

THE VIEW FROM HEPWORTH FARMS

November 15, 2021



Nearly end-of-season cherry tomatoes (and some heirloom tomatoes) from Hepworth Farms for sale on the shopping floor at PSFC.

COOP PROVIDERS REFLECT ON A RAPIDLY CHANGING MARKET

By Frank Haberle

We are just a few years away from the 50th anniversary of the Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC). For almost as many years, the Coop has relied on Hepworth Farms, a 500-acre Hudson Valley agricultural farm that stood with us for decades, and continues today as our largest single farm partner. Through times of prosperity and economic downturn—and through climate crises like Superstorm Sandy and recent flooding—Hepworth Farms and PSFC have worked together to ensure that fresh, organic produce at affordable

prices remains a privilege available to PSFC's working members. In planning their growing season each year, Hepworth Farms' "tell-us-what-you-want-and-we'll-grow-it-for you" relationship with PSFC has ensured that an amazing assortment of fresh tomatoes, zucchinis, lettuce and other produce—grown locally, organically, and lovingly—can be served to our families on our dinner tables, in some cases on the same day they were picked from the vine.



Stacks of Honeycrisp apples from Hepworth Farms, in the walk-in at the PSFC.

In the past 18 months, this balanced, mutually supportive partnership has been tested by the onset of the COVID-19 crisis which, for the first time in our history, severely limited our members' access to our shopping aisles and decreased demand for fresh products. The same limitations were felt on the supply

side, by every farm and business that brings products into PS-FC. For Hepworth Farms, the challenges of the 18-month slowdown demanded that they quickly pivot to meet changing needs, supply shortages and a more limited market at PSFC and elsewhere, while also facing the urgent need to protect the health and safety of their workers. Much like PSFC, which is still struggling to get our members back in the habit of shopping in our aisles, Hepworth Farms faces a new business landscape that has shifted considerably. They have adapted to meet changing trends in the organic food market, the supply chain, the workforce, and the economy. However, like every other part of the food chain, they face a shifting market and an uncertain future.



Six 1/2-bushel boxes of Devoe Pears and one case of Cape Gooseberries, all from Hepworth Farms, in a walk-in at the PSFC.

COVID has taken a toll on both PSFC and Hepworth Farms, challenging both organizations to shift and adapt. “For years, PSFC has been a huge success,” Gail Hepworth, one of three co-operators of Hepworth Farms (along with Gerry Greco and Gail’s twin sister, Amy), observed. “Then, suddenly, the model was disrupted. The impact of COVID-19 was felt very deeply. Suddenly PSFC wasn’t able to cycle its members in like it used to. There were long lines and people didn’t want to wait in lines, and the member work shifts were suspended. Suddenly people were changing

their habits and shopping elsewhere. PSFC needs to come back. It may need to make changes to be more appealing to a shifting market, but PSFC needs to come back and, again, serve as a robust success model for the whole world.”

A RELENTLESS COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABLE FARMING PRACTICES

A seventh-generation farm that was first established in Milton, New York in 1818, Hepworth Farms transitioned in 1982 from traditional farming to dechemicalization and wholly-organic farming, under Amy’s guidance. Hepworth Farm’s methods are constantly evolving to ensure that the best practices in organic and sustainable farming are applied in each step of the food cycle. “For 40 years we have been building our understanding of what being a sustainable farm really means,” Amy said. “We’ve always been committed to a whole-farm-alive systems approach. This has only become more intensified in recent years with our commitment to biological farming [the creation of a sustainable soil system]. Today, biological agriculture teaches us to introduce microbes to improve the soil. It’s a steady, time intensive process to influence biology. It’s a complex dynamic that you have to navigate in the dark. You can’t see what’s going on in the soil beneath each plant, but you can see it in the health of the plant itself. Biological farming is going to take another decade to fully understand. For example, we’re now taking steps to introduce parasitic neomodes [tiny worms into our soil that attack beetles that harm produce. We’re introducing things into the soil to make it more balanced.”

