community Sustainable Agriculture (CSA) program, where residents purchase a share of whatever is grown.. The CSA provides predictable income and also shares the risks inherent in farming, particularly from too much or too little rain. It now enrolls 110 participants each season.

Through its Sugaring Off party in March, Strawberry Festival in June, and Harvest Festival in October, Land's Sake celebrates the seasonal rhythms and brings the community together. Thirty years have brought growth and many changes along the way, but Land's Sake is still doing much of what it set out to do. As one of the pioneering community farms, it has played a part in strengthening the local food movement and helped inspire many similar operations across New England.

Brian Donahue (right) and Kate Rossiter press apples into cider, September 1990 (Courtesy Weston Historical Society)

