

Workshop Title: Considering Alternatives to the Romantic Notion of Land Ownership

Speaker(s) & their titles: Stacy Brenner & John Bliss, Co-owners of Broadturn Farm

Executive Summary:

John Bliss and Stacy Brenner grew up in the suburbs of large cities, with no direct relationship to agriculture, and began farming together in 2002. Their farm, Broadturn Farm grows cut flower and organic produce on 13 acres. They market through a Produce and Cut Flower CSA, a small retail store in Portland, Maine, a design business that utilizes flowers and foraged materials from the farm. They also have a farm-based educational program for children, and event hosting (mainly farm to table weddings). They also mentor young farmers.

Notes:

Being near an urban center with high property values they fully understand the challenges of buying land, and the financial pressure facing new farmers. They never would have been able to get to where they are without renting, leasing, and growing slowly. When they began farming they had a “practice farm”, while one partner worked, and they developed their business plan and bought tools. This farm was <5 acres, and they were on a 5-year lease. Essentially they used it to learn, but knew they needed to move on to a more permanent piece of land. If you are going to go with this option make sure you design your business so that it can be moved, when you are ready.

Next they moved to the “reserve farm”. 434 acres owned by a land trust, which originally bought it to preserve the land, not necessarily to keep it as a farm. The infrastructure was old, but the soil was decent, and suitable for growing crops, although somewhat depleted from being used for hay year after year. To get on their land they needed a business plan, and letters of recommendation to convince the land trust. One of the stipulations was they had to allow the community open access to the farm for hiking etc. This has been valuable for the business in getting buy-in from community. Initially they had a 5-year rolling lease, but they ended up with a long-term 30-year lease.

Why 30 years? They decided that 30 years is the life span of their business, they can pay rent year to year, they can focus on the land, and have enough free capital to run the business. They developed a maintenance fund (based on a 10 year assessment of what needed to be fixed), which both the farmers and the land trust fund raise for together. This fund is for things like putting a new roof on the barn. The buildings are not always functional for the business, but they make sense for the land trust as heritage structures. They work together to preserve the “viewshed” of the land – although the farm business doesn’t need cute barns, the land trust would like the aesthetic preserved so they both contribute to upkeep.

What about equity? Some of the value of the business does stay on the farm, ie soil improvement. They do get to keep, and sell their brand, greenhouses, tools, and perennials.

In case of disagreements they have come up with some levels of protection, and given thought of how they would overcome any issues. They have the right to convene a committee in the case of a disagreement, or if they need to sell their business. This requires

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long term thinking, and planning. They want to be able to capture the most value for their investment, and they want a seamless transition from their farm to whoever would take the farm over. They feel that this model is replicable elsewhere, and a good example of how community can come together to preserve farmland, and assist new farmers. The main point is this one way to farm – you don't always have to own the land.