

# Shelburne Farms

*Weaving a web of partnerships in sustainability education.*

**Story by Nancy Humphrey Case**  
**Photos courtesy of Rosalyn Graham**



Created in 1886 as a 3,800-acre agricultural estate on the shore of Lake Champlain by William Seward and Lila Vanderbilt Webb, Shelburne Farms is today a 1,400-acre working farm and nonprofit center for sustainability education. The enormous, Queen-Anne-style Farm Barn (left) took two years to build (1888–1890). It remains one of the most impressive structures of its type and is the hub of the organization's activities.

**I**T IS A GRAY NOVEMBER day at Shelburne Farms, the 1,400-acre Gilded Age estate on Lake Champlain turned sustainability education center. The doors of The Inn at Shelburne Farms are locked for the season, the children's farmyard is quiet, and the market gardens rest beneath layers of compost and mulch. But the elegant coach barn is fairly exploding with ideas. Two hundred and forty people from 24 states and 4 countries have gathered here for the 5th Farm-Based Education Conference. After the first round of workshops highlighting the potential of educational programs at community farms, the room buzzes with excited people sharing their thoughts, experiences, and contact information with each other. You can feel the fertility in the

mix. And perhaps more than anything else, this type of interchange shows what Shelburne Farms has become in the 40 years since the nonprofit was founded.

In 1969, when Derrick Webb told his children (ages 11 to 23) he could no longer keep undeveloped the estate his grandparents had created, their hearts rose in protest and they came back with a proposal that would preserve the working landscape they had come to cherish. The following year they opened the family property to community activities such as an environmental camp for children—under the name Shelburne Farms Resources. Other revenue-generating ideas followed, such as making top-quality cheddar cheese with milk from the farm's herd of Brown Swiss cows and turning the 72-room family

home into an inn. As the local community became more involved with Shelburne Farms' diverse program offerings, support for the nonprofit deepened. Environmental education programs expanded both at the farm and through partnerships with other organizations, eventually reaching as far away as Japan. Today the many-faceted organization has grown way beyond the boundaries of its Shelburne Point home, but the theme is the same as it was in the beginning: Use available resources to promote stewardship of the land through sustainability education and community involvement. And events such as the Farm-Based Education Conference indicate just how successful Shelburne Farms has become in doing this.



Shelburne Farms offers school field trips, one-day family programs, and youth summer camps for preschoolers to 8th-graders, as well as a host of programs off-site in collaboration with Shelburne Farms' many partners. The on-site, year-round programs, which began in the 1970s, focus on a wide range of topics—from farm history to maple sugaring, animal tracking to dairying, and forest stewardship to the geology of Lake Champlain. Here, a group of young children learn to focus their observation skills on the natural world.

### PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING

"There's a lot of mentoring going on here," says Erica Curry, former Farm-to-School and Farm-Based Education coordinator. "It's the only group in the world that gathers farm-based educators—from directors of nonprofits to people who dig potatoes or milk cows. It's about peer-to-peer learning and building networks."

"Just knowing that other people are going through the same things we are is huge," says one attendee, a school coordinator of an organic community farm in Natick, Massachusetts. "I've spoken to so many people throughout the country who have different roadblocks. To come up with answers, possible solutions, together is fabulous."

"It's very uplifting," says Jon Belber, education director at a 140-acre community farm in Cohasset, Massachusetts that provides programming for 4,000 schoolchildren each year. "All stages are represented—people who have experience in this, people just starting out, and people getting into it through career change." The director of the Cohasset farm agrees. "It's

all about what it takes to build a program from the ground up and make it sustainable." Suddenly, she turns to Jon and nods toward another participant. "She's a very cool woman," she says to him. "She runs a program here in Vermont that's building school gardens and getting the food into cafeterias." Introductions follow and another peer-to-peer seed is planted.

### EXPANDING ITS REACH

The scope of Shelburne Farms' teaching has grown like a mustard seed. In the beginning, children from the Burlington area came here for hands-on experiences. They felt the soft fleece of lambs, picked up salamanders in the woods, tasted maple sap, planted seeds, and squeezed milk from a cow. And experientially based learning still takes place at Shelburne Farms through classroom visits to the McClure Education Center at the four-storey shingle-style Farm Barn, family programs on weekends, and youth summer camps.

