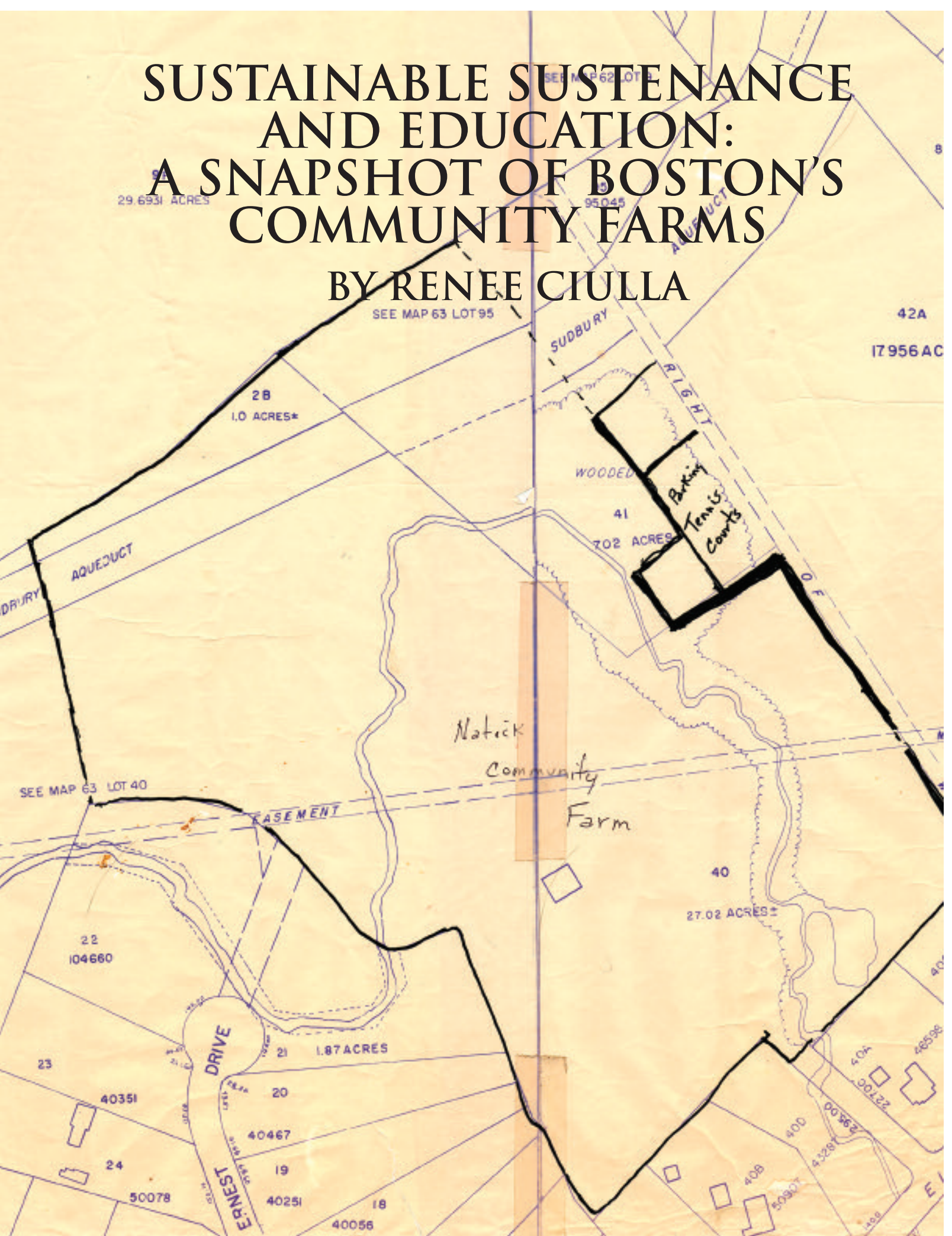


# SUSTAINABLE SUSTENANCE AND EDUCATION: A SNAPSHOT OF BOSTON'S COMMUNITY FARMS

BY RENEE CIULLA



*Searching for community farms scattered around Boston proved to be an inspirational undertaking, yielding various discoveries into communities that have taken creative approaches to preserving open space while also providing farm education and fresh produce, eggs and meat to the surrounding schools, food banks and families. Each farm has a unique mission and story, but across the board, Boston's community farms are doing their part to educate and feed their neighbors and are witness to overwhelming support and gratitude from everyone involved.*

### **Natick Community Organic Farm** **Natick, MA**

“Mommy, look at *that* chicken with the big white and red head!” This little boy’s eyes were full of wonder as his chubby fist excitedly pointed towards the chicken that caught his attention. This child was one of many people enjoying a quiet Saturday afternoon exploring the Natick Community Organic Farm located near the historic center of Natick. This nonprofit, certified organic farm provides productive open space, food to the public and hands-on education for all ages, every day of the year.

