



ELLERY KIMBALL

STEWARD OF THE LAND

BY KIT YOON

You may miss Blue Heron Farm if you cross the railroad tracks too quickly on Rt. 117 in Lincoln, Massachusetts. But if you have to wait for a commuter train to pass, you will surely notice a beautiful piece of land, perhaps with an orange tractor in the middle of the field. You will then see a small farm stand in the corner. You may even spot a few chickens running about.

This is Blue Heron Organic Farm, run by Ellery Kimball, a young steward and teacher of the land.

Ellery grew up learning a lot about nature and gained a deep respect for the earth. Although an avid hiker and outdoor enthusiast at a young age, she knew little about agriculture. In fact, she couldn't tell peas from beans let alone know much about growing crops or operating farm machinery. That all changed one spring day when Ellery stopped by Down to Earth Farm on her way home from high school and met the owner, Keith Shields. They talked a bit and she offered to volunteer. Soon her volunteer position became a paid internship and before she knew it, she was one of the returning farmers at Down to Earth Organic Farm summer after summer.

Inspired by her experience on the farm, Ellery went off to Prescott College in Arizona where she got a degree in Sustainable Agriculture and the Visual Arts. Determined to study agriculture but not sure where she was going to put her education to use, she ended up out West and explored several other small farms. Ellery learned from each experience, but was left wondering where she would ultimately settle down.

During a trip home one fall, Ellery paid a visit to Keith Shields and the farm she knew so well. It so happened that Shields wanted to hand off his land to someone else as he was starting a family and a new home in Western Massachusetts. He asked Ellery if she would be interested and without any reservations, Ellery said yes. "I was looking for a field when he asked me," she said. "I had no idea what it meant to run a farm, but it felt right."

That was the fall of 2000. She was to start farming that following spring. Seven years later, Ellery is still managing the same seven-acre piece of conservation land. She has since changed the name of the farm to reflect her favorite bird, the Great Blue Heron.

Having the railroad tracks right by the farm takes everything out of context. It could as well be Lincoln circa 1900 when life was still simple and fundamental, when most people depended on small farms to supply their food and trains rather than cars to transport them. It was an era when farmers were the essence of the community.

These days, the link between farmers and consumers is much more distant than in the past. We rely on supermarkets for our groceries, lacking the knowledge of where our food actually comes from. Thanks to the more recent efforts of grass-root organizations, farmers' markets and community supported agriculture programs, we are starting to get to know our farmers and producers again. Often, these farmers are much more than someone who tends vegetables and cares for livestock. They are extraordinary human beings who feed the community and the earth on many levels.

Ellery is one of these extraordinary people, and I am proud to call her my friend.

Fifteen years since last seeing her at our high school graduation, we recently met again. "I have a farm," she said after I asked what she was up to. My ears perked up immediately. Happily reunited with an old friend and inspired by her work, I became a regular volunteer on the farm, learning more than I ever imagined possible.

Ellery believes strongly in organic growing practices and has been certified organic since 2003. With this philosophy, Blue Heron grows the highest quality produce and delivers to ten different restaurants and stores as well as selling at the Lexington and Davis Square farmers' markets. In addition, Ellery operates a very popular "honor system" farm stand located on her land. The produce on the stand is picked just minutes before a customer takes it home. Sometimes, as I experienced first hand, if someone wants something that isn't available, Ellery offers to pick whatever it is right then and there. That personal attention is what one gets at a small, friendly farm like Blue Heron.

Customers can also enjoy a beautiful Pick-Your-Own flower garden as well as other seasonal pick your own fruits and vegetables like peas, beans, cherry tomatoes and raspberries.

Ellery intends to farm not only organically, but sustainably. Crop rotation, cover crop and symbiotic plantings help maintain the health of the rich soil. She also believes that growing heirloom vegetables helps preserve the seeds of our ancestors and creates diversity among the crops. Currently, Ellery grows twenty different heirloom tomatoes for which she is well known. She also grows several heirloom potatoes, peppers and eggplants. The restaurants and specialty food stores appreciate her unique offerings.

