

4 SEASON FARMERS

BY TOVAH MARTIN

Long Island, N.Y., doesn't see much snow in the winter, and the temperatures don't generally plummet below 20 degrees F, but the winds are a killer. As we stood (or rather, braced ourselves against the brutal gusts) in the field, yelling over the blistering breezes, Chris Kaplan-Walbrecht assured me that he's witnessed a lot worse than the 40-mph squalls that we were experiencing. In fact, local building codes demand home windows capable of withstanding 100-mph winds and any debris those ferocious drafts might hurl. So relatively speaking, 40 mph is a calm day in Aquebogue, N.Y. Still, Kaplan-Walbrecht confided that he was insulated with umpteen layers beneath his wool sweater and down vest. That's the way he and his wife, Eve, dress for success at their winter community-supported agriculture operation.

Although the Kaplan-Walbrechts don't have a lot of company in the field during the winter, they're certainly important players in their community. Almost everyone in eastern Long Island knows Garden of Eve Organic Farm.

Humble Beginnings

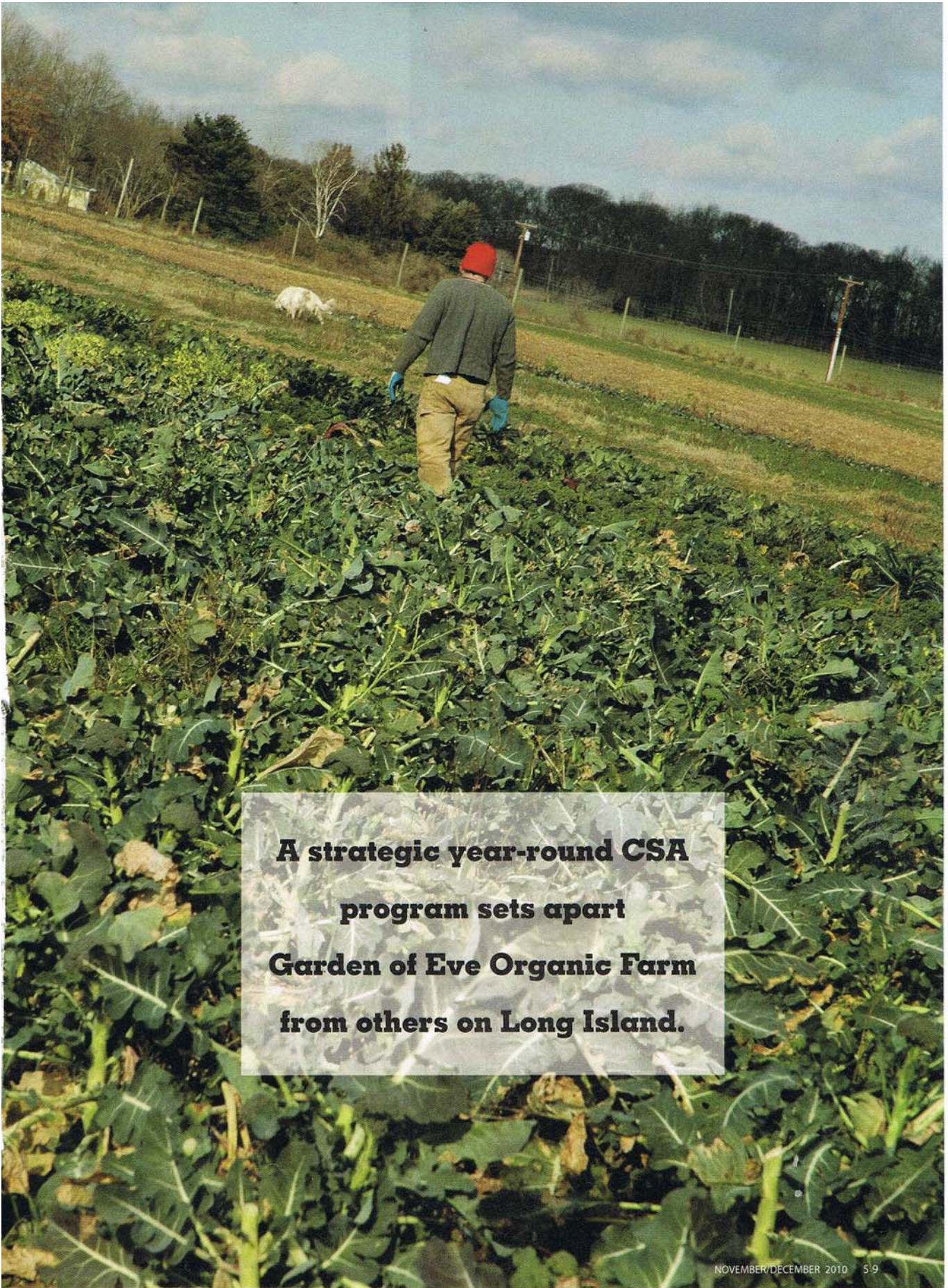
Their business began modestly enough as a garden, but that's a distant memory now. What began with 1 acre has expanded to 60. Garden of Eve furnishes food for more than 1,000 households, making them one of the region's largest CSAs. Not only do they supply shares across Long Island, but they also deliver shares to drop-off points in Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan.

