

CELEBRATING THE AMERICAN LANDOWNER

*Portraits from Vermont,
Oregon, & Montana*



The glow of the setting sun illuminates the farm's guest house (left) and the energy barn (right).

TEAL FARM

By Eric O'Keefe

In a fabled corner of the Green Mountain State just 30 minutes from Burlington, a Vermont landowner combines old ways with innovative ideas to create a timeless approach to living in harmony on the land.

All it took was one phone call, and Melissa Hoffman knew that Northern Vermont was the kind of place where she needed to set down roots.

The year was 1992, and the Chicago native was looking for a piece of property to establish an organic farm. On a whim, she picked up her phone and placed a call to a complete and total stranger. Enid Wonnacott also happened to be the executive director of the oldest organic farming organization in the U.S. Not surprisingly, when it was founded in 1971, it was founded in Vermont.

"Enid did a lot more than offer to help me find a farm. She invited me to stay at her home. 'Here's your room. Here's how you make breakfast. Be sure to lock the door when you go out in the morning.' That was it. She didn't know the first thing about me, and yet she welcomed me into her home. That's when I began to understand how different Northern Vermont is. You don't find people like this every day," Melissa says.

Take an online tour at TealFarm.com.





*One of Vermont's
most storied
landmarks,
Camels Hump,
crowns the state
park that borders
the eastern edge
of the farm.*

For that matter, you won't go finding a property like Teal Farm anyplace either. After almost 20 years in Northern Vermont, Hoffman's ideas about living in harmony with the land have fast-forwarded beyond organic farming to a much higher plain.

That became apparent soon after I arrived at Teal Farm. At first glance, the 445-acre parcel comes across as traditional New England at its finest. You know the look: the weathered barns, the winding stone stairways, and fields of green rising gently to the sky. The setting itself is nothing short of spectacular. Down low, acres of herbs, nuts, and stone-fruit trees are sheltered by a series of terraced windbreaks that maximize the sun's rays. Up high, the broad shoulders of the Green Mountains lord over the picturesque vale.

Kudos to Hoffman for buying right. Teal Farm abuts Camels Hump State Park, more than 20,000 acres of undeveloped parkland with no campgrounds or visitor services. Simply put, the state park is an ideal neighbor: one that pays its bills and raises no ruckus. Furthermore, the park is a virtual extension of her property, an ideal four-season playground for birding, hiking, snowshoeing, and countless other endeavors.

The first hint that the farm was out of the ordinary came just after I arrived at the 8,000-square-foot farmhouse. My quarters were a stone's throw up the hill in a converted horse barn. Right next door, in the caretaker's residence, Paul Goodhouse resides. In the midst of this residential complex stands a big barn. And by big I mean a multi-storied whopper, one that Hoffman christened "the energy barn."



Repurposed materials from salvage centers and quarries were used in new construction as well as refurbishing the farmhouse, which dates back to 1865.

The 12,000-square-foot structure doesn't house horses or hay. It was designed to gather and distribute energy from abundant sources readily available on the farm. Solar panels capture the sun's intense rays. Cutting-edge furnaces not only burn split logs, but they also capture, and combust, the fire's gases. The heat these fuels generate warms the farmhouse; sophisticated batteries store the surplus for later use.

Hoffman credits William McDonough, the dean of the University of Virginia's School of Architecture, as one of her inspirations. She singles out the countless benefits associated with McDonough's landscape-based design rationale. His installation of a 10-acre green roof atop Ford Motor Company's historic River Rouge plant in Dearborn turned a toxic manufacturing center encompassing more than 1 million square feet into an award-winning icon of sustainability.