The Farm (also known as Red Wing Farm) took root in 1974 on a two-acre plot at the Broadmoor Audubon Sanctuary. The initial project, titled Summer Work Experience, was started to provide summer jobs to young people at risk and was co-sponsored by the Eliot Church, the Lions Club and Natick’s Youth and Human Resources Committee. By the second summer, the project had enlisted over 100 teens to raise and market vegetables to the public. In 1976, 27 acres of land were generously leased to the project through the Natick School Committee. Red Wing Farm was then established as the Natick Community Farm, an organization with a remarkable environmental and educational mission. Managed by a staff of six, a resident caretaker and an intern, the Farm is dependent each year on generous contributions, an active Board of Directors, an Advisory Board and a corps of dedicated volunteers from throughout Greater Boston.

The Farm’s 1815 barn, built from blown down oak timber, is an arresting structure with an inviting open door displaying the various tools, animal feed and the token barn cat, all necessary to keep the operation running. Two solar greenhouses and a hoop house teach visitors about seedlings and mesclun green production. The rows of vivid greens were a welcoming sight for January eyes reminding me of warm, spring days ahead. The various animals at the farm include chickens, cows, goats (with irresistible gray beards!), pigs, sheep and turkeys—all raised using organic standards. Numerous bunnies in creatively painted hutches are arranged in a circle for children to observe and pet. Intriguingly clucking chickens located nearby also vie for their attention.

A year-round market stand graces visitors with the option of purchasing some of the farm-raised meat, as well as organic produce and eggs. Adjacent to the store is an Education Center where 4,000 children and adults attend classes in organic farming, life sciences and environmental stewardship. Conferences, artist exhibits, lectures and birthday parties are also held in the Education Center. The Farm’s authentic Maple Sugar Shack was built in 1977 and hosts hundreds of students and visitors through the month of March where they learn how sap is turned into maple syrup. Other educational components include classes in bread and pizza making using an adobe wood-fired

oven, a Toddler’s Garden offering the smallest visitors an experience from their perspective and a nature trail through the woods. Adults can enroll in a variety of workshops and courses on topics such as organic gardening and lawn care, environmentally sound pest control and goat cheese making.

The Farm’s commitment to offering school programs for preschool through high school students provides a unique opportunity for local children to connect with their food and learn how it fuels us. The Farm offers community service to high school and college students as well as a work-study program in collaboration with Wellesley College. Equally important are the relationships this Natick farm has with several special needs schools in the area. Small work crews of two to three students with a job coach from their school come and work alongside the farmers.

Even with the grey dreariness of mid-winter, I was inspired to see that several families were taking advantage of this public, educational open space. The Natick Community Farm provides families a refreshing alternative to city life: warm, furry farm animals, sustainable lifestyle classes and well-preserved historic structures scattered under a broad canopy of leaves.

### **Brookwood Community Farm** **Milton, MA**

It could have been a combination of physical exhaustion and hunger, but Judy Lieberman’s tomato display seemed like a mirage as we biked into the Brookwood Community Farm during the second annual Tour-de-Farm.

This small farm in the Blue Hills was started in 2006 by Mark Smith and Judy Lieberman in order to reclaim unused farmland and grow food for members of the surrounding communities, while providing educational opportunities. When I first explored the beautiful gardens I was stunned by the size of their peppers and the bounty of varied vegetables for such a small growing area and number of farmers! As the bikers streamed in, Judy graciously scrambled to bring us juicy melons and tomato samples that included several heirloom varieties (purple cherry tomatoes!).

The 75 acres of Brookwood Community Farm located in Milton and Canton are State Conservation Land (part of the Blue Hills reservation), managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation. Because it is public land, Judy and Mark needed permission from the state to use the site. Their proposal included both public access and public benefit, which resulted in a 5 year renewable lease for operation of a community farm. Thus, the nonprofit organization was born and their ambitious mission was put into practice.

Currently, Brookwood Farm is growing organic vegetables on four acres of land as well as raising honey bees. The farm encompasses 25-

30 acres of open fields, so there is enormous potential for increased crop production. A small CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program with about 75 members has been successfully implemented and 20% of what they grow is given to local food pantries and the Boston Food Bank's Second Serving program. Additionally, Brookwood sells produce at farmers' markets in Milton and Mattapan, the later of which they helped to start.

Determined to provide education in addition to award-worthy produce, many school and camp groups with ages ranging from pre-school through college have been hosted on the farm for hands-on learning and volunteering. Judy confirmed that keeping the farm running "is a delicate balancing game of negotiating plans with the state agency that manages the property and working with the public to implement the farm's vision, or else create a new vision that encompasses the interests of all groups connected to the land."

