

AT HEPWORTH FARMS, IT'S FULL STEAM AHEAD: PSFC'S LEADING SUPPLIER PIVOTS TO MEET THE NEW AGE

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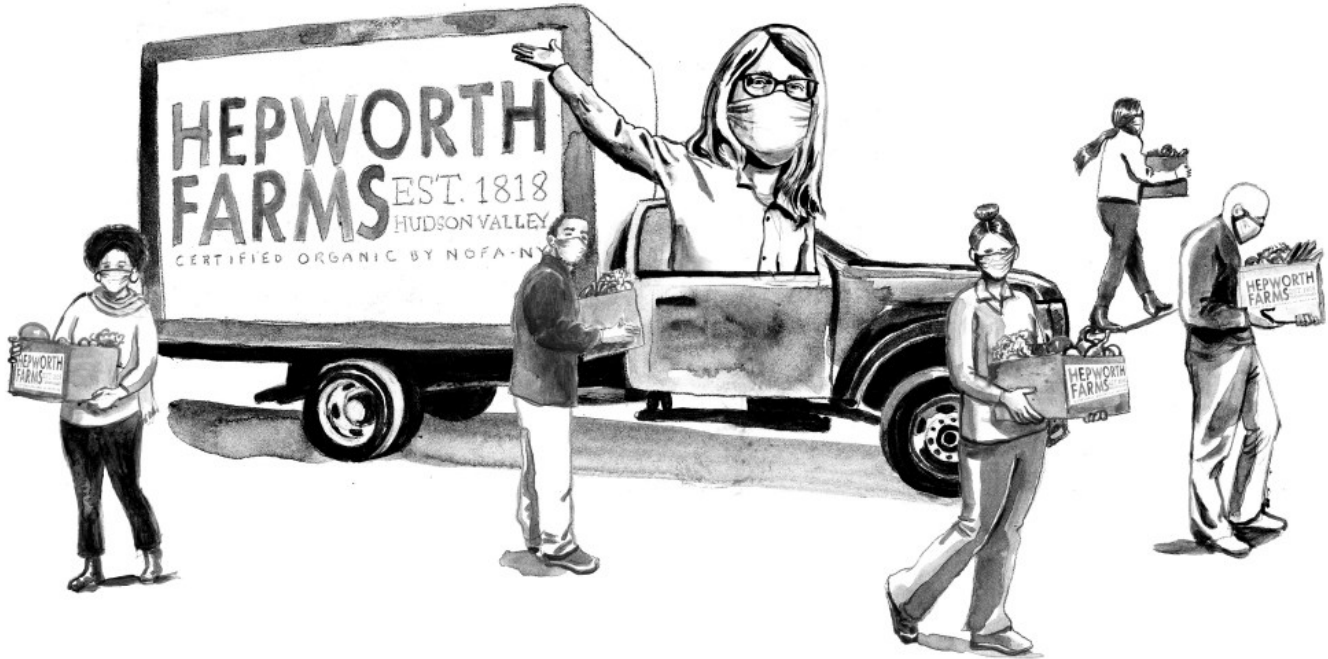


Illustration by Caty Bartholomew

By Frank Haberle

Hepworth Farms is the Park Slope Food Coop's oldest—and one of its biggest—working partners. Located in Milton, New York, in the Hudson Valley, the 550-acre farm, run by twin sisters Amy and Gail Hepworth, has worked with PSFC coordinators to plan, produce, and deliver an incredibly diverse array of produce to our shelves. For four decades, the PSFC produce aisle—a place we might have taken for granted six weeks ago, but certainly not today—is bursting year-round with fresh, seasonal produce delivered from Hepworth Farms and other providers. In the case of Hepworth Farms, the relationship with the Coop that has been forged over the years means that Amy, Gail, and their staff can plan their planting seasons around what the Coop and its members need and want. At no time has this partnership been more valued, and more tested, than it is today.

Any PSFC member who has braved the lines and entered the Coop in recent weeks has seen that social distancing requirements, among other factors, have taken a toll on our produce shelves, with a less diverse array of offerings spread apart to create more space for shoppers. As city dwellers, we know what it looks like from the consumers' point of view—the long lines, the shopping restrictions, fewer produce options. But what does it look like from the production side—from point of view of the people who grow and deliver our produce to us?