But it wasn't long after the first educational programs got under way at Shelburne Farms that directors and staff realized they could reach more children if they helped teachers find ways to share environmental concepts and experiences with their classrooms at home. So Shelburne Farms began offering professional development seminars. Today, teachers from all over the country and beyond flock to Shelburne each summer for weeklong teacher institutes on education for sustainability, which

also emphasize place-based and service learning. To further support teachers, Shelburne Farms published *Project Seasons*, a teacher resource packed with hands-on activities that encourage exploration of the natural world. To date, the book has been translated into 8 languages and is being used in classrooms in 15 countries around the world.

### THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

What really caused Shelburne Farms' educational influence to mushroom, though, was increasing emphasis on the cultivation of partnerships. Take Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day), for example, which promotes healthier eating habits among children and supports local food systems by linking school classrooms and cafeterias with local farms while providing nutrition education in classrooms. A program that has reached more than one-third of Vermont schools since its founding in 2000, Vermont FEED is a partnership of Food Works at Two Rivers Center, Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT), and Shelburne Farms. It is related to the Farm-to-School movement, which had early roots in Vermont thanks in part to Shelburne Farms, and has now gone national—to the point of receiving recognition and grant money from the United States Department of Agriculture and the Centers for Disease Control.

Part of Vermont FEED's success is in its partnering ethic. "It's about good



Anne Bijur (above left), communications and outreach coordinator of Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day), and a participant at a Farm-to-School regional workshop in Newport that brought together teachers, food service personnel, administrators, parents, and interested members of the community. One of Shelburne Farms' many partnerships, Vermont FEED provides nutrition education in the classroom and links local food producers with school cafeterias. Megan Camp, vice president and program director (right), with a student at South China Normal School, one of Shelburne Farms' worldwide partners.



community development," says FEED Director Anne Bijur. "You don't go in and impose your idea on that school, but you go in, see where their strengths lie, what resources they have, and support them—build on what they already have going—and then step out."

Shelburne Farms played out this ongoing theme on a global stage when in 2008 it was invited by the Institute for Sustainable Communities (ISC), based in Vermont, to develop education for sustainability programs in Chinese communities. The ISC was planning workshops for factory managers to address resource efficiency and environmental health issues in the industrial province of Guandong and felt the workshops would be more effective if accompanied by community education for sustainability programs. In characteristic fashion, Shelburne Farms chose not to export American education programs but instead to build upon what Chinese teachers were already doing in the environmental education field at South China Normal University. Shelburne Farms also brought one of its Japanese partners on the team, knowing the Japanese school system was more like China's than Vermont's is. Today, this work continues, carried on by an internal network of Chinese educators, whose programs, like those of Shelburne Farms, educate for sustainability, encourage active citizenship, and promote creative problem-solving.

"The model of partnerships has shifted the cultural expectations of how we best do work," says Jen Cirillo, professional development director at Shelburne Farms, who was involved in

the China project. "The unique perspective that each partner brings makes for stronger programs."

#### A FOREST FOR EVERY CLASSROOM

A far-reaching program called "A Forest for Every Classroom" (FFEC) illustrates just how far this model can go. An offshoot of the "Watershed for Every Classroom" program that Shelburne Farms created with the Lake Champlain Basin Education Initiative in the 1990s, FFEC provides training to educators in how to connect classrooms with publicly owned lands in their communities and integrate children's experiences with those lands into their curriculum. To develop this effective, place-based education program, in 2000 Shelburne Farms formed a partnership with Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historic Park in Woodstock, just when the park was asking itself how it could engage teachers and students in the Woodstock area in learning about conservation and stewardship. Now in its 11th year, the FFEC program has been adopted by the National Park Service and the National Forest Service and is being used in schools in Montana, Wisconsin, Texas, and New Hampshire. The latest news is that the National Park Service, beginning with the Northeast Regional Office division, has adopted the model to start a "Park for Every Classroom" program, adapted to work with schools and communities located near national parks. "It's wonderful to see the idea developed here not only touch 160-plus schools in Vermont but now take off across the country," says Christine Marts, assistant superintendent of the park in Woodstock.

Partnerships that expand the effectiveness of environmental, agricultural, and sustainability organizations all over the United States and beyond owe a great deal to the vision of the leadership at Shelburne Farms. "Our current work is that we've become a hub for networks," says Megan Camp, vice president and program director, who has been with Shelburne Farms for 30 years. For example, as a result of the five Farm-Based Education Conferences Shelburne Farms has hosted, thousands of educators have joined the Farm-Based Education Association online network, multiplying the rich fruits of community farm programs around the country.

This past August, Megan stood in the 2-acre courtyard of the Farm Barn with 800 other people gathered here for the National Farm to Cafeteria Conference. "Who would have ever imagined this 40 years ago?" Megan asked. "The world is changing." ▽

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## Just the facts

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