## **Codman Community Farm Lincoln, MA**

When I drove down the Codman Community Farm driveway I was greeted with rolling fields of pristine snow and a noise rarely heard in Boston: silence. Slowly, farm sounds mingled with the serene stillness; a curious dog at my feet, a pen of calves, co-living with a donkey and a horse, a flock of territorial ducks, and of course, chatterbox chickens.

In the 1970s, Codman Community Farm was deeded to the town and is now run as a nonprofit. The three year-round farmers have kept the land as a working farm with hay as the main source of revenue. The crop is grown on fields throughout the town that are owned by various partners (private ownerships, town, etc). There are also over 100 garden plots that are leased for the summer to motivated community members.

The head farmer, Heidi Tafel, grew up on a farm in upstate New York and is kept busy overseeing farm activities such as the birth of the first calf of the season in mid-January. Two more are expected in February, in addition to lambing season around the corner in March. When the lambs are expected, the farmers can be found snoozing at night with baby monitors in order to attend to the births in the middle of the night! As I wandered around the farm, I made my way inside an impeccably restored white barn, where a charming farm shop sells eggs and natural meats from their cows, pigs and sheep.

The farm offers a few classes such as beekeeping and raising backyard chickens as well as spontaneous tours of the farm. Codman Community Farm has found that farm-based education is a viable way to stay alive, and has opened the farm to preschools and 4-H groups in the past. Kids enjoy watching tractors come alive in the dirt, while all ages can relish the serenity of the open space. The picturesque location of Codman Farm (and Drumlin Education Farm around the corner) is worth a drive in itself; just don't forget to bring your boots and work gloves, as visitors are often tempted to join in some of the farm chores.

## **Waltham Fields Community Farm Waltham, MA**

After reading the fall 2007 newsletter for Waltham Fields Community Farm I vowed to become a volunteer; I was stunned by their ambitious agenda. They describe their efforts as Hunger Relief Education and Farm Preservation, which in my opinion, is an extraordinary feat. When I visited the farm in January I was struck by how even hidden under a blanket of pillowy snow, the energy and force behind the farm's mission could be felt. Several greenhouses, overflowing with stacks of terracotta pots and green hanging baskets were patiently awaiting the return of farmers. Even the snow-covered pergola promised green growth soon.

WFCF was founded in 1995 by Oakes Plimpton when he heard there was land lying fallow at the UMass Field Station. His proposal to farm the land for hunger relief was accepted and that same year, the nonprofit was incorporated.

WFCF is currently growing on just over nine acres (leasing six from UMass and a little over three acres at the Lyman Estate). This acreage supports their 300 member CSA program, which is a vital part of their community base. Additionally, WFCF works with over 1,000 volunteers each year (individuals and groups) who provide important labor for the farm in exchange for learning directly about local agriculture

In 2007, a partnership was launched with the Waltham Parks and Recreation Department to offer programs for Waltham kids in the Children's Learning Garden (they partner with three local day camps to bring children to the farm throughout the summer).

WFCF is also heavily invested in the health of its community, growing over \$30,000 worth of crops each year expressly for the purpose of being donated to local emergency food providers. Farm manager, Meg Coward was also excited to share, that starting in 2008, WFCF will be growing food for the Waltham Public Schools, providing the vegetables for the elementary schools one day each in September, October and November. Keeping the momentum alive, the farm is also partnering with Healthy Waltham, a community health initiative sponsored by Mount Auburn Hospital. Healthy Waltham will use donations from WFCF in a number of their initiatives such as teaching school chefs new recipes for vegetables, sending recipes home with kids and working with teachers to help incorporate lessons about food and nutrition into their classroom.

## **Newton Community Farm Newton, MA**

Greg Maslowe, the head farmer at Newton Community Farm is a firm believer that community farms are a viable way to preserve open space while offering the community fresh, local food and educational opportunities. Even during my visit in January, he was tirelessly working around the farm and was kind enough to chat with me about the projects they have been implementing since the farm's beginning in 2006. Owned by the city of Newton, the farm acts as a sub-contractor with no rent payments and remains a revenue-neutral property. The historic Angino Farm, where the operation is based, includes two and a half acres with a farmhouse, barn and greenhouse. The property was owned by the Angino family since the early 1900s. When it went up for sale, the Newton Conservators worked with the community to write a proposal to save it from development.

