Regenerating Land — and People

Project revitalizes communities through farming, engagement
By Brian PJ Cronin

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and at the shore of Crystal Lake and it feels like you are in the deep forest. A trail leads to the summit of Snake Hill, greenery abounds, and the din of insects and birds drown out other sounds. And yet, as Anusha Mehar points out, downtown Newburgh is two blocks away. “We’re hidden in plain sight,” says Mehar. “They can understand where it comes from and what it takes to tend.”

It feels like something tangible,” says Jacob Nawy, who volunteers at the Peekskill Regenerator Farm. “I’ve been to a lot of protests, and a lot of it is immaterial. But this —” he said, looking at the kale he had just harvested. “At the end of the day, someone’s eating this.”

The principles of the project also apply to the soil. “Regenerative agriculture is about making it healthier after you’re done with it,” explains Maeve McGee, the regenerator at the Peekskill farm. “Conventional farming depletes the soil of all of its life and nutrients. The regenerators and volunteers use compost and cover crops, work the soil without tilling, and eschew chemical fertilizers.” These methods also prevent carbon from being released from the soil, which contributes to global warming. “These techniques have been around for a long time, through all different cultures,” says Apicello. “But the recognition of how important they are in trapping carbon is opportune.”

Angell and Apicello are forging partnerships with municipalities to provide land to farm, which is what happened in Newburgh and Peekskill and means that apprentice farmers “don’t have to wait or figure out how to get a bank loan to buy 20 acres,” Angell said. “They’re thrown right into farming for their community.”

The couple also tries to recruit women and people of color to become regenerators, following the lead of Soul Fire Farms in Graffon and Rise & Root Farm in Chester, which are each run by African American women.

Collins, who is Black, and Mehar, whose mother immigrated from India, live in Newburgh. “In Punjabi culture, we’re used to being land stewards,” Mehar says. “It’s the bread basket of India. In my mom’s case, she said that growing up, if they didn’t grow it or skin it, they didn’t eat it.”

McGee grew up 10 minutes from the site of the Peekskill farm and this month will be passing her responsibilities to Aaron and Josh Mosley, brothers who are also locals. “There’s so many young people in this city who don’t have anything to do but walk around,” she says. “They said that when they were younger they would have loved to have had a place, nice and safe, where you can be sitting instead of Dunkin’ Donuts.”

One of the lessons for the regenerators and the volunteers is that farming can be challenging. The Newburgh farm has proven to be a welcoming sanctuary for groundhogs. Holding up a non-lethal trap, Mehar deadpans: “I’m hoping this will be a gentle invitation that they should be more regenerative in their own practice and buzz off.”

Earlier in the season, a sensory garden of native flowers and medicinal herbs was planted outside the fencing. Overnight, someone dug up and stole the plants. Community members urged Collins and Mehar to report the incident to the police, but, Mehar says, “that’s not the relationship we want to build with this land, or model with the community. Nothing about this space can be carceral.”

Instead, the regenerators and volunteers replanted the area with a “three sisters” system used by Indigenous peoples in which corn, squash and beans are planted close together to protect and sustain each other. “It’s now a resilience garden,” says Mehar. “We’ll grow more food than we ever anticipated.”