

Pay It Forward Farm Gets Up and Running

Permaculture plans mean thinking long-term

By Jackson Bicknell, for the Beacon

Pay it Forward Farm: a food forest, future education center, mecca for wildlife foragers, and the new liveable home for Sophie Viandier as well as three interns and a German Shepard.

After almost a year and a half of ceaseless work, Sophie can begin to rest, a little. The water is running, the electricity is done, the ceramic shower mural is completed, and nearly all the interior trim is painted.

However, a look outside the newly furnished living room reveals future projects: an empty greenhouse, the beginning structure of a composting toilet, and the budding fruit forest. Sophie, a working machine and a connoisseur for all things efficient, commented on her progress: "The place has come a long way, but there is still so much to be done."

To understand Sophie's vision for her property, you have to understand the concept of permaculture. "It's cathedral-building thinking," says Sophie, "realizing that you may not live long enough to reap the benefits of a place, but knowing

that someone one day will."

The "pay it forward" motto reflects this mindset, as does every aspect of the farm. The newly planted apple, mulberry, peach, pear, and plum trees, still too young to harvest, "will benefit whoever is around for the next 40, 50, or 70 years," said Sophie.

Powering the Grid

Sophie had to apply the Pay it Forward

concept more literally when purchasing solar panels. The expense of the panels, originally thought to be too costly to offer an immediate return on her investment, was justified knowing that everyone can benefit from the limited environmental impact of using a renewable resource for electricity.

In fact, the solar panels are connected directly to the grid, so that when the system generates more electricity than Sophie needs, she earns renewable energy credits, and the surplus goes directly into the grid and is available for others to use.

Inexpensive electric bills, independence from fossil fuels, generating excess energy for others, and currently running at a four kilowatt-hour per month excess all make Sophie very happy.

To look at Sophie's property, the permaculture-naive eye would see a few small raised beds full of vegetables, a chicken coop, some newly planted fruit trees, and vegetation everywhere. When taking a guided tour of the property while listening to Sophie's thorough explanations and unbridled enthusiasm for her work, one begins to envision the detailed "food forest" blueprint on display in her living room come alive.

According to Sophie, a food forest is designed to mimic a natural forest, using layers of vegetation that perform either specific or multiple functions, such as fixing nitrogen, providing wildlife habitat, water filtration, or shade. It is a "hyper-efficient version of nature's self-maintaining, balanced system," explains Sophie. "It has many more human-based plants near the house that all support each other. When properly designed and installed, there is very little human input aside from harvesting, preserving, and pruning."

Sophie believes that animals will also be an important component of her

farm because of their capacity to fertilize, eat food scraps, mow the lawn, till the earth, trim the trees, eat grubs and pests, and provide meat and other edibles. Sophie points to her chickens as an example. "My chickens are laying eggs, providing compost, and digging up my Japanese Knotweed, a highly invasive plant that has crept onto the property and can devastate water ways."

She appears undaunted by the work in front of her, and fueled by the progress she has made thus far.

Rebuilding the Soil

A significant emphasis of Sophie's current focus involves preparing the land so that it is both fertile and makes the best use of resources. These efforts include terracing the land as well as building and refining a system of ditches and water storage ponds to more efficiently utilize the rain water. She is also planning a gray-water system which can be utilized to water plants.

In addition, she is rebuilding her soil. "Like many properties in the area, my topsoil was most likely sold years ago." Sophie continued, "The fertility of the land lies in the organic matter and the microbes that make up the top layer of earth. I'm mitigating my problem with organic matter." The rye, clover, and buckwheat which she planted, along with weeds growing on the property, will add a layer of material to start building upon.

In addition to plant mulch to augment the soil, Sophie is researching plans for a composting toilet to collect "humanure," a term coined by Joseph Jenkins in The Humanure Handbook. "Obviously this sounds icky," said Sophie, "but after several months of decomposition, humanure is safe to put on plants.

"This is extremely important in my See Forward on page 31



On the side stoop of the small farmhouse, Sophie Viandier takes a break with interns Jasper Cooper, Eva Moss, and McLean Zauner (in back). Jake Jones, the dog, takes a moment to relax, too. Photo: Jackson Bicknell



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For each event: CONTACT leader for meeting Time & Place

Aug 2 (Sat) : Morning in Wilmot: repair SRK Greenway near Wilmot Center.
Get water off the trail !! Bring a shovel to open drains and stone steps.
Wilmot Conservation Commission co-hosts: Easy: 1 mile; 3 hrs.
Contact: Brian Faughnan (ph: 526-7838) or bwfaughnan@comcast.net

Aug 13 (Wed): Stoney Brook Wildlife Sanctuary (NH Audubon in Newbury).
Help clear a new spur trail to cellar hole site: Loppers, handsaws, shovels.
ASLPT holds the conservation easement with access from the SRK Greenway.
Morning short hike & work Moderate: 2 miles round trip., 3-4 hours.
Contact: Andy Deegan at ASLPT (526-6555) or adeegan@ausbonsargent.org

Aug 19 (Tues): Kezar Lake to Kearsarge Valley Road, North Sutton Valley Trail.
Morning summer low-lands walk, checking for adequate blazing.
Bring loppers and we'll trim as needed to see trail and blazes. Easy 4 mi.; 3 hrs.
Contact: Gerry Gold (526-2857) or geeecubed@yahoo.com

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