Land of Opportunity: Immigrant Farmers Put Down Roots in Holyoke, Massachusetts

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Land of Opportunity

Immigrant farmers put down roots in Holyoke, Massachusetts

By Eric Toensmeier

Finding and procuring 4.1 acres of rich farmland just outside an urban center is no small feat. But Nuestras Raíces (NR), a grass-roots organization that promotes economic, human and community development, did just that.

Based in Holyoke, Massachusetts, NR carries out their mission through projects related to food and agriculture. Fittingly called Tierra de Oportunidades (TOD) or Land of Opportunities, their new farm is being developed as an incubator site for beginning farmer enterprises.

This prime property is located on the Connecticut River, boasting world-class Hadley loam, and is home to several at-risk and endangered species, including the bald eagle. Yet the Massachusetts Turnpike is a scant one mile away as is one of the largest shopping malls in the northeast. The striking juxtaposition is poignant in an environmental sense, yet also provides easy access to the project.

A significant number of Holyoke residents grew up farming in Puerto Rico. While many of them aspire to continue this tradition, they are faced with substantial barriers, particularly the language gap and access to land and capital. TOD offers a means of overcoming these hurdles.

Each prospective farmer takes part in a brief training course offered in Spanish. First we review the realities of farming in the Northeast US, helping participants make the decision as to whether this path is truly the right one for them. This “reality check” is followed by the development of a production, marketing, and financial plan. A committee of farmers, business experts, and community organizers then reviews each plan; the most viable ones are selected.

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But Tierra de Oportunidades is not just about raising produce. It’s also about raising awareness. To that end, there are farm tours, harvest festivals, and other agricultural events. With a canoeful of opportunity to raise small livestock such as chickens, rabbits, goats, and pigs. Here Fermin Galarza is shown with a favorite rooster.

Marketing opportunities include the Holyoke farmers’ market and Nuestras Raíces’ own restaurant, bakery, and shared-use commercial kitchen (for value-adding or sales to existing food processing businesses). Advertising costs are minimal as both of these organizations already have communications in place with the public. The outlook includes forging relationships with local restaurants, adding an on-site farm stand with a café, and developing a women’s entrepreneur network and a cooperative to provide flowers and food for weddings.

A number are for sale through the Schlabach’s Nursery, 2784 Murdock Road, Medina, NY, 14103. Write to them for a catalog listing these trees and their other orchard fruits and fruit growing products. A quantity of these trees will be planted at Cornell and at our Spring Meeting site at Trumansburg, northwest of Ithaca.

Some Carpathian Walnut seedlings will be available for distribution at that meeting. There will be a discussion of Eastern Filbert production, Butternut Blight studies, and the planting of our NYNGA Carpathian Walnut Orchard…our on-going research project and commitment to the continuation and expansion of nut-growing activities in New York State.

If you would like to know more about our organization, the Carpathian Project, or our May 6th meeting; contact Jon Wertis at 607-387-4331. He is recording and mapping the location of these sources of quality genetic material.

Looking For English Walnuts

If you know of any “English Walnut” trees producing good tasting and good-sized nuts in NYS, please contact Jon Wertis at 607-387-4331. He is recording and mapping the location of these sources of quality genetic material.

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Growing Nuts

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the-Lake, Canada, has donated some 5,000 Carpathian (think English or Persian) seed Walnuts to our association. John Gordon stratified them in winter storage and some of these nuts were distributed to participants at the Saratoga Meeting last spring.

One thousand of these nuts were planted at Cornell University by NYNGA volunteers. They were germinated (better than 50% growth) in the green houses there, summered outside, and are now in cold storage waiting for spring 2006 planting. These nuts (Pappe, Combe, G3 ISU H24, Lake, and Harrison) came from Lane Ontario trees that we believe have cold hardiness, are late leafing, and may have Western Blight resistance.

Seeking new varieties of English Walnuts, the NYNGA at BWW Farm, 8144 Searsburg Road, Trumansburg, NY 14886, Phone 607-387-4331 or email farmerjon2000@aol.com.

Jon Wertis is Vice President of NY Nut Growers Association and a retired public school educator. He and his partner Marian Pritchard run a 90-acre Boer goat meat opera-