



# Agricultural Ethos Alive in Londonderry

*Photos and story by Joyce El Kouarti*

**S**everal years ago, the Hicks family had the opportunity to sell their 81-acre farm in Londonderry to a developer. Instead, they chose to protect their land with a conservation easement.

“Some people get it right away,” said owner Dan Hicks. “Other people wonder why you’d pass up the chance to be a millionaire.”

## **Rich Soils and History**

Sandwiched between the cities of Manchester and Nashua, Londonderry has been under intense development pressure for more than a decade. Settled in the early 1700s, this community was one of New Hampshire’s first inland settlements along the Merrimack River. The town’s early residents discovered a land rich in fertile soils and abounding in butternuts, black walnuts, chestnuts, oak and hickory. They introduced apple trees to their new community, and by the 1800s apples had become the major crop of many local farms. By 1976 Londonderry apples were being shipped throughout the United States, Canada, the British Isles, Brazil, and Venezuela.

Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, hundreds of acres of the town’s farmland were lost to residential and commercial development. In response, the community initiated a coordinated effort to conserve its remaining farms and apple orchards. By 2010, more than 4,000 acres had been protected, including three apple orchards. Two of these were later incorporated into Londonderry’s Apple Way, a designated New Hampshire Scenic and Cultural Byway that winds past orchards, old farmhouses, and local landmarks, reminding residents and visitors alike of the community’s agricultural heritage.

But the farms and orchards along the byway exist today only because landowners like Dan Hicks and his family have made the conscious decision to preserve their land and lifestyle rather than make a quick profit by converting their heritage into marketable real estate.

“My father and uncle had the chance to sell this land for a housing development,” said Dan. “But they chose the conservation way.”



*The key to the farm's success has been its diverse crops, including — but not limited to — the apples, lettuces, and Christmas trees shown here.*

## **A Family Legacy of Conservation**

Owned and operated by Dan Hicks and his wife Kelley, Sunnycrest Farm has been in Dan's family for three generations. Dan has worked on the farm all his life and has been its manager for the past 11 years.

"I was driving tractors with my father when I was 12 years old," he said. "I knew the men and women who worked here. I loved it."

His grandfather Al Conner purchased Sunnycrest in 1943. In the early years, he raised chickens as well as fruits and vegetables. In the 1950s, he began to expand, adding more acreage to accommodate the ever-increasing apple production, which reached its heyday during the 1970s and early 80s. He worked the farm for years before passing it to his son John Conner, who ran the farm with his brother-in-law, Dan Hicks Sr., who then passed it to present owner Dan Hicks Jr. and his wife five years ago.

Dan Hicks Sr. and John Connor also owned other farms in the state. They placed their first conservation easement on Carter Hill Orchard in Concord in 2001, selling the farm to their longtime manager at that time.

"My father and uncle were both brought up in farming communities and had a real relationship with the land," said Dan. "My father was on the Londonderry Conservation Commission, and my uncle John worked at the Rockingham County Conservation District."

Dan Sr. and John worked with the Rockingham County Conservation District to conserve Sunnycrest in phases between 2002 and 2004. By selling the development rights, the family was able to pay off all the debt on the property.

"I've seen many farms fail because of debt," said Dan Jr. "By conserving Sunnycrest Farm, we were able to start with a clean slate."

## **A Diverse Produce Portfolio**

Sunnycrest Farm has always sold pick-your-own apples, blueberries, and strawberries. Since the 1980s and 90s, the farm has varied its offerings to include grapes, vegetables, and flowers. Sunnycrest also does a brisk mail order business for apples, even during the winter.

"Over the years we diversified to meet the needs of our customers," said Dan. "In 1997, we added a bakery. My uncle John's breads and cookies, made from scratch right on the farm, are still very popular."

Sunnycrest has been selling its produce to local and regional supermarkets, including Shaws, Hannaford, EM Heath in Center Harbor, McKinnon's in Salem, for more than 20 years. "We try to get our products to stores on the same day," said Dan. "We sell a lot of our goods wholesale as well."

The farm also offers a few varieties of heirloom vegetables grown from seeds that originally came to the New World on the Mayflower. Chefs from area restaurants come in to purchase the produce, particularly unique items like round 'eight-ball' zucchini and heirloom tomatoes. Dan maintains that although the heirloom tomatoes may look funny, the flavor more than makes up for any irregularities in appearance.

"They are incredibly sweet," he said. "They're ugly, but the taste is amazing."

The farm not only sells produce, but also apple wood and Christmas trees. In addition, Sunnycrest Farm operates a woodlot with about 15 acres of pine, which is harvested sustainably. The most recent harvest was last fall.

Along with the rewards, farming also includes its challenges, including crop failure, drought, and flooding. Dan Jr. maintains that the key to their success so far has been crop diversity, along with the family's willingness to keep experimenting.

"It's important to have different things," he said. "We try to do a little of all of it, and do it correctly."

Sunnycrest employs a work force of family and friends, who return year after year to staff the pick-your-own stands, work in the farm market, and pack produce out back.

"Most have been working here through high school and college," he said. "All my aunts and uncles have worked for me."

## **For the Long Haul**

Farming for the Hicks family is not only about making a living, but also the quality of living. Dan and Kelley have three children, ages 11 through 17, all of whom help out on the farm today, and all of whom plan to continue working on the farm when they are older.

"It's about enjoying our family and the work that we do," said Dan.

He is quick to point out that farming is a time-consuming vocation and not always the first choice among a generation that today has a range of professional opportunities to pick from.

"It's different for this generation" he said. "In the old days, you didn't have any other options."

"There's not a lot of money in it. But there's something about walking out your front porch and looking out on your grandfather's land and knowing that it's still yours." ♪