



CONSERVATION SHOWCASE

Self-sufficiency and feeding people are her goals

Paula Packard | Hemlock Hill Farm | Ashby, Massachusetts

Paula Packard lost a lot of sleep buying her farm in Ashby, Massachusetts. "It took me two and a half years to buy it, to work out the deal. I think it took 20 years off my life. It's been hard but we pulled it off," says Paula Packard who, along with her husband Jeffrey, has owned the scenic 150 acre – formerly run-down – farm since 2006.

Today, the whole property, except the land around the house and barn, is protected under a conservation restriction.

“The conservation plan helps you look at your environmentally sensitive areas and gives you ideas of what to do and what not to do. It's worked out great for me.”

"All the forest and all the fields, the whole place is protected. I hate any land being developed, especially if you have prime soils. It would be a shame to put houses on these fields," says Packard who, with three children, is also protecting the farm for future generations.

"We have prime soils, so we don't want any of those to wash away," says Packard whose land is predominantly Paxton soils, the official Massachusetts state soil. That's one reason why she started working with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Packard works full time as a biologist for the state Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), and teaches biology, environmental science and ecology at several colleges. With her animal science background, Packard previously served as DCR's agriculture specialist at the Wachusett Reservoir.

"I was the only one on staff with a farming background, so if a farmer in the watershed was doing something that we were worried about, I would ask them to do BMPs," says Packard, referring to agricultural Best Management Practices.

That's how she became familiar with programs offered by the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) and NRCS.

Packard told District Conservationist Dan Lenthall of NRCS's Westford, Massachusetts field office that she was buying the place and needed a conservation plan.

She also talked to Liz McGuire, a conservation planner with the Accelerated Conservation Planning Partnership, a collaborative effort of Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts, MDAR and NRCS to provide conservation planning assistance to support state and federal programs.

"They came up and gave me pointers. I found out about the technical and financial assistance from NRCS. One thing led to another, but it started with a conservation plan," says Packard.



Paula Packard raises goats for meat and goat milk soap. She also produces pumpkins, pigs, ducks and eggs on her diversified operation in Ashby, Mass.

"They looked at everything, and the beauty of it is they could see past the mess. You get overwhelmed by a place if it's run down. The conservation plan helps you look at your environmentally sensitive areas and gives you ideas of what to do and what not to do. It's worked out great for me. I wouldn't have been able to do it without these two."

"We do hay, a few pumpkins – but we haven't had much luck with those – goats for meat and goat milk soap. We've been selling a lot of those for meat and milking some of them. I've been selling beef and a few horses – they're registered thoroughbreds – and some pigs, a few ducks and some eggs," says Packard, describing her diversified operation.

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Photo credits, top: Red-winged blackbird ©Axel Hildebrandt; Dufourea novaeangliae by Michael Veit



Paxton soils are predominant on Hemlock Hill Farm. Paxton fine sandy loam is the official Massachusetts state soil.

All Packard's marketing is by word of mouth. "We can't keep up. Everything is sold all the time. I always have a waiting list because people want to eat closer to home. We're going to try growing more pumpkins and garlic, keep making the soap and produce more meat."

Packard wants to do more rotational grazing. To get help with that, she's participating in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program or EQIP, a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers and forest land owners who want to improve and protect soil, water, air, plants and animals.

"I'm doing a lot of fencing, nutrient management, lime and soil tests. Basically it makes you do what you should be doing in a timely manner. I'm getting reimbursed for everything I really need to do. Once I get the fences up, pasturing gets easier and easier," explained Packard.

"I'm definitely passionate about conservation. We're in a headwaters so we have to be very careful not to let any manure or other contaminants affect water quality. We have a lot of wildlife like woodcock and bobolinks. We try to not impact them; we make it easy for them to stay," said Packard.

"I want to be self-sufficient and I'm getting there," said Packard of her long term goals. "I don't want to buy grain. I'm always willing to buy lime but don't want to have to buy fertilizer. I want to put manure on the fields. I don't want to buy any hay. I want to be self-sufficient and keep on producing. We already produce a lot of our food. That's the goal: be self-sufficient and feed a lot of people."

"We need to eat closer to home; that's what I think. The more we can do here the happier I'll be. I might even cut back on some of my other jobs," said Packard, chuckling. 💧

Massachusetts' State Soil: Paxton fine sandy loam

In 1991, the Massachusetts State Legislature designated the Paxton series as the Official State Soil of the Commonwealth. The series was established in Worcester County Massachusetts in 1922, and is named for the town of Paxton where it was first described and mapped.

Paxton soils occur on about 400,000 acres of the 5.3 million acres in Massachusetts, predominantly throughout the state but exclude the Cape Cod area as well as Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket islands. They are also mapped throughout southern New England and include portions of New Hampshire, New York and Vermont.

The Paxton series consists of very deep, well drained loamy soils on glacial till uplands and are derived mostly from schist, gneiss, and granite. These soils formed in friable glacial till overlying firm, dense till, which is the outstanding characteristic of the Paxton series.



Packard (left) reviews her conservation plan with NRCS District Conservationist Dan Lenthall and ACPP Planner Liz McGuire.

