

# farm days

ANDREW ORR  
GETS A JUMP  
ON HIS  
FARMING  
ASPIRATIONS  
IN WESTPORT

by john greiner-fetris | photography by dan cutrona

EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD ANDREW ORR JUST wanted to be a farmer. Working the land was something he had been doing since the days when his head couldn't clear the height of a tractor wheel. He learned about growing, livestock, and plowing while working on his grandfather's farm in Tiverton, Rhode Island. Come senior year of high school, the tall and lanky Orr's dream of farming led him to apply for the agricultural program at Sterling College in Vermont. "I never thought I'd own land, though," Orr says with a shy grin. "Not in Westport anyway."

About the time Orr's thoughts were focusing on school, local Westport farmer Jim Wood put 13 acres up for sale. Wood had taken Orr on as a hired hand in high school, and still remembers him as full of questions. "He wasn't a typical teenager," Wood says. "He showed a lot of interest in the work."

It's an old story now: Wood was getting older, and he wanted to ease the burden posed by his farm while making a little money. Developers submitted offers, but the housing market was soft and the offers of a million-plus dollars often came with strings attached. Instead, Wood accepted \$650,000 hard cash from a consortium dedicated to preserving Westport's rural integrity. With this agreement, the land was placed under an Agricultural Protection Restriction,



Orr's 13-acre farm is the fruit of a prolonged commitment to agriculture.

tion, which limits the land for agriculture use. All Westport needed now was a farmer, not an easy thing to find in today's world.

Wood thought Orr's age might work against him, but his wife suggested the young man apply for ownership and his youth turned out to be an asset. Orr reportedly wrote a solid business plan, but his youth coupled with his passion for farming ultimately earned him the land in 2007. Orr rep-

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resented a long-term commitment to the town, and when he was introduced at a meeting, local farmers gave him a standing ovation.

"I have no idea how it happened," Orr says. The speed at which everything happened made it seem like Orr was laying track in front of an oncoming locomotive. Getting the farm. Building greenhouses. Buying seed. Planting. Moving a farm stand. Fertilizing. Harvesting.

A farm stand on the main state road fronts Orr's property, which is primarily a big field with woods creating an ell with two of its sides. The fourth side is a jumbled stone wall overgrown with brush. A locust flies up with a snap and a buzz. Overhead a hawk hunts spread-eagle, climbing a rising thermal, skirting its edges then slipping over the distant tree line. Below a vole skitters to safety into the fence line, scrambling over and around the lumps of earth. The typical New England farmland soil is littered with potato-sized rocks, still big and hard enough to wreak havoc on expensive equipment. Wood says it's excellent farmland, though, because it's dry.

It's October, the end of Orr's first season. He had just closed the farm stand the weekend before. Now, on this still-hot autumn Sunday, Orr is chopping up cornstalks with a mower. In what is typically a day of rest and football on TV, he is making hay (or, more accurately, fertilizer) while the sun still shined. The strong sweet smell of cut grass wafts in his tractor's wake.

Orr finally reluctantly climbs off his tractor. He's not a talker and is happiest when getting his hands dirty.

"How'd it go this year?"

"It went well," he says.

- "Do you feel like a hero? Saving this bit of land from development?"

"No." He pauses. "The people have been real supportive. That's been nice."

The conversation picks up when the topic turns to the plans he has for his farm. In his first year on the farm, Orr virtually mirrored Wood's practices; today, he speaks easily and confidently about yields and marketability, discussing specialty crops no differently than an executive discusses market trends. He will try farming kolhrabi, flying saucer squash, and golden zucchini, vegetables that should have customers flocking from all over. While his outward demeanor is laconic, underneath his focus is laser-sharp. The romantic notion of a slow-talking farmer chewing on a piece of straw is gone, if it ever existed at all.

Driving his tractor back and forth two or three miles per hour an interminable number of times over 13 acres all summer long, one would imagine that his mind might wander. A writer might spend the hours on a tractor writing poetry in his head. Someone else might go over the endless number of possible retorts she could have made to an overbearing brother-in-law. Orr simply says he watches out for rocks. And right there lies the difference between a farmer and the rest of us. 🗿

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