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# At Prep School, Rolling Up Sleeves and Working the Soil

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LAKEVILLE, Conn.

WHEN Hannah Arin arrived here this fall to begin her first year as a boarding school student at the [Hotchkiss School](#), a prestigious co-educational prep school, she expected something of a culture shock. Set in the foothills of the Berkshires, the 820-acre woodsy campus with its imposing Georgian-style brick buildings was a far cry from Las Vegas, her hometown.

But the school's working farm, replete with clucking hens, beef cattle, acres of vegetables and a prodigious number of earthworms, proved to be even more unfamiliar turf. "I'm completely out of my element; there are zero farms in Las Vegas," said Ms. Arin, one of 103 first-year students, or Preps, most of whom traded their Docksiders for rubber boots to harvest potatoes during orientation.

"For many of these students, just getting their hands into the soil is the central challenge," said Kevin M. Hicks, the associate head of school and dean of faculty.

The new students hiked up to the farm from campus, and shortly after, Mr. Hicks cajoled them into digging up the soil with their hands. They obliged. But the wrist-deep discovery of earthworms elicited shrieks of disgust, and the bulbous acorn squash drew quizzical looks from some, including Zachary Katz of Jersey City, who recognized squash only in its "plate" shape.

Several weeks later, a portion of the harvest reappeared in the dining hall in a myriad of more recognizable forms: sautéed kale, parmesan roasted potatoes, zucchini squares, mixed salad greens, squash soup, pickled beets, braised parsnips, buttered carrots, green beans and onions.

Engaging students in the farm-to-table movement is a new twist for private schools.

Traditionally, most independent secondary schools focus on providing their charges with a strong academic foundation for college. The Hotchkiss School, built on former forest and farmland, was established in 1891 to prepare young men destined for Yale University. It ranks among the top independent secondary schools in the country, with the highest endowment and most competitive admissions, according to the Web site of the Boarding School Review, which tracks private school data.

Yet, like some other private schools with a farming heritage, Hotchkiss is returning to its roots and incorporating agriculture into its curriculum.

More than a year ago, Hotchkiss completed the purchase of the remaining 17 acres of Fairfield Farms, a 280-acre spread just south of campus. The property was partially donated to the school by the family of Jack Blum, a former commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Agriculture, an alumnus and a former trustee. The farm not only provides organic, fresh produce for the dining halls, but it also serves as a living classroom where students learn everything from land stewardship to landscape painting.

“Right now, we have more land than we can farm,” said Joshua Hahn, the assistant head of schools and director of environmental initiatives. “But we’re trying to create a sustainable model, and grow from there.”

Other private schools with fewer financial or natural resources improvise.

When the [Loomis Chaffee School](#), a 300-acre, co-educational boarding school in Windsor, opened in 1874, agriculture was in the core curriculum. Students studied animal husbandry and dairy management and worked on the farm. The “Meadows,” which once pastured dairy cows, are now playing fields, and Chaffee Hall, a main building on campus, replaced the hay barn.

But this year students carved out a 40-by-40-foot plot on campus to compost food waste and sawdust for use in the tomato garden. And the food service turned a portion of the 50 pounds of unripe tomatoes that the students had harvested into fried green tomatoes, an instant dining hall hit. Next, students want to try their hand at raising laying chickens, planting an orchard and seeding a faculty garden, according to Jeff Dyreson, a science teacher at Loomis Chaffee and the sustainability coordinator.

[Kent](#), a private school on the banks of the Housatonic River in Kent, once relied on its own dairy herd and the vegetables it grew on a portion of its 1,200 acres. Recently, it began recultivating old cornfields and this year harvested more than 5,000 pounds of potatoes,

some of which are stored in the school's original root cellars. Nearby, [South Kent School](#), which also began as a farm school, bought a neighboring 200-acre former dairy farm that it is converting into an environmental studies laboratory.

At Hotchkiss, this year's harvest will provide the dining hall with enough vegetables to feed the more than 900 students and administration and faculty members into next year without outside purchasing.

"We're not serving foie gras," Mr. Hahn said. "We're just growing enough staples to service our dining hall for the year."

Hotchkiss recently added a pear and apple orchard to the property, and a parcel of wetland is being used to experiment with growing rice. It leases a portion of the land to Whippoorwill Farm in Lakeville, which uses it to graze cattle, but the school raises its own chickens.

"We have about 200 chickens, not enough to feed the whole school," Mr. Hahn said. "But we have a tradition — we give a chicken to each of the faculty members to serve when they have students over for dinner."

Andrew Cox, the executive director of the dining services, plans to make the most of the farm's harvest by flash-freezing vegetables, varying planting seasons and adding a hoop garden. The savings would allow the food service to buy more-expensive, locally grown beef, poultry and other products.

But the farm isn't just about establishing a sustainable kitchen, or saving money. "We feel students have lost touch with the land, which is a part of the heritage of the school," said Mr. Hahn, who, with his wife, Stephanie, raises chickens and lives next to the farm in the house once inhabited by the school's founder, Maria Harrison Bissell Hotchkiss.

"Even though the students who come here are the cream of the crop academically," Mr. Hahn said, "there's a disconnect between our natural resources and their intellectual firepower, which is significant."

"When I first came to Hotchkiss," he added, "I asked incoming students how many of them had ever planted a seed and watched what's grown from it. Out of about 110 students, only about 12 hands went up."

The farm helps bridge that gap. Even so, integrating agriculture into prep school culture has

been challenging, Mr. Hahn said. To encourage more hands-on participation, Hotchkiss started Ffeat (Fairfield Farms Environmental and Adventure Team) two years ago as an alternative to sports. The program began with a few students, but has gained traction in the last year, said Charles Noyes, who teaches art and supervises Ffeat.

After classes, the 15 current members are bused a mile down to the farm, where they mend fences, feed chickens and clear trails, as well as plant and harvest crops. About once a month, Mr. Noyes teaches them how to prepare a dinner from the crops they've handpicked, and from the chickens they've raised and processed at the farm.

Working the land also offers something less tangible than food — to all students. Digging potatoes or weeding the raspberry patch can have a meditative effect, something that can't be measured by grades. "Students feel very free here; they have emotional space," Mr. Hahn said. "It's gives them time to reflect on all the experiences they're having at school, and that's invaluable."

Ten days ago, Ffeat members were culling the flock of hens for dinner candidates. "An hour ago I was in a classroom discussing Thoreau," said Mark Vella, an upperclassman at Hotchkiss, "and now less than a mile down the road I'm plucking a dead chicken. This is where it all gets real."