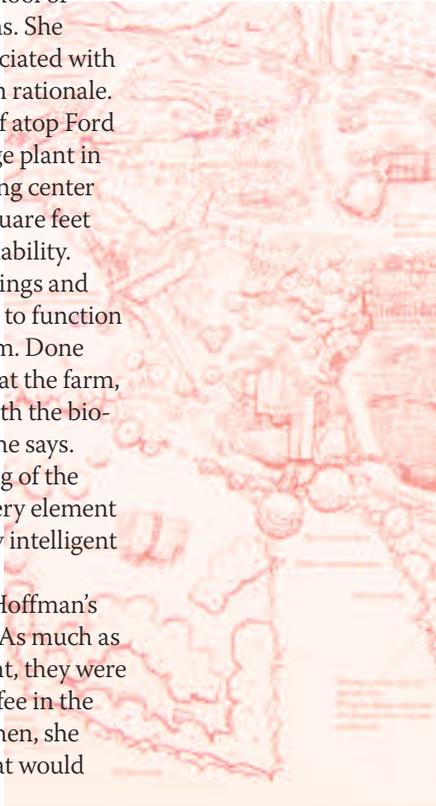
"Few people consider the way buildings and human habitation can be reconceived to function as an enhancement to the living system. Done right, done like we've tried to do here at the farm, they can be designed to harmonize with the biological flow of a specific ecosystem," she says.

The energy barn was my first inkling of the master plan that integrates almost every element at the farm and creates an ecologically intelligent food, energy, and building system.

The farm is the flagship project of Hoffman's nonprofit, Living Future Foundation. As much as her goals may seem theoretical in print, they were not born in an ivory tower. Over a coffee in the farmhouse's spacious, light-filled kitchen, she asks the type of hardball questions that would deflate many a treehugger's balloon.

"Where is the environmental benefit to an electric car that's powered by a coal-fired plant? If corn ethanol is such a great idea, why does it require more energy — in the form of the water, fertilizer, and the transportation costs required to produce it — than it provides?" she asks.

Proof of the growing appreciation for this approach comes not just from cutting-edge thinkers. It comes from corporate America. When the EPA told Ford to clean up its mess at River Rouge, the price tag was estimated to be \$50 million. The ultimate cost of McDonough's landscape-based design? \$15 million.





Vermont-based Birdseye Building Company served as general contractor, Renaissance Builders handled the carpentry, and Liberty Head Post and Beam did the timber framing.

This sort of practicality is evident throughout Teal Farm. Any landowner worth his salt would appreciate Hoffmans' real-world mind-set, one that starts with high-minded concepts and results in cost-effective savings.

PRINCIPLE: "When people do green design, they often don't consider functionality. They only consider materials," Hoffman says.

PRACTICE: Repurposed materials were used in every structure built or renovated on the farm. To my surprise, many of the bricks throughout the farmhouse were found by the side of a road. The serpentine marble that lines the greenhouse floor was once used on someone's back porch. Quarry scraps were converted into gorgeous tile. And the massive Douglas fir beams that gird the energy barn once stood in an industrial warehouse.

Developing a sustainable food system was equally important to Teal Farm's mission. With this in mind, Hoffman turned to Ben Falk, whose Whole Systems Design is based on the other side of Camels Hump in neighboring Moretown.

Falk is a fervent believer in the idea that the era of cheap oil is almost over. Come the day when crude oil skyrockets, the effects will be profound. What foods we put on our tables, how we heat our homes, where we work — all these aspects of our day-to-day routine will soon change.

Falk's goal at Teal Farm was not to develop an organic farm; it was to create a system that does not use or require outside inputs. To that end, he spent a year scouting the farm. Next, he designed a system of windbreaks to create sheltered garden and orchard pockets. Lastly, he planted more than 250 species of herbs, fruits, and nuts.



Solar panels line the western side of the energy barn and capture the sun's rays all year long.

“Everything that has been created on Teal Farm is meant to enhance the living systems here: animals, birds, insects, soil, biota,” Melissa says.

One other system that has benefited are groups that utilize Teal Farm as a corporate retreat. From daylong board meetings to week-long planning sessions, the farmhouse has hosted as many as 25 guests. Numerous breakout areas, an ample supply of bedrooms, and the inspiring setting have drawn in farmers, filmmakers, planners, and politicians.

To make way for Living Future’s next project, Hoffman is now selling Teal Farm. In its next phase, she sees it as an R&D center, a think tank headquarters, or perhaps even a satellite campus. The sales pitch? It’s as old as the hills: to let the inspiring power of the land transform those who come to Teal Farm. 🇺🇸



Learn more about Melissa Hoffman's Living Future Foundation on the web at LivingFuture.org.