

Learning Takes Root

Sprout Creek Farm uses science and farming to encourage an appreciation for agriculture among students of all ages

By Erin Brereton

Images from of Sprout Creek Farm, Poughkeepsie Day School and Unsplash

Poughkeepsie Day School, located in the mid-Hudson Valley region of New York, believes in experiential learning—providing hands-on, immersive opportunities that give students a deeper understanding of the concepts covered in class.

So approximately 30 years ago, when administrators at the private school heard a working farm and educational center would be opening nearby, they thought it could be an ideal location for the type of active instruction the school favors.

In the decades since, Poughkeepsie Day School has sent kindergarten students to Sprout Creek Farm about eight times a year, according to Lower School Head Mary Ellen Kenny. On these trips, students learn about animals, agriculture, and the farm ecosystem. During some visits, children make butter or cheese; on others, they observe the farm's sheep or spend time in the greenhouse.

“We put a very strong emphasis on students understanding the relationship between people and their environment, and how each has an effect on the other,” Mary Ellen says. “It’s the beginnings of young children being able to understand where food comes from. It’s just a glorious way for us to have kids experience the wonders of farm life. They love going there.”



Volunteers put up a sign for Sprout Creek Farm.

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/ AGRICULTURAL IMMERSION /

Named for a waterway that runs through the property, Sprout Creek Farm has served as a nonprofit agriculture and educational center since 1987. Today, Sprout Creek remains a working farm where cows, sheep, goats, chickens, pigs, and other livestock are raised. In addition, the farm cultivates more than 60 plant species.

And the farm's educational programming isn't limited to the kindergarten level. Each year, students from other local schools, as well as institutions around the world, attend one-day and overnight programs, some of which allow them to live and work at the farm.

In the summer, for instance, along with a day camp, the farm offers a weeklong overnight experience for children 9 to 16. These campers spend each day fully immersed in farm life.

"They're waking up with roosters and coming into the cafe for a light snack, then going out and getting greeted by animals saying, 'Feed me!'" says Kim Bodendorf, interim executive director at Sprout Creek Farm. "It's quite an experience when 100 baby goats are running at you, and you're the one changing their water and making sure they have feed."

Overnight campers can also work with on-site chefs, learning to use produce and meat to make meals for the whole farm, or learning about the biology behind how milk is produced.



STEAM

“We do a lot of STEAM (science, technology, engineering, agriculture, and math) education; learning all about our natural earth, its beings, and how to care for all of it,” Kim says. “You’re immersed in education without really realizing you’re studying science.”



A Poughkeepsie Day School student pets a goat

Poughkeepsie Day School extends lessons from the farm to the classroom. For example, students learn scientific methods of observing and recording information as they measure plant growth in a courtyard garden. Or they may bring fertilized eggs back from the farm to watch chicks hatch and learn about lifecycles.

“They’re not just going to the farm to have a great time. It really helps learning happen in a meaningful way,” Mary Ellen says.

The Academy of the Sacred Heart in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, has also had a relationship with Sprout Creek Farm for decades. Every year, the school sends 12 students to the farm for a seven-night stay.

During the day, educational programming takes place by the creek and in the barns, creamery, garden, greenhouse, and fields. At night, students sleep in cabins. “This ‘simple living’-themed experience also gives students an opportunity to live without their phone and technology,” says Korin Visocchi, the associate head of school at Sacred Heart. “They have 5 a.m. chores, make meals, cook and clean, and build a community in a way that’s profoundly different than a classroom.”

In addition to teaching students environmental sciences, the trips encourage a strong work ethic.



Students enjoy a hayride around Sprout Creek Farm

“Chore times with animals are a first great lesson,” Korin says. While students have to follow the typical schedule of a farmer, they’re also confronted with unplanned circumstances, such as a goat birthing, she says.

“You also learn what it takes to put a meal together, cook for 12, and clean up, which can give [students] a somewhat new appreciation for the people in their lives who feed them and do their laundry, if they’re not already doing that themselves.”



/ A BRIGHT FARM FUTURE /

In addition to educational programming, as a functional farm, Sprout Creek sells cheese, meats, eggs, produce, and other items grown, raised, or made on the land at an on-site market. And the farm plans many public and private events.

“We have a variety of farm-to-table educational culinary events, including chef’s table, which is a 10-course diverse meal,” Kim says. Sprout Creek also serves as a venue for children’s birthday parties.

In the past year, the farm has undergone a few notable changes. In 2018, Sprout Creek transferred control of its operations to Marist College, a liberal arts institution in Poughkeepsie. While Sprout Creek will remain an independent nonprofit, Marist plans to develop agricultural immersion programs for its students and faculty at the farm.

“Our young students are immersed in our operational farm, experiencing firsthand from professional farmers, culinary chefs, and a variety of Marist students. Our Marist students will be doing the same thing: experiencing learning in a live classroom environment, being able to create and practice theories they’re currently studying,” she says.

The farm is also looking into incorporating additional programs, such as teaching children how to make maple syrup, Kim says.

As Sprout Creek continues to grow and evolve, its mission won’t change.

“Our main goal here is to take time to reconnect with and respect our natural world and its beings—and educate others to do the same, and learn to sustain it,” Kim says.

Learn more about Sprout Creek Farm by visiting SproutCreekFarm.org.

About the Writer

Articles about travel, business, and other topics by freelance writer Erin Brereton have been published in more than 75 magazines, newspapers, and other publications.