In the decade since they started, Garden of Eve Organic Farm has honed their calendar year into a carefully choreographed dance. The winter part of the puzzle—with 250 CSA shares—is a critical step in the routine.

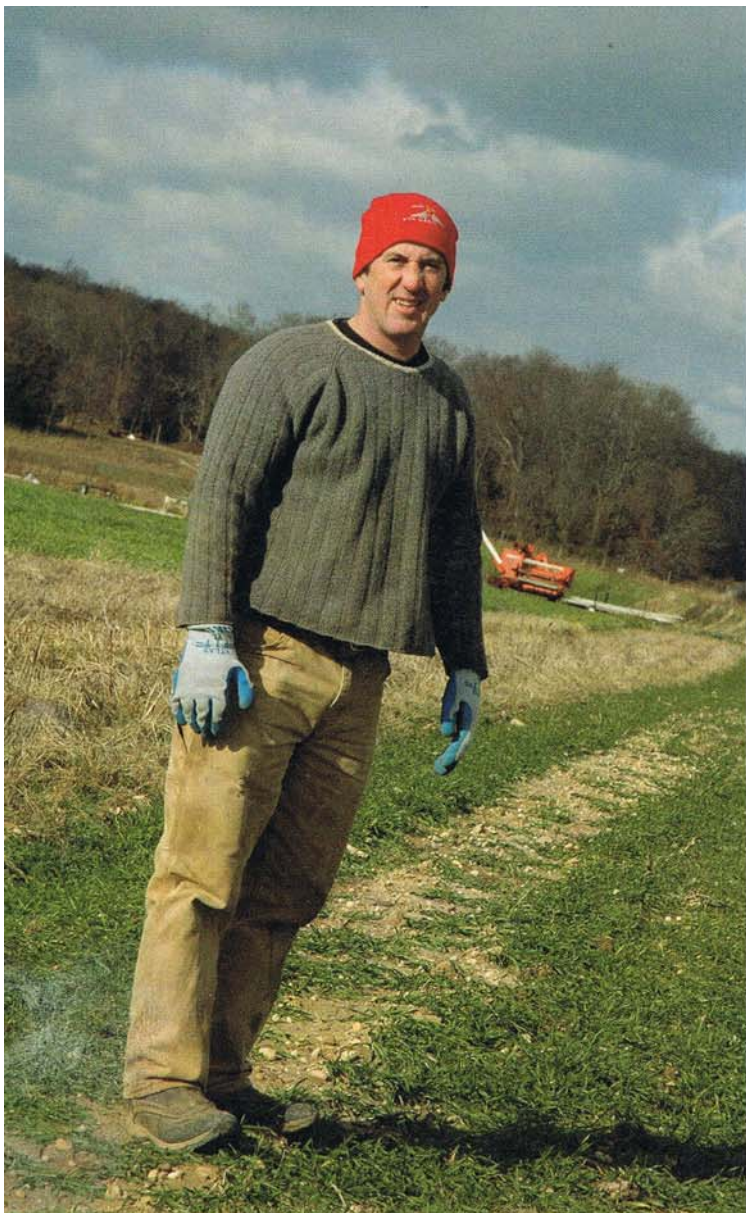
They've increased impressively, but not totally without growing pains. Chris Kaplan-Walbrecht began his professional career working for a nonprofit concerned with water-quality controversies, acid-rain effects, open-space preservation and general agricultural issues in northern New York. That's where he met Eve, and soon, both were living on the farm Eve's family had purchased in the 1970s. He got a construction job only to discover that many carpenters don't accomplish their daily routine upholding the level of environmental awareness that would allow him to sleep with a clear conscience. "But I learned building skills," he says, summing up a brief detour on his career path.

