



Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program



Owners of Applefield Farm in Stow got their big break from a friendly neighbor and the APR program

STOW, MA -- Steve Mong and his wife Kirsten consider themselves to be the lucky -- and somewhat unlikely -- owners of Applefield Farm in Stow. After getting married, Steve and Kirsten were driving school buses and working odd jobs to support their growing family.

Steve had borrowed a hay bailer and tractor from an acquaintance and hired out his services to area farms. Soon the Mongs began bailing hay and picking apples, selling them at the Fitchburg Farmers' Market.

Early one spring, they put a trailer full of vegetables and plants in front of their own property and it sold out in a day.

Thus Applefield Farm was born.

"It's not like I grew up and said I want to be a farmer," says Steve. "Our family had no farming background. We had a local niche doing apples and hay bailing, which we turned into a part-time business."

Steve's brother Ray (a former chef at the Hyatt Regency) later joined as a partner of Applefield Farm in charge of vegetable gardening.

The Mongs were leasing farmland from their neighbor Al Tyler on a handshake agreement. Al was nearing retirement age and looking for a way to protect his nine-acre plot, as farms across the region were being gobbled up by commercial developers.

Steve talked to Al about the Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program through the Massachusetts Dept. of Agricultural Resources. The program pays farmland owners the difference between the "fair market value" and the "agricultural value" of their farms (essentially the value of the development rights) in exchange for a permanent deed restriction for farming.

Al decided to apply for the APR program.

Soon after being approved, Al sold the farm to the Mongs for the remaining agricultural price of the land -- transferring the APR to them in the process. Between the sale of the APR and the sale of land at its agricultural value, Al was compensated for

the full fair market value, and the Mongs were able to acquire the farm at a price they could afford.

"We wouldn't have been able to buy at anywhere close to fair market value," says Steve, noting the high cost of land in Stow. "We could have easily been out of business, but the APR gave us the permanence to continue the farm."

Over the past decade, the Mongs have grown their farm and their reputation. They use sustainable, (non-certified) organic farming methods, growing fresh vegetables such as: lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, corn and kale; without any synthetic fertilizers or pesticides.

One of Applefield's largest buyers is Debora's Natural Gourmet, a family-owned health food store in West Concord.

"We sell to everyone from markets, to chefs, to individual buyers at our farmstand," says Steve. "They like to buy sustainable, locally grown products and know of our techniques."

Applefield Farm now employs several Mong family members including Steve's daughter Erika, who works as a farmstand operator. They bring on 12 to 15 seasonal employees around the harvest season.

The Mongs now have 25 acres of land in operation including several greenhouses, a solar energy system, seven tractors and irrigation equipment, keeping Steve (ever the odd job aficionado) busy with repairs throughout the year.

As soon as winter winds down, the Mongs grow annuals and perennials in their main 14,000 square-foot greenhouse, which are later cut and sold as mixed floral arrangements and container gardens.

The family now own a second farm property located a few hundred meters down the road which they enrolled into APR in 2023, further benefitting the Mongs with money to invest back into their business.

What does the future hold for Applefield Farm?

"Keeping local sources of food production is a high priority for us," says Steve. "Our hope is when we do pass the farm along, it will be to a small farmer who would allow us to continue to be a part of it in some small way."

"With the APR designation, it's going to live on and be farmed by somebody no matter what."





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