

## Living Energy Farm March-April 2012 Newsletter

### We Have a Building Permit!

We are pleased to announce that Living Energy Farm now has a permit from Louisa county to begin construction on a zero fossil fuel home. Now all we have to do is build the house! We are now in the process of clearing the site and gathering materials. Please think of us if you have any building materials or tools you would like to donate.



*Our stalwart crew from VCU (plus Tom and Jamie).*

### Volunteers and Students and Interns, Oh My

A group of 8 students from class on ethics and religion at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) came out to volunteer at Living Energy Farm on March 15-17. We've had a lot of great volunteers working with us since we started this project, but the crew from VCU set a new standard for enthusiasm and hard work. We thought we had a lot of work lined up for them, planting trees and clearing orchard and garden space, but we were amazing and impressed as they blew through project after project. In the end

we had them build us a clothesline and muscadine pergolas! We're excited to be welcoming them back out at the end of April.

This April also marks the arrival of Emily, our first intern for the 2012 growing season. Emily has over seven years of experience in organic agriculture, and has most recently been working on building a homestead at Red Earth Farm, a community in Rutledge, Missouri dedicated to self-sufficiency and living lightly on the land. We're very grateful to have Emily bringing her extensive experience to help us build the farm. We're also thankful to her dog Ada for keeping rabbits out of the gardens.

## Spring is Workshop Season at LEF

On April 7th we held our most well attended workshop to date. 45 people came out for our all-day intensive on Fruit Grafting and Propagation in Charlottesville. Alexis spent most of the workshop explaining and demonstrating different techniques for propagating fruiting trees and bushes. The class also discussed what fruits and nuts can be grown in the southeast without sprays. It is clear that the appeal of propagating and growing your own fruit and nuts without toxic chemicals has become more widespread and popular, especially in our area.



*A stick is not just a stick: Alexis shows how to prepare scion wood for grafting.*

For our next all day intensive, we are pleased to be welcoming back Luke Conner for our second annual Oxen Training and Driving workshop, to be held May 26th at Living Energy Farm. After last year's successful workshop and another year of training our own team, we feel confident that this will be an invaluable opportunity for anyone who wants to learn how to use oxen for their own agricultural pursuits.



*Calvin says, "Come on out to LEF and learn all about oxen!"*

Internationally, no animal is used for draft as commonly as the ox. Sometimes referred to as the "poor man's horse," oxen are cheaper and more easily obtained than horses, and much cheaper to feed. While not as fast as horses, they are stronger and have more endurance, and a more level disposition. This workshop is intended as an introduction to oxen for those with little or no experience with cattle. We will cover the pros and cons of different breeds, and go over the basics of selecting calves, early halter and yoke training, feeding, housing and care. We will then learn the basic commands used to drive oxen and discuss techniques used to teach each of these commands. Participants will have a chance to practice these commands by driving one of our three oxen teams: a young team, a juvenile team and a mature team. We will demonstrate hitching and operating several ox drawn implements, including a disc-plow and a wagon.

Our instructor, Luke Conner, has worked with oxen since he was five years old, and has spent the past six years training, working, and showing his team, Calvin and Hobbes. Workshop assistants Jon and Debbie of Living Energy Farm have been training their team, Lojki and Fiddle, for the two years.

## Summertime in March, Drought in April

Virginia has always experienced up-and-down springs, but this year set a new standard. After a very mild winter, we had a week-long heat wave in early March with temperatures steadily in the high 80's and 90's. This encouraged all the plants to grow ahead of schedule. The red bud trees budded out three weeks earlier than normal, and other flowers and trees were over a month ahead of past years. This was followed by a four week drought, when it got so dry that our small upland pond, which made it through six weeks of no rain in the summer of 2010, dried up completely. We watched in dismay as millions of tadpoles were lost in the drought.

In our era of climate change, it seems we need to redefine normal. Predictable rains, even temperature rise and fall with the seasons- these can no longer be taken for granted. Living Energy Farm is among the many communities across the country who are designing our agricultural systems for resilience in the face of climate instability.



*Rosa shows off our tallest pear tree.*

One way we are doing this by emphasizing the role of trees in food production. With their deep root systems, mature trees are less vulnerable to drought than grains and vegetables. By eliminating the need for tillage, trees prevent topsoil loss from erosion. Some fruits and nuts, especially those native to Virginia such as persimmons, muscadines, paw paws and pecans, are late blooming and thus less vulnerable to a late spring frost. We have been putting a lot of work into establishing orchards of disease-resistant fruit and nut trees well adapted to this area, both for eating and commercial production.

For the annual vegetables, grains and seed crops we need to grow, we are conserving water and reducing erosion through the use of organic no-till methods. While conventional no-till systems rely on heavy applications of herbicides, organic no-till requires careful management of cover crops so they winter kill or can be mechanically “crimped” (meaning to bend over a cover crop so it dies without disturbing the soil) at the right time to plant a crop. Then vegetables can be transplanted, or small strips of soil can be tilled for direct planting. Organic no-till also requires very careful management to minimize weed seeds and the need for hand weeding.

*Living Energy Farm is a project to build a demonstration farm, community, and education center in Louisa county that uses no fossil fuels. For more information see our website [www.livingenergyfarm.org](http://www.livingenergyfarm.org), or contact us at [livingenergyfarm@gmail.com](mailto:livingenergyfarm@gmail.com) or 434 409 6006. Donations are tax deductible.*