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As Amy put it, “This work is about the acknowledgement and respect of the life force and the interconnected reality of life itself.” Gail adds that “Amy’s practices are putting things into the soil that prevent disease, that create healthy soils and build protective colonies around roots that allow our plants to be as healthy as they can be. Our practices keep evolving alongside the latest science, so that we can deliver the healthiest produce while taking care of and nurturing the soil. It’s more expensive and time intensive to grow plants this way, but it’s the right thing to do. We are committed to continuing the mission of organic farming: better soil means better food, which means healthier people. We still have a lot to learn about the evolving biology of farming this way. The more we learn about the soil the more we realize we don’t yet know.”



Devoe and Asian pears for sale at the PSFC.

NEW CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Fewer members shopping at PSFC has meant lower revenues for the Coop and for Hepworth Farms alike. Hepworth Farms has had to face a range of challenges in order to survive the COVID-19 crisis, and now faces numerous questions on how to move forward in a new market and a changed world. For the first time in its history Hepworth Farms faced a labor shortage, in part reflecting—as Gail pointed out—the general devaluing of work in our society. “Through this pandemic, people should have become more aware of the amazing work that goes into their food systems, and the essential role that farm workers play in their food systems. But farm workers are still extremely undervalued in our society. As farmers we are now paying a living wage to our workers,

but people still can't live decently and fully independently on these wages. There's been a big culture shift in the last couple of years where real work, the practice of working hard, is being undervalued. People should be more aware of where their food comes from and they should buy their food from places where workers are valued and supported. The relationship is important but people don't seem to value it."

Amy adds that the people who do come to work at Hepworth Farms—who can number up to 200 during the busiest seasons—quickly learn to appreciate the work and the role it plays in others' well-being. "The best part of my day is getting to work with the beautiful people who work here. I am so thankful for them. We all share a collective mindset of doing good work for others. The workers here know that they are really a part of something special. I think it's really important for people to understand where their food comes from, and it's just as important for them to understand that the people who plant, grow, pick, pack, and deliver their food love doing this work for them."

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The economics of an independent farm are always challenging, especially during a pandemic. Amy said, "[PSFC General Coordinator] Joe Holtz once told me that 'from seed to sale, you are the creditors of the food system. You bring us the food, we sell it, and then we pay you.' We don't get paid until food is in the consumer's stomach. From seed to sale, we are creditors of food sys-

tem.” Added Gail, “We begin working on producing the food in March. We plan what we’re planting and when. Then we plant the seeds. Then we grow the product, pick it, and deliver it. But we don’t get paid until 30 to 60 days after someone has eaten it.”

Inflation and supply chain concerns that have impacted all levels of the economy have hit family-run farms like Hepworth Farms especially hard. “The cartons we needed for our cherry tomatoes, we could not get in time to sell them,” Gail said, “When we need parts for a tractor that breaks down, it takes longer to find them.” Inflation is creeping up, without changing the prices the farm can charge for its products. “Everything we have to purchase,” Gail adds, “is more expensive. But the price of food we sell does not match this rise. The increased pricing is still not filtering back to farmers.”

Amy added that “the worst thing this year was when we couldn’t afford to glean for the food bank—everything became so financially stressful. We have felt so good about harvesting and giving food away in the past. We have to do what we can, but this was the most internally disruptive thing that happened on the farm this year.”

“Right now, all farmers are trying to survive,” Gail said. “When you’re in survival mode other people might do funny things. But we’re not compromising when it comes to Amy’s practices, and our commitment to producing the healthiest produce possible. Three years ago we thought this was sustainable. But sustainability is expensive.”



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

REFORGING CONNECTIONS

As the Coop continues its efforts to bounce back fully and resume our success as a model of cooperative partnerships, local farmers are eager to see members recommit to shopping and working here. “The great thing about our relationship with PSFC,” Gail said, “has always been that people had the opportunity to know who their farmers are, and where their food has come from. This relationship has been such an anchor for our farm, but the pandemic has separated us from you, and you from us. We want to partner with you, to reconnect with your mission, to have you reconnect with our mission. Be connected to our mission—you have a profile population that’s perfect. We need to reestablish relationship. Amy has taken our farm through many generations of changes. Tell us what you want us to grow and we’ll grow it!”

To learn more about Hepworth Farms and the work Gail and Amy Hepworth are doing in the Hudson Valley, please visit www.hepworthfarms.com.