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Farm Collaborative's assistant manager of production and soil, Katie Hunter, feeds the goats some weeds from outside of the pen in Aspen



THE FUTURE OF FARM COLLABORATIVE

Sowing oats, grazing and planting trees for the next generation

by Scott Condon for The Aspen Times Weekly

Visitors to Aspen's Farm Collaborative who expect to find something like a botanical garden are in for a surprise.

Yes, there are exotic plants indoors and an abundance of varieties of vegetation outdoors. But instead of immaculately groomed gardens, this is nature at her messy best.

The Farm Collaborative, formerly known as Aspen TREE, was created 12 years ago to help connect people to nature and teach them where their food comes from. It's a bona fide farm and farms are often messy and unpolished.

"For me, our work at the farm is all rooted in connection," said Farm Collaborative founder and executive director Eden Vardy. "Connection to our surroundings, connection to our food, connection to each other and connection to that which nourishes us."

Farm Collaborative leases 15 acres of land from the city of Aspen at Cozy Point Ranch, at the intersection of Highway 82 and Brush Creek Road. At the center of the operation are a large mobile greenhouse known as Rolling Thunder, a separate growing dome

and a teepee used for kids' programs. Scattered around that centerpiece are goat pens, rabbit hutches, tool sheds and various structures that were erected as needs arose.

Members of the 10-person full-time staff and five interns buzz around the farm, tending to the particular needs of the day and the hour. There are rows of vegetables and greens to weed outdoors. Inside the mobile greenhouse, tendrils from the cucumber vines climb strings attached to a latticework of supports for the ceiling. Rows of tomato plants emit an intoxicating

aroma of ripening fruit.

Farm Collaborative strives to grow farmers as well as food, so the internship program is vital to stoking interest while staff positions help aspiring farmers hone their skills and perhaps develop their own vision.

On a rapidly warming August morning, the temperature in the growing dome had automatically triggered the upper vent windows to open and release hot air. Nevertheless, it was hot and humid in the tropical indoor climate. Plants such as passion fruit, figs, eucalyptus and avocados thrive.

A few hundred yards from the collection of buildings, scores of sheep gnaw down the grass, oblivious to the loud hum of vehicles passing nearby on Highway 82. Adjacent to the sheep pen, chickens peck at the ground in a part of the pasture from which the sheep were recently relocated. They surround a chicken tractor (a sort of mobile chicken coop). The sheep and fowl are part of the farm's rotational grazing program (see related story on next page).

"We have a strong connection to John Denver out here," Vardy said. Some of the structures and equipment were inherited from Denver's Windstar Foundation after it ceased operations. Farm Collaborative also operates the Earth Keepers program, which was launched at Windstar.

Normally, there would be members of the public wandering around the property, formally known as a "farm park." That changed because of social distancing requirements during the coronavirus crisis.

"We will open to the public when we feel it's safe to do so," Vardy said.

But COVID-19 hasn't knocked the agricultural nonprofit organization off its feet. It is wholeheartedly pursuing the next step in its maturation.

"I feel like we're in late teenagehood or maybe early childhood," Vardy said of the organization's growth.



The next step — and one of the biggest — is constructing a learning center/farm hub at a central spot on the leased land. It will have 4,000 square feet above ground and a 4,000-square-foot basement.

"It's the heart of the farm," Vardy said.

The new center would replace many of the "makeshift" structures now utilized, though the grow dome and

mobile greenhouse will remain, Vardy said. The new structure will allow Farm Collaborative to more effectively carry out its existing programs.

The learning center is being designed by the Aspen architecture firm of Rowland and Broughton with John Rowland as the lead architect.

"The most complex design goal was to ensure the new building was carbon-neutral or better," the

ABOVE: Hayden Kessel, land and livestock manager, watches as a chicken flies out of his hands in one of the coops at the Farm Collaborative

BELOW, FROM LEFT: Two children play in a co-op garden at the Farm Collaborative at Cozy Point Ranch in Aspen; Three large rabbits push their noses against their hutch hoping for a treat at the Farm Collaborative; Bija Vardy, 9, feeds a large bunny some weeds.



company said in a statement.

The building will have a photovoltaic solar array with 64 panels that will produce an estimated 31,000 kilowatt-hours per year. External rammed earth walls will regulate indoor temperatures and reduce energy consumption while the walls and earthen floors help control the interior temperature fluctuations, according to Rowland and Broughton.

The facility will have a commercial-grade kitchen where farmers can process their foods. A significant part of the basement will be a root cellar where the collaborative and other farmers in the valley can store crops for sale during winter. That will help broaden the market for local farmers and improve the Roaring Fork Valley's food sustainability.

Vardy said the learning center and farm hub would advance its ability to achieve its mission. About \$4 million has already been raised for the project. A total of \$6 million is being sought.

Every other part of the infrastructure is in place at the Farm Collaborative — greenhouses, pastures and even a heritage orchard, where scion wood from trees brought to the valley by homesteaders is grafted onto rootstock.

