

# THE DIRT ON CHEWONKI NECK



## Nutrient Management

MEGAN PHILLIPS

ELLIE BROWN PHOTO

**A**lmost one year ago, I stood next to the newly re-dug farm pond with semester students and their parents in the midst of a Family Weekend tour of our farm systems. We gazed out at the mud pit that facilities manager Don Lamson had recently carved out with his excavator—the pit that today is a functional farm pond but, at the time, was just starting to fill slowly with recent rains.

“This isn’t very pretty right now, but it’s our farm pond,” one student explained to parents and siblings. “It will be used for nitrogen sequestration and maybe for backup irrigation once it’s filled.” Later that day, I chuckled (and grimaced) as another student stated matter of factly, “The new pond has very little to do with the farm. It will mostly be for ice skating and swimming.”

Note to self: Revisit nutrient management in a future farm talk with students.

The farm pond, in truth, has *everything* to do with the farm. It exemplifies the intentional, closed-system approach to organic farming that we embrace here. Thirty years ago, no pond existed here. These days, the pond that exists is twice as wide and much deeper than the one that was originally dug here. The placement of the pond is ingenious—or common sense, depending on how you look at it. As rainfall runs through the barnyard—which lies just uphill of the pond—it carries potentially valuable nutrients away with it. The rolling hills of Chewonki’s aptly named Saltmarsh Farm ultimately all end in the most downhill part of this place: the salt marsh. Although the impact of nutrient runoff from our diminutive farm pales in comparison with the fertilizer runoff from farms along the Mississippi that have caused the dead zone in the

Gulf of Mexico, we are still hugely aware of the nutrients leaving our land. Quite frankly, we want them *here*.

And thus the cycle of the farm pond begins. Nitrogen from barnyard manure runs into the pond, the pond converts the runoff to duckweed (a floating emergent plant), and we rake the duckweed off the pond every four to six weeks throughout the summer. That rich material goes into our compost system or, more recently, onto the lasagna garden, our attempt to convert lawn to perennial gardens and an orchard over the course of the next two years (see *Step It Up*, p. 34).

Nutrient management is not unique to the pond: it’s happening all over this land. Rotational grazing of cows and sheep gives our livestock access to fresh grass every 12 hours throughout the pasture season. This constant movement through small paddocks ensures that grass has adequate time to regrow between grazings, spreads manure evenly across the pasture, and ultimately improves the health of the land. Managing compost and applying compost onto every garden allows us to recycle nutrients from food waste into the basic building blocks of basil, tomatoes, carrots, and so much more. The aromatic spreading of composted manure each fall onto our hayfields fertilizes the land that the animals do not graze.

I will unabashedly admit that I find nutrient management to be fascinating. It speaks to so much that I believe in, so much that is at the heart of the sustainability movement at large and the day-to-day, intimate workings of the farm: namely, an undeniable interconnectedness and a recognition and ownership of impact. Here’s to duckweed growing (and ice skating) on the farm pond. ■

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*Megan Phillips is the farm manager at Chewonki.*