

# Belmont's Newest Farmer Tends the Land

By Jane Sherwin

Belmont Acres Farm is Belmont's newest market garden, located on land owned and farmed by the Richardson-Ogilby family since 1634. Launched in March 2011 by farmer Mike Chase, Belmont Acres occupies 1.3 acres on the south end of the 10-acre property between Blanchard, Taylor, and Glenn Roads. Chase rents the land from the Ogilby family, who put the land under an agricultural preservation restriction in 2002. (See "Last Working Farm in Town to be Preserved," Belmont Citizens Forum *Newsletter*, March 2003.) The remainder of the land has been farmed by the Sergi family since 1945.

With a PhD in environmental biology from UMass Boston, Chase works full time out of a home office for the Harvard School of Public Health. A Belmont resident for 10 years, he lives with his wife and daughter on Hurd Road, only

a short walk from the farm. "The farm becomes like family, a 24/7 job," he said.

Belmont Acres Farm is one more sign that Belmont is identifying and nurturing its roots in agriculture, particularly market gardening. Henry Ogilby said, "Because of the growing demand for local food, existing farms have outgrown their capacity and there is a lot of demand for farmland like this. Mike is very talented. He has a green thumb and a lot of patience. His love of the land and his good stewardship are really important for us—not just running the farm, but running it well and taking care of the land."

## From Artichokes to Zinnias

Belmont Acres offers a wide variety of crops chosen to please demanding clients who purchase community-supported agriculture



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Bountiful harvest at the Belmont Acres Farm stand.

(CSA) shares in the fall and spring. Three local restaurants—Vicki Lee’s, Stone Hearth Pizza and Sophia’s Greek Pantry—are also purchasing crops from the market garden.

“It’s not always easy to figure out what people will want,” said Chase. “I know they want corn, but corn is a low yield crop for a farm this size. So I’m emphasizing a diversity of plants.” These crops include multiple varieties of lettuce, beets, onions, carrots, beans, and tomatoes. There are also sweet potatoes, watermelon, Charentais melons, cantaloupe, cucumbers, zucchini, leeks, dill, cilantro, basil, brussels sprouts, cauliflower, okra, kale, collards, peas, and three varieties of eggplant.

More unexpected plants include tomatillos, Treviso radicchio, and artichokes. Chase said CSA members seem to be happy with the mix of choices. And Belmont Acres, like every well-run market garden, is marked by the bright magenta and gold colors of annuals: cosmos, zinnia, marigolds, sunflowers, and cockscomb celosia.

Produce is available for sale on Saturdays under a bright blue tarp off Taylor Road. Much of the produce is in bushel baskets ready for CSA members to pick up, but there is plenty of produce for sale to nonmembers as well. And if it’s not under the tarp, Chase or his wife, Hermik, or Hermik’s sister Arvik will walk out into the field to pick it for you. During one visit Arvik pulled leaves off an artichoke and the three of us swapped recipes for tomatoes and artichoke hearts.

In concert with Chase’s work, the Ogilbys are introducing old varieties of quince, apples, and pears that might have been growing on the farm 100 years ago. The land still has ancient fruit-bearing Bosc pear trees, one of which shelters dwarf Nigerian goats.



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Chickens at Belmont Acres Farm.

Chase shares ownership of the goats with Joan Teebagy, who also has four bee hives on the property. They have done some breeding with the goats who tame the grasses of Habitat’s new Weeks property on Belmont Hill. The farm also sells eggs from Red Star chickens who live in a newly-built coop and eat certified organic feed. Chicken and goat manure contribute nitrogen to the depleted soil, said Chase. He expects animals to be an increasingly important part of nurturing the land.

### Farming to Restore Soil, Extend Harvest

Chase said he likes to experiment. “I’ve been using Agribond fabric, which lets the light and heat in but keeps the flea beetles out, and the broccoli shows a vast difference in size and lack of damage.”

There are good reasons for using Agribond to control beetles. “Pesticide is expensive and legally restricted,” said Chase, pointing to the close encirclement of private homes along Glen and Taylor Roads. “We are considering whether to pursue organic certification.”

