

Tangerini Farm

Meaningful Summer Work, Not Just a Job!

by Steve Holt





Tangerini's Spring Street Farm operates, quite literally, on the backs of an unlikely group of laborers: suburban teenagers.

For 12 to 15 young people from a handful of communities southwest of Boston, summer work means planting, watering, weeding, picking and washing on 67 acres of family-owned farmland. The teenagers comprise nearly the entire staff of the Millis farm, a symphony of life providing fresh fruits and vegetables to the surrounding area through its farm stand, delivery to several farmers markets and a successful community-supported agriculture (CSA) program.

If the farm is a symphony, the farm's teenage labor force is the orchestra, and owner Laura Tangerini the conductor. Laura is unmistakable as I drive up to the farm on a Thursday morning in mid-July: A short, athletic woman with tan skin and cropped blond hair is on a mission, speeding across the lot toward one of her workers. As I park, she gives me the long, hard look of someone who wants to know precisely who is where and why on her farm at all times.

Even as she greets me and introduces herself, she pauses to deliver orders to a straggling worker. The teenager joins his fellow workers who dot the horizon, hunched over rows of crops. As Laura shows me around the farm, I get a closer look at their painstaking work: filling crates with the picked produce, handpicking weeds and hauling the harvest back to the farm stand to be washed and cooled. It's Thursday, after all, one of three days during the week that CSA shareholders drive in to fill bags with fresh produce—all of which was picked that morning.

Picking squash is not Jay Fisher's favorite task on the farm, but the 18-year-old from Medfield shows me how to extract the ripe yellow gourd from its vine.

"You're looking for mid-sized squash, not with the bumps on them," says Fisher, a rising senior who has already decided to attend Fairfield University in Connecticut in the fall of 2010. "That means they're overgrown. She wants us to take them off if they're too big and throw them in the middle."

Besides Laura, the farm only has one regular employee who is not in high school or college. Cynthia Prescott is washing heads of lettuce in enormous tubs, in preparation for when the CSA shareholders begin arriving at 11 a.m. A 20-year veteran of the insurance industry, Prescott was laid off a few years ago, compelling her to volunteer at Tangerini's to pass the time during the summer. After her farming experience, she couldn't go back into office work, and that September Laura put her on the full-time payroll. This is her fourth season working on the farm.

"Sitting in the cubicle wearing nylons—if I don't go home filthy dirty, I haven't worked all day," she says.

A few feet away, Cynthia's 13-year-old son, Evan Paicopoulos, places handfuls of carrots in a cylindrical machine that tosses and washes the vibrant vegetables. His mom used to bring Evan to the farm when he was young to pick berries or cut a Christmas tree, and now she brings him to the farm as a summer volunteer. "I am breaking him in to the

wonderful world of farming, and he loves it," Cynthia says.

A Brief History

Laura Tangerini set out to be a businesswoman, not a farmer. She says the extent to her agricultural experience for the first half of her life was a rock garden she kept growing up in Queensbury, New York, and seeing her mom plant a couple tomato plants year after year.

After earning a degree in nutrition from the University of Maine and an MBA from University of New Hampshire a few years later, she sold computer software to companies in the radio and veterinarian industries. She realized quickly that the corporate world was not for her.

"The problem was that sitting down for any length of time, for me, was excruciating," she said. "Couldn't do it. It just wasn't my cup of tea."

She began farming in Maine with her boyfriend Charlie, now her husband, in 1984. They expanded their operation year by year until the early 1990s, when the savings and loan crisis hit them hard, causing them to "lose nearly everything," as Laura puts it. That spurred them to move south to Massachusetts and make a new life in 1993.

Around that same time, Louis Deangelis, the former owner of the Spring Street farmland, passed away. Because Deangelis had signed an Agricultural Preservation Restriction requiring that the land always be used for agriculture, the farm was turned over to the Massachusetts Land Conservation Trust, an affiliate of the Trustees of the Reservation, to select a family to take over its ownership and operation. Out of 40 or so applicants, the Tangerinis were chosen to purchase the land.

"You had to write an agricultural plan and a marketing plan to be here so they knew what your intentions were," Laura recalls. "We were chosen, I think, partially because of the connection with the community that we wanted to make through classes, having on-farm selling and those sorts of things."

Fifteen years later—perhaps ironically—Laura applies her MBA and corporate experience to managing a team of teen workers every summer, organizing and implementing each day's agenda, and strategizing for the farm's future. Recently, she has benefited from the reinvigoration of the local foods movement, expanding the farm's CSA program from 125 shareholders in its first year last year to 230 shareholders in 2009—an 83 percent increase. Laura says she wants to add another 100 shareholders in 2010.