The volunteer board of eight members, Maslowe and one seasonal assistant, manage a 62 member CSA, participate in the Newton farmers' markets, operate an on-site farm stand and donate a portion of their production to a Newton food pantry. Determined to offer educational components as well, the farm is open to public and private schools and summer camps. Newton parents can take advantage of the weekly story time for preschoolers where books about nature and farming are read aloud. Courses for adults span the topics of vermiculture, fruit tree care and a four-part course on home gardening.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Newton Community Farm is that they are using the small size of the farm to demonstrate to visitors the endless growing possibilities in their own backyards. In the field they are using intensive planting methods borrowed from the biointensive approach to agriculture. Maslowe explained, "Our close, hexagonal spacing allows us to get between 25% and 30% more plants per row foot than in normal planting schemes." The farm also utilizes permaculture methods to develop the edges of the fields by planting in "layers"; for example, a ground layer of melons, a shrub layer of blueberries and a canopy layer of fruit trees such as Asian

pears. Anyone touring the farm is also made aware of the surprising diversity of plant possibilities available in this area such as kiwi vines, hardy figs, grapes, mulberries, filberts, walnuts and paw paws!

The Newton Community Farm is hoping that peoples' inspiration will begin a rippling effect of culinary adventures from one backyard to the next. The Newton community is blessed with the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the farm landscape, purchase produce from the farm and participate in farm events and educational programs. These interactions allow residents to develop an intimate connection with the environment and demonstrate the benefits of local food production.

## Community Harvest Project North Grafton, MA

Bill and Rose Abbott founded the Community Harvest Project, Inc.

in the 1970s as a way to provide vegetables for hunger relief. Initially called Food for the Needy, the Abbotts began by inviting volunteers to their farm, sharing their vision of feeding needy neighbors while engaging the community in a rewarding activity. Today, the project is run by a strong volunteer group in North Grafton with additional financial support from other interested individuals and organizations. The land has been graciously donated by Bill and Rose.

The Community Harvest Project farms on eight acres of land and grows a variety of vegetables, which are donated to the Worcester County Food Bank. The Food Bank then distributes to their 200 partner programs: food pantries, shelters, soup kitchens and kids' meal programs. This collaboration supplies a healthy stream of fresh produce to a population that would otherwise go without.

Most of the helping hands come from nearby schools ranging from preschool to college age. Several teachers have organized visits as part of a community-service learning curriculum or have integrated trips to the farm into their social studies or science courses. After a school field trip a fifth-grader named Kevin reported, "Thanks for letting me be a part of a good cause. It made me think about when my mom couldn't afford food and how I felt when I was hungry... My favorite part was thinking about how happy the hungry people will be when they see all that food just for them!"

One of the most exciting developments that has grown out of the relationship between the farm and the local school systems is the recent construction of a greenhouse at the Grafton High School. Now the high school students will grow the seedlings used at the farm. Another local school, Touchstone Community, is working on a similar greenhouse project.

Possibly one of the most important features of the Community Harvest Project is that they strive to instill a sense of enjoyment in all the work carried out by the volunteers. Instead of viewing farming as a grueling road to survival, the Grafton community is appreciating the satisfying aspects surrounding the magic of growing food.

*My tours around the community farms in the area have shown me just how much individuals and organizations are doing to educate and support the health and well-being of their communities. I suggest visiting one or all of the farms I have mentioned to see first hand, just how inspiring their work can be. There are numerous ways to get involved!* ❖

Renee Ciulla has been dedicated to the world of organic food and farming for several years. After two years of farming and running a sustainable vegetable garden business in Montana, she has recently returned back East and plans to attend graduate school in the Fall for Agroecology. She dreams of owning a farm where she can provide education and grow food for her local community. Renee can be reached at BeGreen618@hotmail.com.

# BOSTON'S COMMUNITY FARMS

## Brookwood Community Farm

114 Blue Hill River Road  
Milton, MA 02186  
(617) 727-4573  
[www.brookwoodcommunityfarm.org](http://www.brookwoodcommunityfarm.org)

## Codman Community Farm

58 Codman Road  
Lincoln, MA 01773  
(781) 259-0456  
[www.codmanfarm.org](http://www.codmanfarm.org)

## Community Harvest Project

37 Wheeler Road  
North Grafton, MA 01536  
(508) 839-7402  
[www.community-harvest.org](http://www.community-harvest.org)

## Natick Community Organic Farm

117 Eliot Street (Route 16)  
Natick, MA 01760  
(508) 655-2204  
[www.natickfarm.org](http://www.natickfarm.org)

## Newton Community Farm

303 Nahanton Street  
Newton, MA 02459  
[newtoncommunityfarm@comcast.net](mailto:newtoncommunityfarm@comcast.net)  
[www.newtoncommunityfarm.org](http://www.newtoncommunityfarm.org)

## Waltham Fields Community Farm

240 Beaver Street  
Waltham, MA 02452  
(781) 899-2403  
[www.communityfarms.com](http://www.communityfarms.com)



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