

Heritage Point, a Cooperative Urban Farm

BY JOHN BRYANT



Heritage Point Farm in May 2013.

Southwest Virginia has seen a lot of rain in 2013, and Roanoke experienced flash flooding on three separate occasions during July. At this time last year, our co-op was worried about a leaky spot at the front door that would let rainwater in the store if too much of it came down the parking lot too fast.

This year, we worried more about our potatoes. That's because, in addition to operating a retail cooperative grocery store for 38 years, Roanoke Natural Foods Co-op during the past year has also been farming. In October 2012, we stepped out of the comforts of retail and into new territory as local food producers when we founded Heritage Point, our 25-acre cooperative urban farm.

Intentional growth

A company-wide goal to intentionally grow our business kept Roanoke Natural Foods Co-op intensely focused on the project for over two years. We recognized an opportunity to get ahead of future competitors—the nearest Whole Foods is still 90 miles away—and strengthen our commitment to lead the local foods movement in the Roanoke Valley.

Over the course of two years, the co-op created two complete business plans for two separate properties. We walked away from a 12-acre property in 2011 after we heard from many neighbors that they were not ready for an urban farm, even though the residents previously had approved a comprehensive development plan that specifically asked for commercial urban

Our intention is to build a sustainable profit center for our co-op that will also support our mission of outreach and education.

agriculture in their neighborhood. It was our intentional focus on growing our co-op that helped us transition from the devastating blow of giving up that first site to acquiring Heritage Point, which in many ways is a better property than we had ever imagined we would own.

When we purchased the land in 2012, it was the culmination of 10 years of our co-op dreaming big, and when we started farming the next morning, the real work began. We have five farmers on staff: two part-time positions; two outstanding Assistant Farm Managers, Chelsea Graves and Conor Rice; and our Farm Coordinator, Sean Jordan, who led Roanoke Natural Foods Co-op through the process of preparing to purchase, operate, and reap the benefits of our farm. Jordan, who came to the co-op with more than a decade of experience as an organic farmer, is an invaluable resource and was essential to making sure the farm would become a real, self-sustaining part of our business.

Making a plan

The land at Heritage Point presents a number of challenges for agricultural development.

The terrain is hilly, and some areas have solid rock just a few inches below the soil. The property also holds 16 different easements that range from storm-water retention to electrical utilities.

Although these issues hinder the full use of the 25 acres for planting crops—we plan to farm approximately 12 acres of the property—it isn't unusual to encounter obstacles like these when dealing with urban agriculture. In fact, it is the unique variations of every piece of land that make urban agriculture feasible and an excellent model for farmers who take the time to work with the land.

"Each piece of land is unique," Jordan says. "And if you approach it with a rigid expectation, 'This is what I'm going to do whether the land likes it or not,' you'll fail."

Before the co-op even made an offer on the property, Jordan, along with General Manager Bruce Phlegar and accountant Jim May, constructed a complete three-year business plan for Heritage Point. This document not only includes financials for every aspect of the farm, but also looks at how taking on the risk of owning a farm ties back into our Ends statement on owner engagement and community involvement. The business plan underwent months of review from our board of directors and outside consultants to make sure that it was solid, would leave a lasting legacy of education and engagement for generations to come, and would in time generate a profit for our co-op.

"Why plan to fail?" Phlegar asks. "Our intention is to build a sustainable profit center for



Asian greens (above) were some of the first products from Heritage Point to be sold in the co-op's stores. Hybrid lilies (right) and other cut flowers sell well, and at the farm, contribute beauty while functioning as pest control for other crops.



The Matheson Brothers, Kevin (left) and Bryan (right), played at Heritage Point Farm's dedication.



Assistant Farm Manager Conor Rice with Aengus, the farm dog.



Assistant Farm Manager Chelsea Graves at Heritage Point's Farm Dedication, where the co-op raised over \$500 for Feeding America.

our co-op that will also support our mission of outreach and education.”

Becoming self-sustaining

Roanoke Natural Foods Co-op purchased 17.5 acres of Heritage Point from the city of Roanoke for \$30,000, and we are leasing another 7.4 acres with the option to purchase within the next five years for an additional \$30,000. This incredible price for such a beautiful property came in part because of the easements and unique lay of the land, but it also clearly reflects our city's recognition that urban agriculture

makes civic sense in livability, a long-term tax base, and a progressive image among other cities competing for the same businesses and talent.

We have invested an additional \$170,000 to date for farming equipment, irrigation, refrigeration, permits, and additional infrastructure. The business plan calls for a significant portion of the long-term income from Heritage Point to come from the sale of fruit and perennials, including a U-pick operation with strawberries, blueberries, asparagus, and more. Heritage Point won't see a yield from these crops for

another three to five years. We have already paid for a majority of long-term expenses, and we anxiously await the fruits of future labor.