Meanwhile, Eve was working for the North Fork Environmental Council, promoting the preservation of local farmlands. The couple grew vegetables started in their windowsill and already had a surplus of produce that they took to the nearby Greenport Farmers' Market. Their earnings totaled a modest \$40 that first day, but the Kaplan-Walbrechts were sufficiently elated to take their venture seriously. After three years on Long

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**A strategic year-round CSA
program sets apart
Garden of Eve Organic Farm
from others on Long Island.**



Chris Kaplan-Walbrecht, shown dressed in multiple layers, says the weather is a top challenge to running a winter CSA.

Broccoli, along with kale, collards, Swiss chard and Brussels sprouts, make up the green veggie portion of the winter CSA shares.

Island, they expanded their “garden” to 2 acres. That’s when they decided to draw up a five-year business plan as farmers.

Organic at Heart

Whether they’d grow organic was never a point in question. In his previous job, Chris Kaplan-Walbrecht learned about the residual effects of pesticides and their impact on water bodies. The time spent on Long Island raised his knowledge of negative chemical effects and heightened his commitment to organic agriculture. “Organic was the only choice we were willing to make,” Kaplan-Walbrecht says. “I had zero interest in learning how to spray [chemicals].”

But organic gardening required a steeper individual learning curve to achieve an economically feasible business plan. “Organic was picking up, ... and we were seeing supermarkets carrying organic,” he says.



PHOTOS BY TOVAH MARTIN

Five years earlier, the movement had begun to take hold in their area, but orchestrating seasonal crop rotations while simultaneously producing good-quality vegetables was a challenge that few farmers had achieved. The Kaplan-Walbrechts were dedicated to making it work.

On their side was their fertile land. Like most of Long Island, their soil is a silty loam with a tendency to be sandy and heavy, but it has no rocks, which is easy on equipment. “It’s flat, well-drained and very workable. Farmers are usually envious,” Chris Kaplan-Walbrecht asserts. Farming here certainly isn’t a piece of cake, though. Garden of Eve crops are tormented by a herd of 70 to 100 deer (they ate an entire field of cabbage), plus occasional severe summer droughts. By farming smart, learning fast through trial and error, and installing deer fence, the couple is earning a living and following their dream.

CSA Game Plan

Early in the game, the Kaplan-Walbrechts decided to go the CSA route. Although they now have a farm stand, as well, Long Island is rife with competition in that department. “In our area alone, there are six farm stands in a 1-mile radius,” Chris Kaplan-Walbrecht says. They were already active in the farmers’ market

field but found it wasn't enough. "Farmers' markets require you to spend a lot of time off the farm," he continues. "When you're not on the farm, problems get magnified, and I was spending more time selling than growing." The CSA avenue gave him more time on the farm daily. "It's a more efficient system of farming and distribution." However, it was critical that the winter season become part of the plan.

The Kaplan-Walbrechts found that their crops dwindle around Thanksgiving, so, they swing into winter-CSA mode from December through May. Their winter fields still hold unharvested produce in December and January from crops sown in August. During December and January, they add fresh kale, collards, Swiss chard, Brussels sprouts and broccoli to their winter shares. Occasionally, crops that haven't had enough time to achieve sufficient size or ripen in time for the regular CSA shares will be harvested later for the winter share. Indeed, when I visited in December, a harvest of 1,200 to 1,500 pounds of broccoli was ready and ripe for picking in the field.

Bolstering the fresh veggies are those harvested in late fall and stored through April in walk-in coolers, including beets, carrots, potatoes, sweet potatoes, rutabagas, cabbage, daikon radishes, onions, garlic,

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celeriac, kohlrabi, sunchokes and winter squash. Winter CSA shareholders receive 15 to 20 pounds of vegetables plus two to three dozen pastured organic eggs for \$45 per month, equaling \$270 per share. Chris Kaplan-Walbrecht ensures that each share's retail value is at least \$10 more than its cost to the customer each month.

Garden of Eve also offers the option of a slightly smaller vegetable delivery coupled with three to four locally produced products, such as their own pickles and tomato sauce, as well as organic cornmeal and

Chris (back row, with his son) and Eve (seated with their daughter) Kaplan-Walbrecht credit their strong partnership and their dedicated staff and apprentices as keys to their success.



COURTESY GARDEN OF EVE

flours, organic dried beans, buckwheat cereal, mushrooms, popcorn, raw honey and apples. This “locavore” version sells year-round for the same \$270 share. Egg shares are available separately.

Some time in January, the fields generally stop producing. “The rule of thumb is that if the ground is frozen for three to five days and the wind is really strong, we close down the field,” Kaplan-Walbrecht says. Although snow is rare, the low temperatures coupled with the wind bring harvest to a halt. That’s when the winter shares flip into stored-vegetable mode.

