

Hartford Courant

VOLUME CLXXIV NUMBER 172

COURANT.COM • MOBILE.COURANT.COM

MONDAY, JUNE 21, 2010

COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE



STEPHEN DUNN | SDUNN@COURANT.COM

LOU RUSSO, left, and his wife, Priscilla, walk the rows of crops during one of their visits to the Wild Carrot Farm in Canton. They trade their farming skills for a portion of the produce.

RESIDENTS SWAP SWEAT FOR VEGGIES

Sharing A Farm's Work

By **RINKER BUCK**
rbuck@courant.com

CANTON — Priscilla and Lou Russo are a young West Hartford couple who run a photography business together. But on Friday afternoon, they found themselves working under the hot sun at the Wild Carrot Farm along Route 44, harvesting scallions and kale.

"It's almost like daydreaming out here, and we find the work very helpful

GOOD TO KNOW

FARM WORK

► 80 hours:

From spring to fall

► **Where:** Wild Carrot Farm, Canton

► **\$1,500:** Estimated value of produce received in return for farm labor

FARMING, A10

Farming

Continued from Page A1

after a week of answering the phones about appointments, processing paperwork and staring at a computer screen," Lou Russo said. "Business has a burn-out effect, but farm work restores our creativity."

Apart from these meditative aspects, there's another reason to pay attention to the Russos, and dozens of others who plant, weed and harvest at Connecticut's burgeoning network of community-supported farms.

The Russos work for free. In return for devoting 80 hours of labor apiece from spring through fall at the certified organic farm, the Russos, vegetarians who consume "huge" amounts of fresh produce every week, earn about \$1,500 worth of produce at Wild Carrot's farm stand.

The concept is called "work share" or "member labor." It's a growing trend in the community-supported agriculture movement, a national network of farms that are changing food distribution by emphasizing the importance of locally grown produce. At community-supported farms, families can buy a "crop share"—costing about \$500—that entitles them to a specified amount of the farm's produce every week. Because families pay early in the year, the system allows farmers to generate cash flow early in the planting season, as well as avoid the market vagaries of selling through a middleman.

In addition, the CSA program is gradually transforming local farms and drawing many new players into agriculture.

The Russos' motivation is similar to many other

work share converts at Connecticut farms. Six months ago, Priscilla came home with "Skinny Bitch," the tart, best-selling vegan diet book that espouses healthful living, and began reading passages to her husband. Impressed, he bought the sequel, "Skinny Bastard," and by this spring he had joined his wife in vegetarianism. Searching for a way to share their newfound interest, they combed the website of the community-supported agriculture movement — www.localharvest.org — found Wild Carrot Farm and were excited to learn that they could earn their shares by working in the fields.

The Russos began reporting for work one or two days a week in May.

"It was quite tedious at first—I can't tell you how many thousands, and I do mean thousands, of seeds we planted," Priscilla Russo said. "But there's this wonderful satisfaction you get after a long day of really learning how to grow your own food, and becoming introduced to new vegetables and varieties."

Wild Carrot Farm grows 75 different kinds of produce, and last week Priscilla Russo helped harvest garlic scapes, the scallion-like stalk that grows out of garlic bulbs. She was unfamiliar with this iteration of garlic, but Wild Carrot co-manager Joanie Guglielmino told her how to grill the scapes.

"They're delicious," Priscilla said. "How would I have found garlic scapes if I didn't work share?"

Growing A Sense Of Community

The program offers advantages for farms, too. During the summer, Guglielmino relies mostly on farm workers who are ei-



STEPHEN DUNN | SDUNN@COURANT.COM

WORK SHARE farmer Lou Russo waters pepper plants at the Wild Carrot.

ther high school or college students. But these workers often are not available during the busiest work seasons—spring planting and late-summer harvests. Her 12 work-share employees are especially vital early in the planting cycle, when farms have little cash flow, but their costs are high.

"For a farmer, work share is ideal because you

have a lot of upfront costs in February and March getting ready to plant, and thus less money to pay regular workers," Guglielmino said. "Then, in late August, when all the students are going back to school, you can use your work share people to help harvest."

Work share is also a valuable inducement for residents who have skills

FROM PAGE ONE

that the farm needs but might not be able to attract otherwise.

"A lot of us use work share to get valuable work done that we either can't do ourselves or don't have time for," said Sam Hammer, the farm manager at Holcomb Farm in West Granby, a 30-acre operation with about 600 participating members who buy traditional shares, and an additional 24 work-share members.

"You can never get enough help on a farm, and I have work-share members who are carpenters, tractor mechanics and who help maintain our computers. It's work we need done, so why not trade out your skill for vegetables?"

But both the farmers and work-share laborers insist that it's a mistake to measure the value of the trade in dollars. An eclectic mix of people on the farm, which creates a strong sense of community, is an important by-product of work share.

"One of our work-share members is a stay-at-home mom who is a whiz at computers and started a blog for us. Another is a very capable administrator who straightens out our paperwork," Guglielmino said. "We like them so much we end up hiring them for pay once their

work share is over."

Most of the work-share laborers at Wild Carrot describe their experiences as life-transforming and say that they plan to continue with organic farming in one form or another.

Priscilla Russo, for example, is compiling a portfolio of photographs on green farming, green companies and the vegan lifestyle so that she can get more assignments from magazines such as Mother Earth News or Organic Gardening.

Katie Conroy of West Hartford was inspired to work at Wild Carrot after she attended a "green wedding" at an organic farm in western Massachusetts. She started in the fields in Canton in March, loves the work and is now considering starting a garden at home. Over the past two weeks, she has been weeding carrots.

"You just get into a total zone weeding — it's you against the crabgrass," Conroy said. "It's meditative and relaxing. You weed and weed, go away for a week, and then you come back, and the crabgrass has returned."

"It's this epic battle with weeds, but I can't tell you how good it feels to be triumphant over crabgrass."