“What we are made to realize, in an event like this, is the interconnectedness of our worlds. This is impacting everybody,” Gail says. “What the Park Slope Food Coop is going through, we’re going through. Like the staff at PSFC, we are dealing with new variables every day. We are doing whatever it takes. We are adapting to the new realities.” At Hepworth Farms, new realities this spring include the extra steps the farm must take, to ensure the safety of the food it delivers to its partners, the health and stability of its workforce, and the sudden change in the demand for fresh produce—which is declining because fewer shoppers are buying in the Coop, and because a larger percentage of people, concerned about food shortages and wanting to reduce the number of trips to the Coop, continue to buy more frozen and canned produce than before.

Keeping Workers and Produce Safe



Baby Swiss chard. | Photo from Hepworth Farms collection

If it seems challenging to stay six feet away from people in the PSFC bulk aisle, imagine what it must be like on a working farm. “I used to ride in the tractor with somebody else often, mostly for training purposes,” Amy says, “but as the caretaker of my mom, those days are over.” Over the winter, Hepworth Farms invested in building better housing for temporary agriculture workers—but with the H2A Program temporarily suspended, the new workers have been delayed for at least a month. Hepworth Farms has a regular staff of 20–30 people; the delay has been a mixed blessing, because of the resulting opportunity to spread the staff out more, and to create an emergency apartment in case workers need to be quarantined. The staff has been divided into specific work teams as much as possible, to create additional separation. In normal years, Amy holds a “huddle” at 6 a.m., when the entire staff comes together and reflects on the importance and the mission of the day’s work; today the

teams are separated, and go out to the fields in one-hour intervals, to create more distance between workers. Additionally, Hepworth Farms is creating its own sanitizer for its workers.

The Produce Keeps Coming



We are still preparing our fields. This stage of preparation is foundational to the crop

cycle and cannot be treated with any less care than other stages. | Photo from Hepworth Farms collection

Recent media stories have reported that American farms are plowing over their fields and pouring milk out into ditches, because they have nowhere to send their food. For Hepworth Farms, the strong relationships built with partners like PSFC mean that they can plan, change, and adapt to a shifting market. “As farmers, pivoting in mid-season to keep our farm running is nothing new,” Gail says. “We deal with droughts, insects, hail, and heat waves. So, now we have to deal with the pandemic. We’ll do whatever it takes, whatever is necessary to keep everybody safe and keep the produce coming.” Amy adds that, as farmers, “we know how to pivot. We’re pivoting now. We are completely tuned into your needs, and we wake up every morning to bring you food. We are here to make it happen.”

Amy adds that the relationship PSFC shares with Hepworth Farms allows them to plan and prepare for changing needs. “Usually, at this time of year, we’re speaking with the coordinators about plantings we’re going to start doing now, in preparation for the summer season. For example, in a normal year, right now, we’d be asking if they were planning to carry seven types of summer squash this year, and they would have a couple of weeks to decide. This year we need to adapt. We can manipulate the speed of our tomatoes’ progress in the greenhouses, if we have to—by changing temperatures, i.e., cooling them down.” The limited movement of produce in the Coop poses a different set of issues. “A few weeks ago, we started harvesting our overwintered greens—an amazing assortment of greens for this time of year—collards, kale, spinach, rapini. I asked the Coop, ‘Are you sure you don’t want more greens?’ They didn’t go to waste; we picked and shipped all of it to an Alberts’s near Philadelphia, a trusted distributor who PSFC also buys from. Of course, we would prefer to deliver direct to the Coop. By the time our spinach gets to PSFC through a distributor, it’s just not as fresh as when it arrives at PSFC directly. With direct delivery, what we pick today goes on the truck tonight to PSFC.”

Like all small businesses, Hepworth Farms has definitely felt the short-term impact of the changes to the economy. “When a partner as important to us as the PSFC suddenly isn’t ordering food in the same volume it normally does, we obviously are affected by that,” Gail says. “It’s a challenge but we’re doing what we can do. At the same time, some of our suppliers are giving us a little more time and flexibility in paying our farm’s expenses, which is helpful with the decrease in sales; that money goes directly to pay our workers this time of year.”

One option Hepworth Farms is exploring is the expansion of its Farm Box program, which brings fresh produce from their farm directly to people’s doors. If Hepworth Farms can gain enough interest, they will try to launch the Farm Box Program in New York City. Please visit <https://www.farmbox.us/> to register your interest. To learn more about Hepworth Farms—or if you would just like to stare for an hour at amazing photographs of the beautiful open spaces where your food comes from—please visit <https://www.hepworthfarms.com/>.