Teebagy, a Belmont resident and a member of the board of directors of the Belmont Food Collaborative, described Chase’s other

sustainable practices. “Mike is doing a really fantastic job,” Teebagy said. “He’s producing a large variety of food in a really good way—no chemicals or pesticides. He’s got some nice compost piles going, he conserves water using drip lines, and uses the hoop house (a kind of plastic-sheet-covered greenhouse) to extend the growing season with heat from the sun. You can see how much he knows just by looking at the results.”

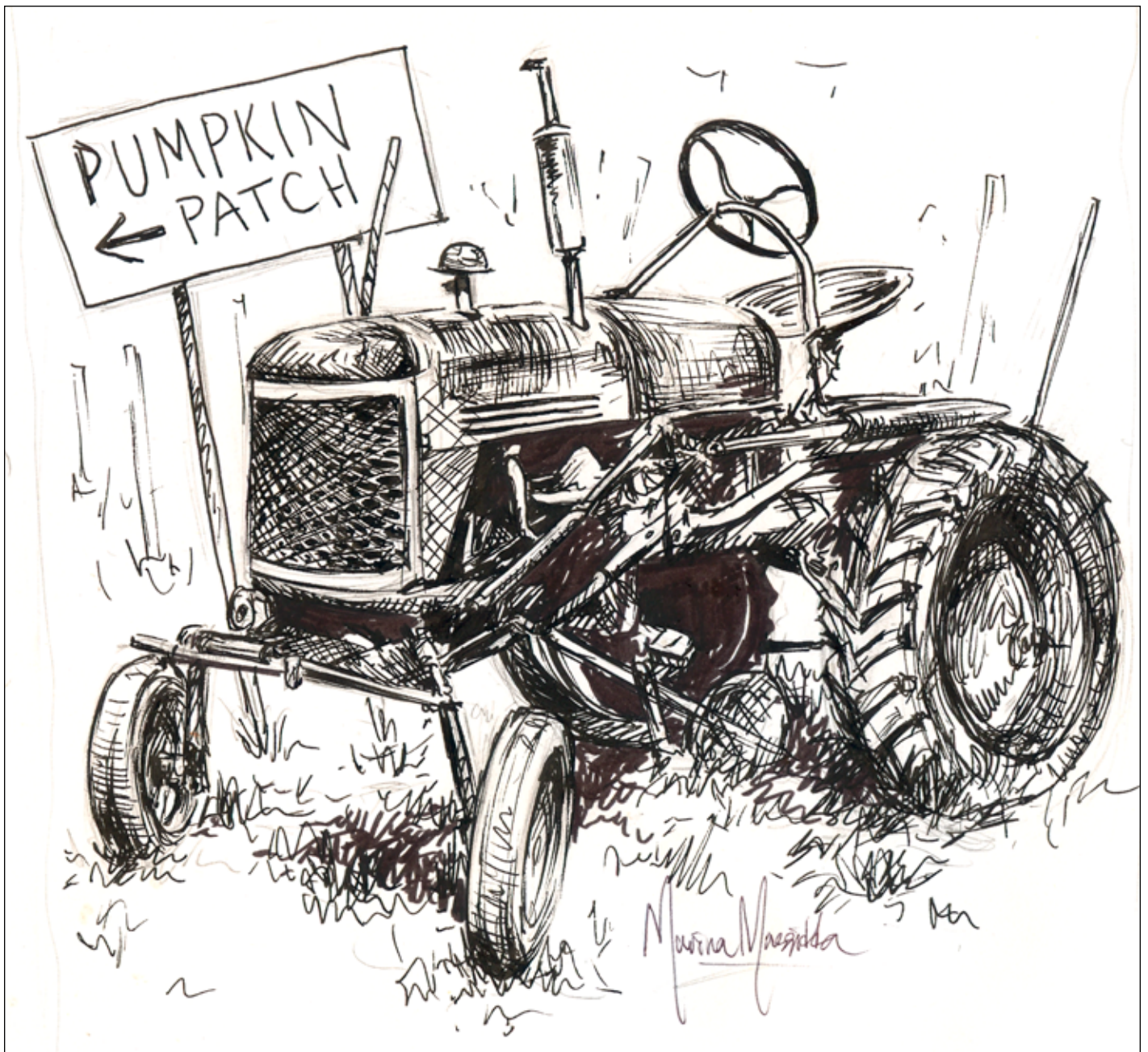
### Farm is “Resource for the Community”

Chase believes strongly in nurturing his farm’s role in the life of Belmont. “Farms are valuable to their communities. It’s much more than just

the good feeling you get when you see the place. I’d like to see independent study courses for high school students. We encourage volunteers—one is a teacher who comes weekly and talks about the farm as a refuge.”

