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COTTAGESGARDENS.COM | NOVEMBER 2019



A Crafted
APPROACH



GROWING ORGANIC



AT EARTH'S PALATE FARM, HORTICULTURALIST AND
FARMER RENÉE GIROUX TAKES A HOLISTIC
APPROACH TO RAISING ANIMALS AND GROWING CROPS

BY ANNETTE ROSE-SHAPIO | PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIE COLE

Down On The Farm
(OPENING SPREAD, LEFT TO RIGHT) Earth's Palate Farm's hydroponic lettuce, also known as living lettuce, is grown without chemicals or pesticides. A Berkshire-Duroc pig. **Connecticut Cornucopia** A sampling of organic vegetables (THIS PHOTO) grown on the farm includes summer squash, tomatoes, beans, cucumber, potatoes and garlic. The barn (OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP LEFT) sports solar panels installed by Litchfield Hills Solar. Renée Giroux (OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP RIGHT) is an organic horticulturalist and practitioner of organic animal husbandry. See Resources.



I credit my mom for my career,

says Renée Giroux, a certified organic horticulturalist and owner of Earth's Palate Farm in Litchfield County. "I wanted to study art, but my parents felt it wasn't a good idea and encouraged me to go to our local community college. My mother nudged me to start gardening and looking at the landscape." Giroux got her degree in horticulture from Naugatuck Valley Community College, taking courses in botany and agronomy, and working in a greenhouse while she was still taking classes at night. "I fell in love with it," she says, "and involved myself in that world, learning design and how to be a grower."

But the downside to working in a greenhouse was donning a hazmat suit and spraying lots of chemicals on flowers and plants. There was no such thing as organic gardening then, and Giroux went to work on an organic farm in New Mexico to teach herself how to do it. A turning point was meeting Sal Gilbertie, owner of Gilbertie's Herb Gardens in Westport. "I was able to certify his whole farm to be organic, with 23 greenhouses—the second in the country and the largest in New England at that time." She



Greens House (THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM ROW) Hydroponic oak leaf lettuce, shown here in various stages, is grown for Artisan restaurants. **Farm Scenes** (OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT) A butterfly visits a zinnia; son Tahleb; the flower garden in full bloom; (MIDDLE ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT) A potato that's a favorite among chefs for its creamy texture; Giroux and husband Kevin MacPherson with baby Hunter; the Earth's Palate Farm logo. See *Resources*.

went on to work for Gilbertie for eight years, and also formed a friendship with Chef Frederic Kieffer of Artisan Restaurant in West Hartford.

Giroux and husband Kevin MacPherson, a French pastry chef, now run their own 40-acre farm. Nutrition is an important aspect of her growing philosophy. "I try to encompass my understanding of plant homeopathy," notes Giroux. Working with the earth and preparing the soil prior to planting, Giroux makes a medicinal compost of different herbs to inoculate the soil. "The root system is the belly of the plant," she says, "and don't you want to feed it the most nutrient dense food? We take herbs ourselves for different ailments, and plants are similar." She believes that treating the garden ahead of time with tinctures fortifies the plants and boosts their immunity. Take it a step further—your food is your medicine.





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Of the 40 acres, half is forest and the rest are for farming, an orchard and animal husbandry. The couple started working the farm two years ago, and Giroux explains that it takes at least seven years to create a beautiful, diverse and viable piece of land. "You have to think about where the animals go, what type of cover crop you're putting down, and work with the imbalance of different plants," she explains. "In other words, working with something that is imperfect, working with the biorhythm of nature to make an imperfect balance."

The farm's animals—American Bresse chickens, Berkshire-Duroc heritage pigs, and sheep for meat and fiber—play an important role. The pigs are taken to the wooded area to root everything up, and then brought to another pasture so that it can rest. Other animals are rotated through





FARM TO TABLE

Renée Giroux is also the resident gardener at Artisan Restaurant, Tavern and Garden, at the new Delamar Hotel in West Hartford. She started a line of herbs for Chef Frederic Kieffer and went on to design the beautiful kitchen garden—or “living pantry”—which is a commitment to sustainability and fresh local produce and flowers. Along with restaurateur Rick Wahlstedt and Charles Mallory of Greenwich Hospitality Group, Chef Kieffer has created a true farm-to-table dining experience with a seasonally inspired menu.

Situated in the Blue Back Square neighborhood, the Delamar Hotel is built to LEED Gold Standards and is close to the Hartford Union Station and Bradley International Airport. The 114 rooms and suites are stylish and elegant, and the Delamar Spa offers a rejuvenating oasis in the heart of the city.

artisanwesthartford.com, delamar.com/west-hartford



as they forage, and manure plays a big role in the restoration of agricultural farmland. How does this affect the vegetables? “The compost is amazing,” explains Giroux, “and there is a full symbiotic relationship. You plant the vegetable garden, and you bring the chickens to eat everything; they fertilize it, and you let it set over the winter. The microbial activity is super-happy.”

In addition to farming, Giroux runs the Northwest Connecticut Regional Food Hub,

a nonprofit working with 20 small family farms in Litchfield County. They pool their produce, bringing it to restaurants or boutique grocery stores. She also has a passion for farm-to-school projects, educating children at a young age to eat locally grown healthy produce. With a baby and a nine-year-old, Giroux wishes she had about 10 more hours in the day. How does she manage it all? “When you have a vision and a purpose, you feel alive with what you have to do, and you find the time.” ☀

PHOTOGRAPHS ON OPPOSITE PAGE BY MANNY WARGAS PHOTOGRAPHY (TOP LEFT, MIDDLE LEFT AND BOTTOM LEFT); JEANNETTE PUNSONI DARDENNE (TOP RIGHT, MIDDLE RIGHT AND BOTTOM LEFT)

Nature's Bounty (THIS PAGE)
These tomatoes are sweet, and their stunning colors create a beautiful summer salad.

Outside Dining (OPPOSITE PAGE)
Artisan West Hartford's 1,500-square-foot garden patio is just steps away from its bustling kitchen. Ingredients from the garden star in Chef Kieffer's carefully crafted dishes. See *Resources*.