



## Midwest native brings fresh view of urban farming to Stamford

*Martin B. Cassidy | May 15, 2016*

**STAMFORD** -- Maxon Keating took over as farm coordinator in January at Fairgate Farm on Stillwater Avenue, where residents contribute and work to grow vegetables.

Over six growing seasons, the yield from the plot at 129-143 Stillwater Ave. has increased from hundreds of pounds of fruits and vegetables to 7,500 pounds in 2015. The majority of that is shared by volunteers on the farm.

In cooperation with Stamford Hospital, the farm is an outgrowth of the Vita Health & Wellness District, which was established in 2010 on the West Side to improve the health of neighborhood residents.

Keating, 31, a South Dakota native, discussed his passion and the plot's urban farming mission to expand access to locally grown food in an interview with The Advocate:

### **Q: What's happening at the farm as growing season begins?**

**A:** We have plants in pots like tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, and hearty greens that it has been too cold to begin planting, so they got an early start in the greenhouse. It has been a cool spring. The less fragile vegetables and plants, like kale, collards, Brussels sprouts, broccoli and cauliflower are already in the ground.

The farm is on the site of four blighted properties, which were detoxified. They brought in 800 cubic yards of soil.

We also have just added bees on the property this spring, which will help pollination on the farm and produce 50 to 100 pounds of honey a year.

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**Q: What is the mission of Fairgate Farms in terms of education and providing a farm in the community?**

A: Well, simply being on the farm is educational, especially for those who have little gardening experience. The purpose of our educational programming is to have fun and learn how living a healthy lifestyle is easier, more affordable and tastier than many people realize. Lifelong health is an investment, and it's all about prevention. You'll feel better in the present and live longer if you take care of yourself now, naturally.

**Q: What is your training in agriculture and how did you get involved in farming?**

A: My father had a large garden behind our house in South Dakota, which I worked in, and he prepared meals using vegetables and fruits he grew.

I farmed in South Dakota and did lots of greenhouse work there, and went to the school of environmental science at Southwest Minnesota State University, studying horticulture and botany and other sustainable practices. Then I went down to Brazil. The first year, I studied and then the second year, I did health outreach and helped with the drug and alcohol rehab center through gardening, being outside, practicing yoga.

**Q: What is the importance of sustainable practices and improving the fertility and maximizing production at Fairgate Farm?**

A: It has to do with understanding farming practices, like how plants can be stronger together, solid crop rotation, and even utilizing more beneficial insects. The more you know the land, the more the soil is alive, which is why I practice no-till here.

A big tiller can take weed seed from 12 inches down and 20 years ago and bring it to the surface. Not only do you get more weeds, but you are also disrupting the soil structure that has taken forever to create. So the microflora, the bacteria, the fungus, and everything and the root structure you are going to disrupt that and break it up so now the life has gone. You also lose lots of air in the soil and plants just like humans need water, air and food. So by practicing no-till, there will be more air in the soil, which means it can handle more hard rains without compacting the soil and pushing the air out. Over time, it increases production as well.

**Q: What type of influence do you think it has on kids who come to work on the farm?**

A: The only reason I have the passion I do is because I was exposed to it. Simply being on the farm, playing in the soil and witnessing life sprouting up all around you has potential to be life-changing. With all the kids on the farm, I always remind them to be present, take their time and make sure to observe their surroundings. If you look at the soil long enough, it's much more alive than you realize. It's not about how much work is accomplished, it's all about them understanding why they are doing what they're doing and their positive impact on the environment, themselves, and the community. It really is special.

**Q: What community groups and agencies receive the vegetables and fruit you grow besides the volunteers?**

A: Produce goes to both the men's and women's shelter, New Covenant House Soup Kitchen, Scofield Manor, and individuals that are "prescribed" fresh produce from their nutritionist at Optimus Health Care, which is one of our supporting organizations.

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**Q: As a South Dakota native, how did you end up working at Fairgate Farm?**

A: Now that's a longer story. Upon graduating, which wasn't a quick process, I gave my cousin a call, asked if I could enjoy his couch and see if I could make something happen out east. I knew this area was more progressive in the local food movement, holistic health, organics and sustainability. I call it sustainable health care, which is simply prevention through food and lifestyle. I've also always been drawn to diversity and wanted to be in the middle of a true melting pot.

The first year out here, I was a veggiecator for a company called Veggiecation. It was a blast. I had the fun job of getting people of all ages excited about creating a healthy relationship with vegetables, which were instructing educational cooking classes, this mostly took place within the five boroughs.

Then I enjoyed landscaping, carpentry, and personal training before I found Green Up, which is located here in Stamford. They specialize in indoor and outdoor growing. I was sort of a traveling grower, going to different locations to help residents, schools and businesses with their gardens and greenhouses.

While at Green Up, an urban farm requested the construction of some new raised beds, and that's when I found Fairgate. I remember my first visit and being blown away by all the potential I was seeing. It had everything I was looking for. I've always said I'd never be a farmer without education being a strong component. I don't just want to be outside and grow food, I want to grow passion for others, self worth, mental and physical health, stewards of the environment, and self sustaining communities that work together and care for one another. Which is why there's no place I'd rather be. This is all happening here at Fairgate.

**Q: Over the years you have increased the productivity of the farm substantially from hundreds of pounds to tons of vegetables. What accounts for the heightened productivity?**

A: Like anything, the more you do it, the better you are. What do they call that, the 10,000 hours rule? You know, when you become an expert at something only because you've devoted so much focused time to it. I'm much better at reading plants and understanding how to utilize the natural landscape than I was 10 years ago. The list is endless, but proper spacing, companion planting, crop rotation, nutrient levels, cover crops, soil improvements, regular harvesting, and meticulous daily care, makes all the difference in the world. You just have to be willing to put the time in and work hard. Luckily I love it all.

**Q: Who volunteers at the farm these days from the community?**

A: I'd have to pull out the list, but the numbers are growing and it's a large variety of individuals. Some who simply walk across the street, others that catch the bus, then those driving for sometime before arriving at the farm. What I really enjoy, is seeing the many backgrounds and age levels talking, working, and laughing with one another, which also grows volunteerism. As the word spreads of all the farm fun they're having, more of their friends and families are becoming interested.

We also have different schools, groups, organizations, and corporations throughout Stamford that are starting to see the benefits of a day on the farm while contributing to the community.

**Q: What are some of the popular programs and events at the farm?**

A: On Wednesday nights, it is pretty much the event evening at the farm. We have green happy hours for people getting off work and make people wheatgrass or different veggie juices; relax and have fun and get their hands in the dirt. We also have Farm to Table events, where we highlight whatever the special vegetable is, like a zucchini. Everyone would go on a little farm tour with me, understand the life cycle of zucchini, when I plant, how I maintain it, insects you need to worry about. Then we have a dietitian nutritionist who will go over the health benefits of it, and prepare three or four different meals that we prepare and they take samples of it. Then they take the recipe and produce home to recreate the meal in their own home.