

Growing A Greater Long Island

By Morgan Oline Wiig

Description:

Growing A Greater Long Island is a short documentary that takes a glance into Thera Farms, a small 20 acre organic farm on leased church property in Brentwood, New York on Long Island. We hear from Teddy Bolkas, farm owner, who speaks about his take on sustainable agriculture in a community like Brentwood.

Transcript:

Teddy Bolkas:

So farming history, we moved here in 1982 from Greece and we were city folk for some reason. My dad found the love of goats. We had 17 goats growing up and we made goat milk and goat cheese but back in the 80s, no one really wanted that and so we slowly transitioned over to tomatoes and we farmed about an acre and a half in Ronkonkoma for a long time. We had a little farm stand at the front, and we used to make little baskets of tomatoes. People would come, take the basket and leave 5 bucks. And then I grew up, moved away. Got a career. Missed farming. I was sitting in the backyard with my sister looking at , you know, 2.5 acres of grass. And you know what, I'm gonna start the farm back up. Bought a tractor, and started digging. And then 6 years ago we found 20 acres here in Brentwood.

I contacted the Peconic Land Trust, told them my predicament and they said that there's farm land in Brentwood. Brentwood is right in the middle of Long Island, there's no farmland in Brentwood. And when I came here and stood in the middle of this gorgeous field with Sister Karen, Dan, and Kim from Peconic Land Trust, I was pleasantly surprised- there's farmland in Brentwood! So we struck a deal, got a long lease. And the past 5 years we've had this farmstand and every year it gets busier and busier and better and better. And the community absolutely loves us here and every year we are expanding a little bit more. Now we have 20 acres. 3 greenhouses, we have a little agrotourism, a little play area. We do brick oven pizza on the weekends. And all those little aspects help sustain the life of the farm

Debra Ruiz:

Everyday we cut the vegetables for the people to buy so they can eat healthier. This year there are more vegetables, though the sun was not enough this year, it was very hard but other than that we tried for the people to bring fresh vegetables and that everything was well so that everyone was happy.

Teddy Bolkas:

Our focus at Thera Farms, we want to farm ethically in every aspect. Ethically by our workforce, we want to pay a living wage. Ethically by our customers, we want to charge a fair price. And ethically by the planet, we want to use practices with the least amount of environmental impact. We do that by not shipping our food out. Everything that's grown on these 20 acres is washed on these 20 acres and sold at this farmstand. We soil test every plot and we add nutrients that are needed. We don't over fertilize. We cover crop, we rotate and that's what keeps us sustainable. My favorite saying is the definition of the most important aspect of sustainable agriculture is profitability because if you're not making money you're not sustainable. The money sustains passion. If you're going broke doing this eventually you're going to stop. You know we all have to eat, we have car insurance, and health insurance we have to pay for. You gotta provide for your kids. If you can't make a living at this, it's not sustainable. So in six years we went from a grassy field to a profitable farmstand and an overall farm operation. We gross in hundreds of thousands of dollars right, we do about \$300,000 a year and hopefully within the next five years if we fine-tune it in the neighborhood find out more about us. I think we can approach 1 million. My goal is to have a successful profitable operation that's going to outlive me. The goal of agriculture isn't about me and my generation, it's about how do we keep it around and having a successful business that somebody else can walk into even though it might not profit me. When I'm ready to retire it's something that I would like to live behind, so there's two ways you can approach growing food. One you grow what you like, and you try to force it onto consumers or you can take a feedback from consumers and grow what they like to eat so coming from Ronkonkoma to growing food in Brentwood we have learned with this neighborhood liked or would they want to buy with their diet instead we went from growing 20 varieties of heirloom tomatoes to grow and grow tomatoes and you know Radishes jalapeños and they're big on corn here too to satisfy the local market and that also helps a community engagement because now we have the majority of our sales is the neighborhood and they come here to get their daily. Do you know their daily vegetables I'm gonna leave you with if you're going to go into agriculture, concentrate more in the money aspect of it on the business aspect of it you know I think dollars not tomatoes if you want to make it in medium small scale operation, very important that you know your figures be very good business to be an OK grower and you'll be all right.