

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Bringing the Culture Back to Agriculture

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From a fairly young age, Camelia Frieberg, owner of Watershed Farm in Nova Scotia, had a strong interest in growing food. She could often be found foraging around her family cottage, discovering plants that you could bring to the table.

“I was a huge fan of Euell Gibbons [outdoorsman and early health food advocate]. My main interest was foraging—however, I soon discovered that what you can’t find you can deliberately grow,” said Camelia.

A film producer by trade, Camelia moved to downtown Toronto, residing in spaces that often had very small growing areas. But despite the size limitation, she always took the opportunity to grow gardens.

Pictured: Camelia Frieberg, seen here tending her flock of sheep, owns Watershed Farm in Nova Scotia, which serves as a CSA operation and education center.

At one point, she was living in a space with a postage-stamp-sized backyard that backed onto three other neighbors. All three of those neighbors—one Portuguese, one Italian and one Greek—would connect with Camelia and each other outdoors in their gardens.

“It showed the incredible link between cultural traditions and foods,” said Camelia. “Although we didn’t have mutually comprehensible language skills, we shared a lot of information, seeds and, eventually, vegetables.”

Throughout the '80s and '90s, Camelia became very involved with issues in food security and the food sovereignty movement. At the same time, she was producing documentary and feature films, traveling the globe to both make and showcase her productions.

“I was living a jet-set life, but was tied to the seasons and what was growing,” said Camelia. “I remember dreading

leaving for the Cannes festival, as that was when my home garden was in its glory.”

Growing evolved into more of a full-time pursuit when Camelia became attuned to the challenges with seed diversity.

“My partner and I decided to start a farm in Ontario by Lake Simcoe,” said Camelia. “It was a CSA before there was a name for it with a group of about 30 friends and neighbors coming in from Toronto to collect their vegetables.”

Their journey eventually led them to Nova Scotia where they fell in love with both the region and the people within it. Before purchasing their plot, Camelia contacted every farmer in the region that was on the Canadian organic list of certified farmers.

“I wanted to know what they had to say about the area in terms of both market and growth potential,” she said. “They were all very welcoming.”

The plot that would eventually become Watershed Farm was purchased in the summer of 1995 from a couple who had deep roots in the local farming community.

“We were deeply inspired by the people who we bought our property from and they remained good resources for us during those first few years,” said Camelia. “I think she was glad to have found someone that was not there to cut down the forest, but instead grow organically.”

In those initial years, Camelia continued in her film production business, while her then-husband did the majority of the farming work. That being said, Camelia never strayed too far from the operation side of the business, providing both the marketing and helping to develop the CSA. Watershed Farm also set aside a portion of their land to grow seeds from a company on the West Coast.

“This was a huge eye-opener, as we quickly saw how a small piece of land could generate significant revenue,” said Camelia.

When Camelia and her ex separated, she took over the business full time. This included introducing the first CSA in south Nova Scotia, and expanding it into Halifax and the student population in Dalhousie.

“I have a strong commitment to biodynamic farming as both an aesthetic and spiritual choice—it forces you to close the loop, including adding livestock to the farming operation to aid with the farm fertility,” said Camelia.

Part of biodynamic farming is fostering a strong connection to the community. This is a philosophy that Watershed Farm has thoroughly embraced over the years, including being both an education hub and a resource. Over the years, the farm has subsidized a portion of the food shares in the CSA for students and other individuals in need. Also, they’re active supporters of Ark, a local charity that provides programming for individuals with special needs.

“We supply all of the food for the cooking program and have been very happy to be able to make those donations throughout the years,” said Camelia.

She enjoys discovering and growing new varieties and prides herself in helping expand the Nova Scotia palate to seek out more than the traditional green zucchini and red tomato. Today, almost 80% of what Watershed Farm grows is from their own seeds. The farm has become much more than a place to grow vegetables—it’s a place where Camelia can share her knowledge, seeds, produce and a bit of culture.

“Over the years, I’ve held poetry workshops and music concerts, including the annual stinking rose garlic festival,” said Camelia. During the festival, attendees are entertained with music, garlic lore and garlic-infused food. “I’m trying to bring the culture back into agriculture.”

Today, Watershed Farm has evolved from a CSA to an education resource center, providing different workshops on

the farm and teaching others about organic and biodynamic farming. Her goal is to launch a residential program for young adults that would immerse them in a variety of aspects, including seed saving, beekeeping, farming and civic engagement. For Camelia, the days of running a large CSA and selling in several farmers markets are over; instead, she's looking at the future of the farm, including succession planning.

"I've shaped this beautiful landscape and creating this abundance of diverse resources," said Camelia. "The challenge is how do I safeguard my vision of the farm while also making room for someone new to come in?"

Recently, Camelia has returned to the world of film, including producing an award-winning feature documentary called "Modified," a film that explores the role of GMOs in North America, with documentary filmmaker and food writer Aube Giroux.

When asked about Watershed Farm, Camelia shared that she's very encouraged by the growth in young farmers in South Shore Halifax.

"I do feel to some extent that my work here is done," said Camelia. "There is an increased sophistication in food culture today, which is extremely refreshing." **GT**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.