

FULFILLING FARM DREAMS

By Layla Ennis and Kae Vargas

River Ridge Farm's CT Farmlink success story goes beyond mere accomplishment; it is a tale of dreams realized and expanded. One of the first hot days this July, Kae Vargas, Connecticut Farmland Trust's Farmland Access Coordinator, and I had the pleasure of meeting with Dakota and Matt, the passionate owners of River Ridge Farm. As we arrived, Matt warmly greeted us, having just come from tending to their fields. Without hesitation, he took us on a captivating tour of the farm.

Nestled in Portland, Connecticut, River Ridge Farm had undergone an interesting transformation. From being an orchard in early 1960s before transitioning into a nursery in the 1980s. However, the CT Farmlink match in 2021, which subsequently led to its sale to Matt and Dakota, marked the beginning of its new chapter as a thriving no-till farm. Today, the farm boasts an impressive repertoire of 200 fruit, vegetable, and cut flower varieties. Their four-season operation spans 32 acres, between crops, greenhouses, woodlands, and a farmer's market stand in Middletown.



Dakota and Matt met during a summer apprenticeship on a farm in Maine. While northern New England had a more prominent agricultural community, they wanted to bring that same spirit to Connecticut. Matt, a native of the state, expressed his vision, saying, "We wanted to bring some of the northern New England agricultural spirit to Connecticut." Dakota had learned about CT Farmlink through her previous job with Land For Good. With a clear goal of owning their own farm, the couple began their search on CT Farmlink in 2016, exploring various lease-to-ownership options, including a property in Torrington, where they interacted with Kip Kolesinskas, CT Farmlink's soil scientist.

Finally, in 2020, their perseverance paid off as they found their first CT Farmlink match, and they entered a two-year lease-to-ownership contract. Despite their dedication to the agricultural work on this property, the option to buy fell through due to an undergoing process of preservation of the land. They continued their CT Farmlink search, eventually, their dream became a reality in November 2021, when they moved into their newly acquired farmland.

Matt shared his future aspirations for the farm during our tour, including expanding the strawberry pasture, restoring greenhouses, and raising pigs in the woodlands. He expressed pride and freedom that comes with farm ownership. During our tour, Matt pointed out a wedding arbor in the back of the fields where he and Dakota had recently celebrated their wedding, symbolizing their deepening connection and commitment to the farm.

However, amidst the excitement, Matt revealed a surprising fact: River Ridge Farm currently lacks conservation easements to protect the land. For Dakota and Matt, the next crucial step in their journey is ensuring the perpetual protection of River Ridge Farm for the future generations.

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