He also spoke of “the incredible generosity of the Ogilby trust” and said “I can see how much it means to Lydia Ogilby, who often comes over to visit.” Conscious of the need to reach out, Chase has set up a website, [www. BelmontAcresFarm.com](http://www.BelmontAcresFarm.com), where readers can subscribe to the farm’s e-mail newsletter.

Teabagy said, “It’s a wonderful resource for the community to have food produced locally and by a productive farm that uses sustainable



MARINA MASSIDA

methods. And it's great to have students involved. You are always learning when you work on a farm."

## Gardening his Whole Life

Chase said that he's been gardening his whole life. "In the early 1980's I learned organic gardening from a World War II veteran who had cancer and needed somebody to help him with his garden. He was a great person and I learned a lot from him. I still have an organic gardening book of his."

Chase has also learned much from working with the Sergi family. "Sal Sergi, especially, took me on, and one year before his death, he asked me to select plant varieties for growing. I was like a family member—we would walk the rows together." Henry Ogilby says that Chase's apprenticeship with the Sergi family "made him a tested and known commodity when we were selecting a farmer."

One hundred years ago Belmont's economy thrived on farms and market gardens. They occupied much of the land from the orchards off Common Street, to the Wellington holdings south of the Center, to the numerous farms around Brighton Street. As late as the 1970's, the Scarfo family grew and sold tomatoes, radishes, zucchini, and zinnias off Pleasant Street. Chase seems happy to be a part of this tradition. "The orchestration of it all is the biggest challenge," he said. "Otherwise our first year has been remarkably problem-free, except for the rabbits, who are all over Belmont."

"We are very dedicated to continuing farming here and hope that Mike will expand his operation next year," said Ogilby, who grew up on the property. "There will definitely be a farm here in 2012. We want people to know that we are committed to this."

For more information contact Mike Chase at [mikeandhermik@juno.com](mailto:mikeandhermik@juno.com) or visit the farm's web site, [www.BelmontAcresFarm.com](http://www.BelmontAcresFarm.com).

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## Environmental Events

By Sally Rifkin

### Summer Gathering and Herb Talk

**Saturday, September 17, 2 p.m.**

Join the Belmont Victory Gardens at Rock Meadow for a final summer gathering and to hear herbalist Madelon Hope discuss medicinal herbs. Picnic begins at 2, talk at 2:30. Free. Sponsored by Belmont Victory Gardens. [otto.judy@gmail.com](mailto:otto.judy@gmail.com). Rock Meadow, Mill Street, Belmont, between Trapelo Road and Winter Street.

### Sustainable Belmont Garden Tour

**Sunday, September 18, 11 a.m.-3 p.m.**

Visit ten organic flower and vegetable gardens and learn about composting, rain barrels, backyard chickens, beekeeping, and other sustainable practices right in Belmont. Pick up map on September 18 at the Beech Street Center, 266 Beech Street, Belmont.

### Tours of the Water Purification Facility

**Monday, September 19 and October 17, 6 -7:30 p.m.**

The Cambridge Water Department is offering tours of the City's beautiful Walter J. Sullivan Water Purification Facility. The program will include a virtual tour of the whole Cambridge watershed, an explanation of the process by which water that falls as rain in the suburbs 10 miles west of Cambridge is transported to Fresh Pond and made into pure drinking water for our city, and a walk through the purification areas and the lab. Free. Sponsored by the Cambridge Water Department. (617) 349-6489, [friendsoffreshpond.org/cwdprograms2011.htm#twp](http://friendsoffreshpond.org/cwdprograms2011.htm#twp) Walter J Sullivan Water Purification Facility, 250 Fresh Pond Parkway, Cambridge.

### Protecting Open Space in Dense Areas

**Wednesday, September 21, 7 p.m.**

Bob Wilber, director of Land Acquisition and Protection for Mass Audubon, will speak about conservation restrictions, the use of Community Preservation funds, and other ways to preserve open space in built-up towns like Belmont. Free. Sponsored by the League of Women Voters. [belmont.ma.lwvnet.org](http://belmont.ma.lwvnet.org). Assembly Room, Belmont Memorial Library.