Using retained patronage and earnings, the co-op has funded Heritage Point's buildout completely out-of-pocket, aside from a 0 percent interest loan for our beautiful John Deere tractor. “We planned with the knowledge that our existing operation would partially support our farm financially until our farm is able to support itself,” Phlegar says.

Heritage Point is projected to generate a profit by 2015. We remain on pace with those

◀ projections, although some aspects of the original plan have changed. Phlegar and Jordan meet quarterly with members of our board of directors to discuss the successes, struggles, progress, and changes.

“You have to have an idea of what you want to do and look at what the land wants to do,” says Jordan. “It’s a partnership between the farmer and land, not a hierarchy.”

As I write this in July, the farm is harvesting banana peppers, green peppers, basil, cut flowers, fresh eggs, and potatoes—the ones that survived the record-breaking rainfall. Though Heritage Point is still two years away from generating a profit, we can say without a doubt that the attention we have received for this project from our owners, shoppers, and media—both local and national—has helped grow sales at our two retail locations. Roanoke Natural Foods Co-op recorded a sales increase of nearly 21 percent in 2012.

Our customers’ trust is also growing as we receive many compliments on the farm products sold at our stores and the transparency behind our brand, “Our Promise.” This eight-point pledge addresses how we care for not only the food grown at the farm, but also our livestock, our employees, the environment, safety, our community, and our customers. “Our Promise” was developed in the original business plan for Heritage Point and is displayed throughout our store and on our packaging as a testament to how we stand behind our farm’s products.

Reality and reward

The idea of farming carries with it a certain nostalgic glow. There’s “feel good” imagery of baskets of freshly harvested food, picnics under an apple tree, sunsets behind silos, wind pumps, “American Gothic,” etc. But the reality is that small-scale, sustainable farming is hard work, and it is dying out. Running a farm is a numbers game that has all too often veered off into second or third mortgages of the family home. Granddad’s land, once covered with fresh vegetables, is more profitable and manageable to the grandkids as real estate.

There is also a disconnect between food and the consumer. How can we truly engage a community and gain its trust in regards to food while local farms are becoming more and more scarce?

It is for these reasons that we felt it was important for Roanoke Natural Foods Co-op to get into farming. Our co-op believes in preserving real food, sharing values that build a local economy, and ensuring that farmland remains farmland and accessible to everyone.

It will take time to develop Heritage Point into its full potential. Local food in the Roanoke Valley and across the nation still has a long way to grow, and we expect a lot of hard work for many years to come. That’s the journey ahead—and the reward. ■

POSITION OPENINGS

Two Positions

Neighborhood Co-op Grocery Carbondale, Illinois

Neighborhood Co-op Grocery is located in Carbondale, Illinois, a university town with a population of 25,000. The 300,000-acre Shawnee National Forest is just minutes away and features some of the best rock climbing available. The co-op operates a 12,000-square-foot store with annual sales of approximately \$5 million. We consistently rank in the top quartile among food co-ops in staff satisfaction surveys.



Prepared Foods Manager

We are seeking an individual with experience running a restaurant, food service, catering, or deli operation.

The prepared foods manager oversees the operation of a natural foods deli with a scratch bakery and cheese subdepartment and is responsible for meeting co-op goals for sales, margin, labor expense, and customer service. This includes developing and pricing new recipes; overseeing the purchasing of products and ingredients; and supervising the kitchen manager, bakery supervisor, and deli counter manager. Salary DOE.

Wellness Department Manager

We are seeking an individual with familiarity with vitamins, supplements, herbs, natural cosmetics and body care products.

The wellness department manager selects, prices, promotes, and assists customers with sales of wellness products to meet objectives for sales, margin, labor expense, inventory turns, and customer service. This includes planning and maintaining attractive displays, overseeing buyers in ordering to maximize sales and turns, and ensuring that all wellness staff are able to answer customer questions within legal guidelines. Salary DOE.

Please apply for either position by emailing Francis Murphy, general manager, at francis@neighborhood.coop.

General Manager

Rising Tide Community Market Damariscotta, Maine

Rising Tide seeks a general manager to oversee all aspects of day-to-day co-op operations and carry out policies set by its elected board.



Rising Tide is a cooperatively owned grocery store that has provided quality natural foods and other products to the Lincoln County community of Maine since 1978. Rising Tide underwent a major expansion and store purchase four years ago. The store is located in the picturesque town of Damariscotta, Maine, and currently has 3,000 member-owners, 36 employees and over \$4 million in annual sales.

The general manager is responsible for the management of all operations and reports to the board under Policy Governance. The ideal candidate will have proven leadership skills, extensive supervisory and financial management experience, demonstrated employee and customer satisfaction focus, knowledge of the natural food industry, excellent communication skills, experience building teams, an understanding and commitment to cooperative principles, and experience working with governing boards.

To learn more about the job description and method of application, visit our website: www.risingtide.coop.

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