Meanwhile, 1,000 Rhode Island Red chickens (a breed selected for its unfaltering year-round production) lay 60 to 70 dozen eggs daily. Originally, Garden of Eve started with 100 chickens raised under lights. They figured they’d need to winterize a coop for the birds, but the Rhode Island Reds thumbed their beaks at the cold, preferring to spend winter outside.

As for their nutrition, Kaplan-Walbrecht found it was two-and-a-half times more expensive to raise his

chickens on store-bought organic grains than on grains they raised themselves. So he’s growing peas, oats and triticale, combined with rye grass and pasture during the growing season. While they’re on pasture, the chickens move every three to four weeks. And wherever the chickens are grazing, they’re accompanied by two Maremma livestock guard dogs, an Italian breed that protects the chickens from raccoons and weasels.

The deep-cold window only lingers six to eight weeks on Long Island. By the second week in March, crops such as kale, collards and spinach begin growing again. These are the same crops that were harvested for the CSA members during the previous summer. “Broccoletti”—kale flower buds—and the last of the field greens are featured in March shares. For the April winter share, members enjoy pounds of greenhouse spinach, tender mâche lettuce, mesclun and other spring delicacies. The regular CSA shares run June through November.

Simultaneously, transplanting begins under the protection of row covers, direct seeding is underway,

Garden of Eve Organic Farm offers a farm stand and exhibits at farmers’ markets, in addition to hosting a year-round CSA.



COURTESY GARDEN OF EVE

and the farm begins to gear up for its summer sequence. In May, the last winter share consists of early harvests from the field, including bok choy, head lettuces and more, before June kicks in with the start of the summer CSA season.

Altogether, the farm produces about 300,000 pounds of vegetables annually, with the bulk going into summer shares. However, the winter segment is nothing to dismiss, producing \$65,000 in income annually—much of it from produce that less-resourceful farmers would leave to rot in the field.

Keeping the share going throughout the year keeps their customers loyal and their income flowing. The benefits of the winter CSA can't be denied, but there's the burden of year-round performance to consider. Most farmers consider winter a downtime, and they value that lull in their heavy-duty work schedule. Kaplan-Walbrecht admits such a long season is grueling. For one thing, it's physically challenging. "But you get smart and efficient about how you move and use your body," he says. The couple takes off most of January for a much-needed vacation.

To cover the packing and distribution of the January share, Garden of Eve relies on farm apprentices. In keeping with its mission to spread enthusiasm for farming, Garden of Eve eagerly accepts apprentices year-round, many of whom later go on to farm on their own. The Kaplan-Walbrechts find it particularly gratifying that more couples have recently been applying for apprenticeship positions.

The Kaplan-Walbrechts take the CSA challenge extremely serious. For them, failure simply isn't an option. Non-CSA farmers might figure that one good year out of three isn't bad. "We have to have a good year every year. If people don't get their value, they will look elsewhere," Chris Kaplan-Walbrecht says.

In addition to the winter CSA, adding a Brooklyn delivery to their business has been a saving grace. Currently, Garden of Eve Organic Farm does only 20 to 25 percent of its business on Long Island. The rest comes from New York City.

Ask Kaplan-Walbrecht about his formula for success, and he'll put in a strong word for the benefits of partnership. The fact that Eve is part of the business is everything. He explains, "It's so helpful to have a spouse



COURTESY GARDEN OF EVE

who understands the stresses and can provide (informal) counseling when you come home."

Farming can be less than full-time fun in winter, especially when the wind rakes the fields and outdoor work is physically difficult. Still, the Kaplan-Walbrechts never looked back. Because they grow organically, they don't have the burden of competing with conventional farms. They've found their niche and expand slightly each year, and they feel a strong sense of belonging and serving their neighborhood.

The farm relies on the help of two Maremma live-stock dogs to protect the chickens from predators.

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"We're very lucky to have community support," Chris Kaplan-Walbrecht says, as he pulls on a few pairs of wool socks, climbs into his boots, dons a wool hat, tops that with a second wool hat, and heads back to the field to continue his daily chores. The wind hasn't quieted, the sky is threatening snow, but still, he's wearing a smile. Tails wagging gleefully and oblivious to the wind chill, the Maremmas greet him at the edge of the field and escort the farmer on his rounds. There's broccoli to be harvested, and it's looking beautiful. **hf**

*With the bounty from her organic berry bushes, fruit trees and vegetable garden in northwest Connecticut, Tovah Martin is an avid supporter of the eat-local movement. Her most recent book is *The New Terrarium* (Clarkson Potter, 2009). Find out what else she's up to at www.tovahmartin.com.*