

# Farmers team up for collaborative CSA

By KATHRYN FLAGG

ADDISON COUNTY — On a brisk mid-April morning, Jeremy Gildrien worked alone in the large greenhouse beside his Middlebury home, fashioning from a mound of earth the "soil blocks" that would someday soon nurture small, green seedlings.

The breeze cut through the greenhouse as Gildrien worked among the rows of spinach and radishes and pea shoots, each sending up sprouts. He and his wife, Caitlin, are beginning farmers, and they're learning that much of the work on their vegetable farm is solitary.

But now the Gildriens are joining a few families in the county who are pooling resources to make small-scale farming operations both more feasible and profitable.

Gildrien Farm is banding together

with the Four Families Farm this growing season for a uniquely collaborative "community-supported agriculture" (CSA) business. CSAs function in many ways like a magazine subscription: Customers pay into the system at the beginning of the year, when farms incur the costs that go along with planting, and in return typically receive a weekly ratio of vegetables during the growing season.

The collaborative CSA — called the Neighborly CSA — provides customers with both meat and vegetables. The Gildriens will grow everything green: lettuce and kale, scallions and carrots, tomatoes and tomatillos and a range of other vegetables.

Meanwhile, Four Family Farm produces the meat. The farm is actually (See CSA, Page 18A)



JEREMY AND CAITLIN Gildrien are heading up the vegetable portion of the Neighborly CSA, a small-scale farming operation run by four local families.

Independent photo/Trent Campbell

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CHENAO AND GABE Hamilton and their children Julian, 14 and Liam, 8, are part of a group of families who are collaborating on a Community Supported Agriculture business that will supply both meat and produce directly to customers.

Independent photo/Trent Campbell

## CSA

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ally made up of three families — the customer being the fourth — and is run by Jeff Weaber, Alexandra Wylie and Gabe Hamilton in Salisbury and Cornwall.

The spirit of collaboration that drives the Neighborly CSA got its start among these families, who began sharing resources when they tipped into raising livestock.

"We all have enough land that we'd like to see it being productive for our families, rather than seeing it sitting there," Weaber explained. Because none of the families owned large tracts of land though, they began rotating the animals between their fields and sharing some of the responsibilities that came with raising livestock.

"We're raising this meat with the idea that it's not just for us, but it's for other people," Weaber said.

That practice of pooling resources has also worked out for the Gildriens: In addition to farming in their greenhouse, the couple is cultivating vegetables on one acre of Weaber's

land in Salisbury. That land has allowed them to expand their vegetable CSA from a test run last year with just two customers to as many as 20 CSA members this year. If the weather cooperates, they'll also have plenty of vegetables left to sell at the Middlebury Farmers' Market.

Weaber explained that sharing resources takes some of the financial volatility out of farming. He remembered a few years ago when he and his neighbors went in together on a crop of turkeys to raise for Thanksgiving. The birds were an heirloom breed, which meant they weren't cheap. When a predator killed off the entire flock, the financial blow was cushioned a bit because the investment had been shared by multiple families instead of one farmer.

"It's very difficult to make money on small-scale agriculture. That's why it's been pushed out of the farming landscape," Weaber said.

For the Gildriens, joining the Neighborly CSA has other benefits: Jeremy Gildrien explained that he and his wife like being able to of-

fer customers as much of their diet as possible, but on their own they wouldn't be able to manage livestock in addition to their vegetables.

Of course, CSA customers don't have to sign up for both meat and vegetables to participate in the Neighborly CSA; customers can choose both, or opt for either one or the other. The CSA will run for 20 weeks, with weekly pick-up dates for vegetables and biweekly pick-ups for meat. (The vegetable portion of the CSA comes with at least 10 different kinds of seasonal vegetables each week, and the meat portion includes 45 pounds over the course of 20 weeks made up of beef, pork, poultry and lamb.)

The CSA will also offer an optional "Thanksgiving box," filled with vegetables, a pumpkin pie, local cranberries, and a free-range, home grown turkey.

Jeremy Gildrien said that this kind of direct marketing to customers is the foundation of his farm.

"We don't ever want to get all that big," Gildrien said. "Part of what

farming is about for Caitlin and myself is that relationship with customers. A big part of it is helping further a sustainable food system, and I think part of a sustainable food system is one where consumers have a relationship with the people they're getting their products from."

When he and his wife were apprenticing on a farm in northern Vermont, Gildrien said, one of their favorite days of every week was the CSA pick-up day: It was a time when the solitary work of farming was set aside in favor of mingling with customers.

He hopes that the CSA pick-up for the new cooperative operation will offer similar benefits. And this time around it will be neighbors, in addition to customers, who gather to share the fruits of their labor.

"What works really well for all of us is that we all have similar values around food systems, so we're able to help create more than we would on our own," Gildrien said.

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