Supporting Community

CSA shareholders are now trickling in, and will do so until around 7 p.m. this evening. Behind moms and grandmothers, young children tumble out of station wagons and vans, brimming with excitement. Susan Weycker of Wellesley hands out bags to each of her five children to fill with the day's pickings—lettuce, cucumbers, carrots, squash, cabbage, tomatoes and potatoes. Each child is elated to participate in the weekly pickup, and I hear a young boy point to a crate of green beans and exclaim, "Mom, can you get some of these?"

When sister informs brother that mom already had, the boy responds quite atypically for a child his age: “Yessss! They are so good!”

The highlights of the weekly trip extend beyond the vegetables for Weycker and her children, though. She says they always sit down for some ice cream from the Tangerinis’ stand and go see the chickens and goats down the hill from the ice cream counter.

“My kids love vegetables,” says Weycker, a first-time shareholder. “It’s just so refreshing for the children to be out in the open, in the fresh air. Their schedules are busy, so it kind of slows them down and lets them appreciate the sweet things.”

Katelyn Jarvis dips up the Weycker kids’ ice cream, which comes to the farm from the award-winning Bliss Brothers Dairy in Attleboro. Jarvis also oversees a small shop that features handmade pottery, jams, honey and local and grass-fed meats, among other goods. Her exuberance about the farm is contagious, and it occurs to me that she is the perfect person for her job. Not surprisingly, she says her favorite part of working in the shop and dipping ice cream—which she’s done the past three summers—is her interactions with customers, many of whom she has gotten to know well through the years.

“When I first started here, they used to say, ‘localicious’ because it’s really community-centered and you know some of the locals who come here,” says Jarvis, who will be a senior at Holliston High School. “The other day, these twins who have been coming here since they were born came in—they’re so cute—and I’ve sort of watched them grow up. They came when they were born and now they’re probably 3. It’s really awesome.”

Hiring Teens: ‘I Like Doing It This Way’

Out in the fields, the daily work continues for Laura’s crew of teenagers. They are mostly boys this year, nearly all accomplished athletes, the majority of whom Laura came to know through their parents’ involvement in the CSA or her two boys’ high school alma mater. She says she’s never had to advertise a job on the farm. While many farms in Massachusetts prefer to use immigrants as field labor for their efficiency and farming experience, Laura uses teens for no other reason than that’s how she’s always done it.

“Are they the fastest workers? No. I can probably out-pick them by double,” she says. “But it’s fine. I have them every year, I like doing it this way.”

Laura tells her teens that if they write about their farm experience in their college entrance essays, they’ll probably get their first choice.

“Many of them do,” she says. Cornell. Colgate. Fairfield. Georgetown. Hard-working and smart is a deadly combination.

Laura’s newest worker is Will Adams. Over in the farm stand, the 16-year-old is taking the tops off carrots he’s just picked and weighing them for delivery to a local restaurant. The Franklin teen is only a few days into his first job, and so far he likes it. “Here, there’s different

things to do all day,” he says. “You don’t really get bored. I think carrots are my favorite so far, though.”

Laura says she knew Will was going to work out his first day on the job, when a severe thunderstorm disrupted preparations for CSA pickups. She had sent the rest of her workers home for the day because of the lightning, but says she forgot about Will, who was forced to stick around the farm after his mom left with their car. When the weather took a turn for the better, Will worked alone for three or four hours cleaning vegetables for their shareholders.

“If he does that and he came back the next time, he’ll be good,” she says. “He’ll be with me a long time, I imagine.”

The Future

A big question, is who will take over the farm when Laura decides to hang up her boots. Managing a farm is a seven-day-a-week job, and 23 years of it has taken a toll even on the strong Laura, who says retirement is likely only a few years off. Son Charlie will likely pursue a discipline besides farming. Emilio, 20, is studying agricultural business at Cornell but says he isn’t sure yet whether he wants to grab the torch from his mom. Laura puts no pressure on either son to take over the farm, reminding them that starting the farm was her dream, not theirs.

“The best you can hope for yourself is to be happy,” Laura tells her boys. “Not just fleeting happiness, but getting up every single morning and really enjoying every single thing you do to the point that you almost feel childlike sometimes because you get to be happy.”

So many clues point to the fact that Laura is doing what makes her happy: the love she shows her workers, the bounce in her step as she surveys her land, the dirt underneath her fingernails. She has never let efficiency and profits trump community and education. She is supporting and educating a generation of teenagers that will appreciate local food and hard work, and who knows—maybe even start or take over a farm themselves.

Driving away, I think I understand why Laura’s young workers come back year after year. Incidentally, it’s likely the reason Laura’s stuck with farming all these years. They have found meaningful summer work, not just a job. There’s a difference.

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