



Community Harvest Project looking forward to first apple season in Harvard

by Joan Eliyesil

The apple trees in the orchard at 115 Prospect Hill Road in Harvard have a new mission this year—feeding the hungry. Thanks to a generous benefactor, the 75-acre property, which includes a 30-acre apple orchard, is now owned by Community Harvest Project (CHP), a nonprofit organization that uses volunteer labor to grow food for hunger relief. This September marks CHP's first apple harvest, and it begins what the organizers hope will be a long relationship with volunteer apple pickers and packers from in and around Harvard.

Community Harvest Project is headquartered in North Grafton, where it grows vegetables and blueberries on about 16 leased acres at two farms. Most of the labor is done by volunteers, and part of CHP's mission is to engage the community through volunteer service. The Worcester County Food Bank collaborates with CHP to determine which crops to grow, and the Food Bank distributes the crops to its 150 partner agencies across the county. In 2013, more than 324,000 pounds of food was distributed to those agencies. This year, about 50 percent of the Harvard orchard's apples will go to the Worcester County Food Bank; plans for the remainder of the apple crop have not yet been solidified.



Apple trees loaded with fruit at the Community Harvest Project orchard on Prospect Hill Road.



Manual lawnmowers Martha, Mary, and Kat keep the grass low in the pasture.

(Photos by Lisa Aciukewicz)

The orchard currently has 2,300 trees, mostly McIntosh and Cortland. Orchard manager Susan Conant said that there was great weather during the bloom this year, hot and dry, so pollinators were able to do their job efficiently. "Honeybees are babies about being out in the rain," said Conant. Judging from the number of apples seen on the trees during a visit to CHP's orchard this week, there will be a large crop this year, and with all of their varieties maturing about the same time, this week's tranquil orchard will be bustling come September.

Volunteers needed

Volunteers will do all the work to pick and pack the apples. Operations manager Ken Dion stressed that no climbing will be necessary for picking because all the trees were pruned drastically during the winter to about half of their former size. "People thought we were crazy to cut the trees that much, but we did it at the orchards that we used to lease, and the trees produced more apples than ever," said Dion. He added that climbing is not only a safety issue, it slows pickers down. All volunteers will learn Dion's technique for picking an apple. "Think of holding a teacup in the palm of your hand and dumping it out. You cup your hand under the apple, lift it up, and turn it over. It works every time."

The organization also hopes that some local people will volunteer to be team leaders, a position that requires a bigger time commitment as well as a day of training, mainly to learn about CHP's mission. Daily instructions will be given to team leaders by Conant, so no experience is necessary, either for regular volunteers or team leaders.

Mowers, big and small

There are already a few volunteers working at the orchard this summer—Mary, Martha, Kat, Larry, Curly, and Moe, the resident sheep. Conant and a friend loaned three Cormo sheep ("the girls") and three Katahdin sheep ("the stooges") to the farm to keep the weeds and grass in the areas that used to hold farm animals sheared to a reasonable length. The other mower on the farm is much more high tech, although not nearly as cute. It's a Fischer rotary mower with a swing arm, imported from Europe and built to mow orchards and vineyards. A sensor causes the swing arm's blade to swing back when an obstacle is detected, making mowing under low-hanging fruit easier.

Orchard plans for the coming years include replacing some of the older standard-size trees with dwarf trees. Conant said that dwarf trees can produce almost as much as full-size trees, but they require less time to maintain. Dion agreed, saying, "If we can grow 1,000 trees an acre instead of 100, it means we can spray for one-tenth of the cost and in one-tenth of the time." Other fruit trees, such as peaches or pears, may be added to the unplanted acres of the orchard.

There are no plans to grow a substantial number of vegetables at the Harvard location because of the necessary duplication of equipment already in use at the North Grafton farms, mainly sprayers. "You can't use an apple sprayer on vegetables," said Dion. "It would blow the blossoms off." He added that the hoop house already on the property is being considered for a small crop, possibly early tomatoes, because a backpack sprayer could be used there. For this year, the only plan is to repair the damage that was done to the hoop house when last winter's heavy snows caused a section to collapse.

Staying sustainable

The orchard belonged to Westward Orchards until 2010, when a Cambridge couple bought it. They leased the orchard to Westward and leased some land for vegetables as well. Part of that land included an asparagus patch, and the harvested asparagus was sold at Willard Farm. When CHP was given the land last year, all of the leasing arrangements ended. This year's asparagus crop went to a Worcester restaurant that ran a campaign for CHP. The asparagus was used in an appetizer, and all the money that customers paid for that appetizer went to Community Harvest. "People were disappointed that the asparagus didn't go to Willard Farm," said Dion, "but we received a lot more money from the restaurant campaign. It's all about making the organization sustainable."

The orchard is conducting walking tours during the summer to acquaint residents with the organization and the upcoming volunteer opportunities. Tours are scheduled on July 21, August 4, and August 18, from 10 a.m. to noon. Residents who would like to volunteer at the orchard this fall should contact CHP soon. Dion said that he expects volunteer slots to fill quickly. "At our gardens in Grafton, with the exception of a few days, our season is completely full." The current plan for volunteer hours filled by individuals at the orchard is Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, September 7 to October 2. Volunteers from schools will probably come in the afternoons. To be placed on the schedule, potential volunteers can call CHP's volunteer hotline at 774-551-6544.