

ENVIRONMENT

Holden's Spring Ledge Farm officially designated as public conservation space



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Worcester Telegram & Gazette

Published 4:41 p.m. ET Sept. 15, 2024

HOLDEN — Open space in Worcester County got a huge boost on Friday, as Spring Ledge Farm, the former Christmas tree farm in Holden, was officially dedicated as public conservation land.

The 112-acre property is now open to all and contains numerous walking trails of forest, meadows and watershed areas that are home to different wildlife, including river otters, beavers and even moose that have been spotted this summer living in the area.

"You have huge tracts of land that you don't expect when you are on the outskirts of the second largest city in New England," Colin Novick, executive director of the Greater Worcester Land Trust, said. "The property is kind of magical, because it really isn't like the rest of the forestry we have."

Novick said that due to the rocky nature of the property and shallow soil, the area around the farm provides a landscape similar to Northern New England, which is atypical of most forestry around Worcester.

"It's got the mix of plant species that you expect, a more stressed landscape. Frequently that is both shallow depth to bedrock, poor soils and more extreme winters, but any combination can give it a different effect," Novick said. "We are not getting the extreme winter here, but we are getting the soils and shallow depth, so it creates that kind of landscape you would see in Northern New England."

The history of the site dates back to the 1700s when it was first developed as farmland. The modern history of the site starts with the Howatt family, who purchased the farm in the 1960s.

"My parents were Winthrop kids, they didn't know how to run a farm. My father taught himself to do everything, eventually buying up to 150 acres before selling the house in 2003," Nancy Howatt Wilson, who grew up on the site, said. "My family were stewards of the land, knew it had to be protected and knew it had to be made environmentally safe."

On the site, the Howatt family eventually constructed a Christmas tree farm, the ruins of which can still be seen along the meadows and paths, with remnants of the former pine trees still poking up above the overgrown flowery.

Howatt Wilson said that her parents were attached to the farm and did not want to see anything happen to the property while they were alive, so the plot of land remained in the family even as the Christmas tree farm was moved off-site and the family home on Chapin Road was sold.

When the site became available for sale, the Greater Worcester Land Trust, which maintains dozens of property set aside as public conservation land, stepped in and helped orchestrate the purchase of the property, using federal funds provided by the Land and Water Conservation Fund, as well as funding from the Town of Holden, the Worcester Reservoir and the GWLT itself, to purchase the property for \$1.28 million, with the property being turned over to the Town of Holden.

"It was a very pragmatic solution, in order for the Land and Water Conservation grant to be approved, ownership of the site needs to go to public government, so at the GWLT, we worked with the Howatt family and then turned over our right of negotiation to the town," Novick said.

U.S Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Worcester, who helped advocate for the preservation of the federal Land and Water Conservation fund during his first term in the 1990s, praised Novick for being the driving force behind getting the project done.

"This wouldn't be possible without Colin, he drives everything forward," McGovern said. "To work with just one entity, that can be really challenging, and he worked with four to get the job done."

Reintroducing a native species

As part of the conservation of the site, three new American chestnut trees were planted on the land. The American chestnut was a once-numerous tree in the United States and native to

Massachusetts, but was made virtually extinct due to a fungus that was introduced to the U.S. when Japanese chestnut trees were first planted in the early 1900s.

"The American chestnut is the holy grail of conservation," said Denis Melican of Spencer who, along with his wife, Lois, volunteer for the American Chestnut Corp., which advocates for the restoration of the American chestnut. "The trees being wiped out is one of the biggest ecological disasters of the 20th century.

An estimated 3 billion to 4 billion trees were killed by the fungus, but a few trees, particularly one in Blacksburg, Virginia, survived and were immune to the fungus. Conservationists have subsequently been breeding the trees with the immunity and providing the saplings to areas like Spring Ledge Farm, which provide space to reintroduce the hardwood tree back to its native area.

The three trees planted at Spring Ledge were done by the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill, which planted the trees in the aim that they will pollinate with one another, reach maturity and then provide seeds for more American chestnut trees to grow on the property.

"Chestnuts would have been a historic presence on this property, with a property like this we are trying to reintroduce the tree onto the landscape," said Robert Graham, a land steward with the New England Botanic Garden. "Chestnuts were used for all kinds of things historically, we culturally used it for food, timber, a lot of historic barn buildings are made out of chestnuts. The cultural value of the food crop and the timber crop, and being able to reintroduce it and make a comeback is really important."