

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.”



Theresa Snow



31, Morrisville

Program director of agricultural resources,
Vermont Foodbank

In the Vermont Foodbank's Wolcott distribution center, pallets are stacked high with bags of rice and canned vegetables, staples for food shelves and other agencies that receive food through the Foodbank, which they in turn provide to the needy. But in a large walk-in cooler, Theresa Snow shows off a newer development: tubs of fresh greens and crates of sun-yellow summer squash salvaged from local farms through the Foodbank's gleaning program, an outgrowth of a project she started in 2004.

The endeavor, originally named Salvation Farms, started small with Pete's Greens in Craftsbury where Snow, then a recent Sterling College graduate, had worked. "Pete had extra greens and we thought, 'Let's get this food to people who aren't buying it,'" Snow recalls. She deliv-

ered some to nearby senior and day care centers and called the Foodbank, which happily took the rest. The project quickly expanded to other farms that were eager to donate excess produce but did not have the staff to glean it or to train volunteers.

For three years, Salvation Farms served the Lamoille Valley under the financial sponsorship of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont. Snow involved dozens of gleaners from preschoolers to seniors, college students to at-risk youth because she believes the community should share in harvesting and learn how food is grown, lessons she treasures from her Morrisville childhood helping in her family's garden and on her grandparents' farm. "We wanted to reconnect people with what it means to provide for yourself," Snow explains.

By January 2008, the project was so successful and Snow stretched so thin, that

she and her advisory board decided to take the Foodbank up on its offer of a permanent home. Doug O'Brien, then Foodbank CEO, says Snow's efforts dovetailed perfectly with their goal to provide more fresh, locally grown food. "Theresa was doing the right thing at the right time," he says. "It was an incredible accomplishment how far she'd gotten with so few resources."

The Foodbank gleaning program now has field representatives in Brattleboro and Wolcott and rescued 400,000 pounds of produce last year from triple the number of farms as two years ago. Unfortunately, need for emergency food continues to grow in Vermont. The USDA reports that the number of Vermonters at greatest risk of hunger has increased significantly over the past decade. All the more reason not to leave any apple unpicked. "Food is for everybody and farmers want to feed everybody," Snow says. 🍎