

A Discussion with Theresa Walker about Agriculture, the Agriculture Commission, and Ovis Aries

New Ordinance

Did you know that sheep have a stomach with four compartments? And that the word *ruminant* comes from *ruminant*?

An interview with Theresa Walker, shepherdess and chair of the Durham Agriculture Commission, on the occasion of the Town's adoption of an innovative ordinance promoting agriculture in the community, yielded much fascinating information. Theresa also emphasized that the commission is eager to assist residents who want to pursue new opportunities now available for backyard farming.

Agriculture

Theresa noted how much agriculture in New Hampshire has changed over the years, including the obvious decline in the number of farms. But farms, former farmland, or at least good arable soils, are still embedded in Durham's landscape. As a society, we have a newfound appreciation of the importance of local and household food production, more so with the pandemic and supply chain interruptions. Happily, we are seeing a resurgence in agriculture throughout New England.

In addition, Theresa said, "Farms provide many of the attributes that we value: rural quality, scenic views, a working landscape and a record of our history. The open fields, stone walls, wildlife habitat, clean water, and lower density draw new residents here."

There is unlimited potential for growth in farming in the region thanks to technological advances and a supportive infrastructure that has ripened. Theresa observed that, "You can walk into the Rollinsford Farmer's Market and buy fresh greens grown over a very cold weekend in the middle of winter. Backyard Farms in Maine produces fresh tomatoes year round. There is a big hydroponic facility [with plants grown in water without soil] in Loudon producing lettuce."

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), in which consumers support a farm by purchasing shares entitling them to portions of the harvest, is thriving. "Some people think that agriculture in New England is dying and others may not care where their food is grown and under what conditions. But food quality and food availability affects us all. To quote [former commission member and noted advocate for charcuterie] James Bubar: 'If you eat, you're in.'"

A Longstanding Passion

Theresa grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, not exactly a hotbed of agriculture. And she didn't spend summers on an uncle's farm. She has always just loved all things agriculture – "farms, farmers, farm animals, farm people, and the seasonal nature of farming." A dyed-in-the-wool aficionado.

Theresa received a bachelor's degree in agriculture from the University of Delaware (President Biden's alma mater, although he was not an ag major). Go Blue Hens! She wanted to be a large animal veterinarian but was waitlisted for veterinary school (which is more competitive than medical school). Instead, Theresa took a job as a farm manager for Sterling College in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, an institution renowned in the sustainable agriculture world.

While she was at Sterling, Act 250, a groundbreaking statute driven in large part by the loss of farms to development, was passed (Vermont can no longer boast having more cows than people). The law facilitated public participation in project reviews, kindling Theresa's interest in the impact of planning decisions on agriculture. She then obtained a master's degree in land use from the College of Environmental Science and Forestry at SUNY Syracuse.

In 1987, Theresa and her husband Patrick moved to Durham for her job as a land use planner for Rockingham Planning Commission. Her ongoing work at RPC, along with a part-time position with the Regional Economic Development Center have proved to be invaluable assets for her volunteer work in Durham. It is worth noting also that she had the pleasure of working with the late John Hatch, an artist and ecologist and one of this community's most illustrious citizens, on the Conservation Commission some time after her arrival here.

The Agriculture Commission

Theresa has chaired the Durham Agriculture Commission since its establishment in 2011. Those who have worked with Theresa praise her leadership qualities: She is dedicated and knowledgeable, even tempered but not at all sheepish about promoting this cause, and she listens. In turn, Theresa stresses the special value brought by each member of the commission.

- Ray LaRoche, Jr. represents the 6th generation of his family's diversified farm.
- Ellen Karelitz raises chickens – Bridget, Norma, and Natalie, at present – and has a wealth of knowledge and experience about food production at the household and community scale.
- Suzanne MacDonald is a leader and founding member of the Wagon Hill Farm Community Garden.
- John Carroll is Professor Emeritus of Environmental Conservation at UNH and author of four books on local food and farming in New Hampshire.
- Lee Alexander is the town's beekeeping expert and the lead in managing Durham's 'Bee City USA' designation.
- David Langley, who for many years ran Durham's famous buffalo farm on Langley Road, shares a farm management perspective and interest in homesteading.
- Bryan Cassidy helps people to be stewards of their own gardens and orchards.
- Dan Winans is the founder of the EcoGastronomy dual major at UNH.
- Alberto Manalo teaches agribusiness economics and food policy at UNH.
- Anton Bekkerman is the director of the New Hampshire Agricultural Experiment Station, UNH's first research organization, created in 1887.

- Wayne Burton, the Town Council’s representative on the commission, is a strong advocate for re-establishing agricultural use at Wagon Hill Farm.
- Paul Rasmussen, the Planning Board’s representative, provides the commission with an indispensable planning perspective.

Ovis Aries

As for Theresa, she brings her knowledge of sheep (*Ovis aries*). She and Patrick and their youngest son Tim raise Merino and Romney breeds for wool and breed stock on their small farm on Bennett Road.

Theresa says, “Sheep were likely the second animal domesticated after dogs. They give you meat, milk, and fiber, and they convert carbohydrates [their food] to protein [our food] very efficiently.” As prey animals they are docile and friendly, but wary. “Their only defense is running. They don’t scratch. They can’t bite because they have a hard palate on top rather than teeth (except for molars). They can read expressions which they have learned to do for their own survival. If they trust you they are quite personable. Provide them with a safe environment and they are easy to manage.”

Sheep are ruminants. They eat a lot of hay and other roughage. The enzymes in their stomach break it down and they regurgitate it to chew some more. With four compartments their stomachs are very good at digesting. Sheep spend half their day chewing. “This is the sign of a satisfied, healthy animal.” Theresa thinks that they are pondering all the while; after all, to ruminate is to contemplate. “They have very deep thoughts.” But then, Theresa does a lot of knitting, a human take on chewing one’s cud.

Her business, Great Bay Wool Works, occupies a market niche. Many sheepherders raise white sheep exclusively to serve knitters and apparel companies that want white fleece for dyeing. Theresa’s sheep come in white, brown, black, and shades of gray and their yarn is not dyed. She says, “In our case we spun it around so people get the natural fleece color.”



Theresa, Patrick, and Tim usually keep around twelve sheep. The current flock includes Cocoa, Cute Face, Duchess, Edie, Estie, Fiona, Gidget, Honey, Margie, Ronnie, Smooch, and Storm. Adorable, ewe must admit.

Take a look at the new ordinance and the Agriculture Commission’s website here: https://www.ci.durham.nh.us/boc_agricultural. Consider reaching out to Theresa and the commission for guidance in growing crops or raising chickens, goats, sheep, or other livestock (subject to best management practices, of course). It’s certainly worth contemplating.