Published on *Kitchen Gardeners International* (http://kgi.org)

Developers Bet the Organic Farm

Thu, 03/25/2010 - 09:17 -- Barbara Damrosch

Forget the golf course. The hot new "amenity" being offered to residents of new subdivisions is a working farm. You don't have to weed it (unless you want to), but you can have access to food that could not be more local and participate in a slice of vanishing farm life. Ironically, the housing developers that are so often the culprits in farmland extinction are starting to save some of it.

There is a difference, of course, between the old farming community where everyone farmed and a planned community with a farm included, but something of the old sense of rural village life can be retained by clustering homes and having them anchored by a farm, as part of set-aside open space. Often a farm market is set up, or a community-supported agriculture program through which residents can buy food shares. Farm-centered festivals and activities bring residents together.

Several hundred projects like this are underway or in the planning stages throughout the country, but there is no one formula for setting one up. Two well-established residential-farm developments: Bundoran Farm (http://www.bundoranfarm.com [1]), near Charlottesville, preserved 90 percent of its 2,300 acres, including orchards and cattle pastures. Serenbe (http://www.serenbecommunity.com [2]) in the Chattahoochee Hill Country, near Atlanta, combines New Age vibes with historicity, with three constructed "hamlets" and several farms.

By contrast, Prairie Crossing (http://www.prairiecrossing.com [3]) in Grayslake, Ill., is an easy commute to downtown Chicago yet boasts a 90-acre farm and a "learning farm." Agritopia (http://www.agritopia.com [4]), in Gilbert, Ariz., is smack in the middle of an urban area, with an ambitious farm project underway. In Colorado, ranches are being preserved with narrow lots encircling them like piano keys.

Most of these projects start with a matchup between a fine old farm to save and a smart developer with a vision, but in the case of Potomac Vegetable Farms (http://www.potomacvegetablefarms.com [5]), west of Tysons Corner, the farmers saved it themselves. Hiu Newcomb and her family now have a co-housing project (a community with shared common areas and responsibilities) clustered in one area, but most of the popular farm remains.

Another uncommon example is the South Village Community (http://www.southvillage.com [6]) in South Burlington, Vt., where a percentage of house sales will help fund a farm's infrastructure. Will Raap, founder of Gardeners Supply Co., provided interim funding as a "slow money investor" to create what he calls "a new farming and food hub." Happily, getting the farm off the ground first has paid off in buyer interest, as well as providing several farmers with an honest wage.

It remains to be seen whether development-based farms will progress from enticements to resources that can feed an entire planned community. Encouragingly, a project called Brewster Point [7] in Rockport, Maine, will have a farm that is scaled to provide a significant amount of produce to all the homeowners.

But any progress is good, since farm soil, once lost, is nearly impossible to recover. As Julia Freedgood, head of American Farmland Trust's Growing Local Campaign [8] puts it: "It's fantastic to see the increasing trend recognizing local food as a key element in creating sustainable communities. Ultimately, it's helping keep farms in agriculture."

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