Reciprocally, Ellery enjoys the relationships she has with the chefs, whom she says teach her so much about food. Jody Adams and Gordon Hamersley of Rialto and Hamersley's Bistro are two of the chefs that have been ordering directly from Blue Heron since the first year Ellery started to farm. "They understand farmers and respect what it takes to harvest and deliver to them within a few hours," she said. The chefs enjoy cooking with fresh ingredients and diners benefit from an organic, local and nutritious meal prepared by highly regarded professionals. It is a scenario where everyone wins.

At this point in the season, Ellery and her team of three are busy in the greenhouse planting and transplanting seedlings. They will continue with field plantings and carry on diligently through the season weeding, harvesting and preparing for market. Ellery has a tractor for discing, tilling and mowing, but all the other work is done by hand. Everyone who works on the farm takes part in all of the farm labor every step of the way.

Ellery enjoys teaching kids, and it shows. Last summer I often brought my four-year old twins to the farm and Ellery was thrilled to teach them about the different bugs and plants they found. Their interest was peaked immediately when they discovered dozens of butterflies in the flower garden, or plump caterpillars on tomato vines. They learned that potatoes, carrots and beets grow in the ground and that one harvests watermelon after the stem has turned brown. They learned the real taste of cherry tomatoes by popping them straight from the vine into their mouths. They observed how chickens roost in the evening and how all plant matter becomes soil

again in the compost pile. They learned to be gentle with baby plants as they are just poking up from the ground, and they learned that animals are happiest when they are free.

In past summers, Ellery had campers spend a few days on the farm learning the ins and outs of how food is grown. The young farmers help with weeding, harvesting and even selling the produce at the stand.

Occasionally, preschoolers will take a field trip to Blue Heron with teachers and parents in tow. The children are ecstatic to be on the farm running, picking and getting dirty. It seems like such a natural way to learn about life: an outdoor classroom that is a working farm. I think Ellery has slowly transformed this land that she has loved for so long into what she has always dreamed of.

"I can't imagine being anywhere else," Ellery told me over tea one day. "The farm has been such a big part of my life. It was so good for me to start working here when I was only 17. It gave me so much confidence and purpose in life. I want to share my love of farming with people."

Bucking the usual trend of most businesses, Ellery doesn't want to see the farm get much bigger. Instead, her goal is to keep it small and make it more productive and sustainable. "Pete Seeger once pointed out that a small creek will never get polluted, unlike a big river. I want to keep my farm that way," commented Ellery. She wants it to be a source of food, a source of education and even a political statement.

The community has certainly taken to Blue Heron Farm as evidenced by their support of Ellery's recent irrigation project. After seven years of depending on rain as the only source of water for her crops, Ellery decided the time had come to put in an irrigation system. Last fall, the farm put together a festival and fundraiser to raise money for this project and with generous support from an appreciative community, Ellery will break ground this spring.

Ellery hopes that the irrigation system "will improve the productivity of the land for generations to come." Irrigation will be like life insurance for the farm. If this summer is dry like last, she can focus her energy on other parts of running the farm instead of dwelling on lost crops and disappointed customers.

Blue Heron often has special events that are posted on the farm website. Some of the annual events include the Edible Wild Plant and Mushroom Walk with Russ Cohen, which is always very well attended and may become an annual Fall Festival.

The Organic Plant Sale will take place in mid-May when the farm stand reopens for the season. At the stand, you will be able to purchase the early harvest of lettuces, spinach, rhubarb, radishes, peas and chives. By June, Ellery will be at the Davis Square and Lexington farmers' markets. ❖

Blue Heron Farm
Route 117
Lincoln, MA 01773
(781) 254-3727
www.blueheronfarmlincoln.com.

Volunteers are a crucial part of the farm. Blue Heron needs and loves everyone, young or old, who wants to get involved. Please contact the farm directly if you are interested: farmer@blueheronfarmlincoln.com.

Kit Yoon is a freelance writer, and a licensed acupuncturist and herbalist. She has been spending the year in Cambridge with her husband and children, enjoying what New England has to offer. They look forward to returning to Northern California this summer where they can frolic on small farms like Blue Heron, all year long. She can be reached at shimboon@gmail.com.



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