

# India Burnett Farmer



28, Rutland Region

Co-founder and program director,  
Rutland Area Farm and Food Link  
Farmer

The Rutland region has faced more than its share of challenges. “We lost manufacturing, the marble quarry, the railroad — and we didn’t get the highway,” explains Greg Cox, a West Rutland farmer for 30 years. “People like living here because of the open land, the farms, the culture — but it’s going rapidly.” Luckily for Rutland, it also has creative, committed residents like India Burnett Farmer who co-founded Rutland Area Farm and Food Link (RAFFL) six years ago.

It was while working on economic development initiatives as a planner for the Rutland Regional Planning Commission that Burnett Farmer, a Green Mountain College graduate, first dug deeply into the state of regional agriculture. “There was this general melancholy about farming in Rutland. There wasn’t a lot of celebration around agriculture that was viable, and there were a lot of very real challenges,” recalls Burnett Farmer. “We did find there were some easy things that could be done to help,” she says, “but there was no organization to do them.” So in 2004, she left her job to bootstrap a new organization into being. “You want people like India in your community,” says Cox, a longtime RAFFL board member.



RAFFL is about supporting and forging connections: between farmers and consumers, farmers and resources, food and health, agriculture and culture. “We’ve been able to identify challenges and develop strategies and also get people energized around what is good and is working,” says Burnett Farmer.

The organization published its fifth annual Locally Grown Guide, helped establish the state’s first year-round weekly farmers market and has facilitated sales between farms and institutions. It is cultivating the next generation of farmers through mixers and a grant-funded New Farmer Initiative, which offers business advice and is developing an incubator farm. RAFFL has also undertaken a feasibility study for a Green Mountain Food Hub — shared processing, storage and distribution facilities where farmers will be able to develop value-added products for customers like schools.

“My hope is that the work we’re doing can keep land accessible and cultivate markets that truly value the products and the land,” says Burnett Farmer, who also practices what she preaches. Last year she and her husband bought 190 acres in West Pawlet to expand their nursery of cold-tolerant grape varieties. Fourth-generation Pawlet farmer Bill Clark is optimistic about new farms like theirs and the work of RAFFL. “We’re trying to turn some things around here,” says Clark, “and RAFFL is what turns the wheels.”