"We're carrying on the heritage of the pioneers," Vardy said.

And if his vision for the Farm Collaborative bears fruit, valley residents 140 years from now will be using it as the model for sustainable agriculture.

"Farming and working the land is literally and physically an act of hope and optimism, and when we plant we are making a statement that we have hope for our future," Vardy said. "My wish is that we can share that hope with the kids and community that benefit from our programs so that together we can plant a future that nourishes all of us and those not yet born."



Hayden Kessel, land and livestock manager, holds one of the kids at the Farm Collaborative at Cozy Point Ranch.



COOPER MEANS has given up describing himself as a farmer.

The Aspen native and agriculture director at the nonprofit Farm Collaborative said it creates confusion since there are so few small farming operations remaining today in the U.S.

"I tell them I'm a food producer," Means said. "When I say I'm a farmer, people generally think I am a rancher and raise cattle or I grow pot."

The Upper Roaring Fork Valley is better known for gatherings of the rich and famous than of chickens and sheep, and it is more notable for planting ski lift towers than heritage fruit trees.

The Farm Collaborative is trying to expand the image by becoming a model of sustainable agriculture. Means said he likes the innovation the staff is urged to undertake and the sharing of experiences, successful or not.

"What excites me is always trying something new," he said.

One day he might be welding for the first time in a year. The next he might be driving a combine for the first time ever to harvest an oat crop.

"There's something about farming that you always want to try something new," Means said. "You're never bored. Farmers are inventors."

At the request of The Aspen Times, he highlighted three noteworthy initiatives within the Farm Collaborative's broad efforts.

1. PRESERVING HERITAGE FRUIT TREES

Our society is too often oriented toward quick fixes and immediate benefits, Farm Collaborative executive director Eden Vardy believes. He was impressed on a visit to Israel to discover families planting olive trees even though they won't produce for 50 years.

"It's really looking toward the next generation," Means said. "The heritage fruit tree project goes along with that idea that we need to be investing in our future."

The Farm Collaborative staff has planted rootstock from about 200 trees, mostly apple trees. The rootstock is from orchardists who have developed varieties that can handle the high altitude climate and upper valley's soil conditions. After establishing the rootstock, the Farm Collaborative grafted on scion wood from fruit trees that homesteaders planted decades ago. The homesteaders developed some of the hardiest, top-producing trees. The Farm Collaborative wants to keep them alive and in production.

While the grafted trees won't produce fruit for some time, they will live well over 100 years, Means said.

The staff grafted scion wood onto 200 trees last year. That effort will have to be repeated this year.

"We had a lot of trouble with rodents over the winter," Means said. The critters gnawed the bark and the trees must be re-grafted. "That's farming," he said with a shrug.

The soil is dialed in at the orchard, the irrigation system is installed and now fencing is erected to keep out the varmints.

2. LETTING CHICKENS AND SHEEP DO THEIR THING

In a pasture right off Highway 82, visible to thousands of daily commuters, the Farm Collaborative is using its expanding population of sheep and chickens in rotational grazing to benefit the soil. The West has a long history of overgrazing by sheep and cattle and degradation of natural resources, Means said. Rotational grazing is modeled more on natural systems.

"A group of grazers will always stick together and they will always be moving because of predator pressure," Means said. "Obviously we don't want to stick a couple of wolves in our pasture to keep the sheep moving. So we're playing the role of the predator by fencing in and keeping those sheep tight."

Small mobile pens are used to keep the sheep grouped together. The fencing is moved every five

to seven days after the grass is grazed close to the ground. The grass stores energy in roots that is used to produce new grass once the grazing stops.

Once the sheep are relocated, chickens in a mobile coop move in. They pick apart the sheep droppings, which serve as a natural fertilizer, and eat the insects, which helps keep the sheep healthy. The chickens produce eggs that the Farm Collaborative is able to sell.

3. SOWING THEIR OATS

Means was uncertain that food distribution systems would hold up during the coronavirus crisis so he spent \$12,000 on feed this spring. The Farm Collaborative imports organic chicken feed from Montana for its growing flock. If the nonprofit couldn't get feed, its chickens wouldn't produce eggs.

Means wants to eliminate that dependency on an outside source. In the latest of a multi-year experiment, he planted 4.5 acres of oats for both human and animal consumption. The oats were planted on the Lazy Glen property leased from Pitkin County Open Space and Trails for agricultural uses.

Means has visions of reviving small-scale grain production that was once predominant in the Roaring Fork Valley. The Farm Collaborative is purchasing a grain combine manufactured in 1956 to handle the harvest. The machine will be part of a tool library that can be used by local farmers to "check out" machinery for shared use that would be too expensive for one operator to purchase.

Means has high hopes for grain production. There are numerous gentleman ranchers in the valley who grow hay as a way to get a favorable tax rate for agricultural use of the land. Instead of growing hay, Means would like to see that land growing grain.

"There used to be a lot of grain produced in this valley, so we know it works," he said.

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