

## NEW FARMERS

# Cut Flower Farming: A Love Story

By Madeleine Charney

*"The earth laughs in flowers."  
—e.e. cummings*

Jane Litwin Taylor never pictured herself as a flower farmer. But the journey of life can take you down unexpected paths, sometimes leading to vibrant and enriching places. This is the story of Sweet Earth Farm, the certified organic farm she co-owns with her vegetable farmer husband, Patrick Taylor. Located on Jackson Street in

Belchertown, Massachusetts, Sweet Earth Farm is part of the Lampson Brook Farms Cooperative, which is based on a 416-acre site.

It was a sunny Sunday morning when Jane and I met up on her half-acre field. She bounded up to me with an outstretched hand and a wide smile. Dressed all in black with a digital camera dangling from one wrist, she appeared more like an artist than a farmer, especially against the backdrop of multi-colored flowers ribboning out across the landscape.

I immediately noticed the intricate beadwork of her dazzling earrings. She explained they were her own handiwork, part of a jewelry business she owned and operated for several years. The business savvy she gained through this experience has transferred well to owning and operating a farm. Currently selling her bouquets at the farmer's markets in Amherst and Cambridge, future plans include sales to local restaurants.

So how does an artist transform herself into a farmer? "It's natural for me, the way I think about which flowers work well together," she said. Her first exposure to hands-on gardening began in 1995 when she shared



Jane Litwin Taylor's artistic talents found their creative outlet in flower farming.

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McDonald supplements his pigs' grass diet with organic grain and said he was experimenting with how much grain swine actually need.

Both Flying Pigs and McDonalds send their pigs out to be butchered in USDA-approved facilities, a step required by law for farmers that wish to retail their meat.

Flying Pigs sells approximately half their pork at farmers markets and the remainder is equally divided among sales to restaurants and to consumers via mail order, Yezzi said. He anticipates the portion of his business dedicated to restaurant sales will go up, thanks to participation in Farm to Chef Express, a weekly delivery service that brings fresh produce and meat from upstate farmers to New York City restaurants.

"We found the pork was excellent, with great marbling," Yezzi said.

The pigs feasted on nuts, grasses, wild mint and more, a varied diet that brings a more complex flavor to the meat, he said.

Growers also typically market their meat as "clean," whether it's organic, "natural," hormone-free or the like. Most grass-based operations shun medicated feeds, medicines and the like and claim raising animals on pasture cuts down on the need for medicines. "I want consumers to know their food is clean," McDonald said.



A McDonald Farms pig challenges the stereotype that sows are not maternal by nursing her litter and a few piglets she didn't give birth to. Photo by Peter McDonald

Raising animals on pasture can be healthier for the soil, advocates say, claiming that frequent rotation of land breaks the cycles of parasite and bacteria cycles that can be harmful to the land and the creatures that live on it.

#### TO MARKET, TO MARKET

Direct marketing of pasture-raised meats requires consumer education, these farmers say. Whether selling off the farm or at farmers markets, buyers typically want to be reassured about the way the animals were grown, the quality of the meat and so on.

"When you drive up to the farm, you can see all of the animals. You can see the pigs rooting up the garden," McDonald said.

Consumers may be surprised to learn how pasture-raised animals live.

"One of the coolest things anyone ever said to me is, 'is that a pig?'," McDonald said. "The general public is so far removed from where their food comes from and the power they have to direct the way food and animals are cared for with their consumer dollar."

Just as consumers might have a learning curve, there are few books or experts on raising swine on pasture, meaning farmers have catching up to do as well.

"We have seen so many conventional farming truths prove to be untrue," McDonald said. For example, he said, sows on his farm have proven to be very maternal, even occasionally nursing others' piglets.

#### GETTING STARTED

Both farmers suggested new pig growers start small. Learn to care for the animals and the land and how to work with customers; grow from there.

McDonald Farms sells meat direct to the consumer, utilizing farmers markets, an on-farm store and what McDonald called "farm connections," gathering together a group of people who will buy local food.

#### BRUSH HOG

"Pigs are basically plows," McDonald said. Because they are fairly voracious eaters farmers have used them to clear brush on abandoned pastureland they want to bring back into use, or pasture that has become overrun with weeds. They are also used for clear stubble in garden plots and cornfields.

Their hooves and their rooting habits help rip up soil, then turn it back down, a sort of animal-lead composting system. Additionally, pigs add nutrients by excreting within their paddocks.

"They graze, take three steps and roll the sod back like carpet, rooting up bugs, leaves, pine needles. They work it all back into the soil," Yezzi said.

Pigs can, of course, be too good at grazing and turning over soil, meaning farmers should watch them and rotate them often enough to prevent overgrazing.

"They are extremely destructive on pasture. They must be moved regularly and often," McDonald said.

#### THE OTHER, TASTY MEAT

Many pasture-raised pork growers say any doubts they harbored about the practice disappear once they have tasted the meat.

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