



# EarthWatch Rhode Island



**Topic:** Farmland Preservation

**Date:** October 24, 2008

**Location:** Mathewson Farm in Johnston

## **Background**

The Department of Environmental Management this week purchased a deed to development rights for 15 acres of farmland at Mathewson Farm on Greenville Avenue in Johnston. Mathewson Farm is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as an intact and well-preserved family farm. The property contains an historic farmhouse built in the 1700s, barns and outbuildings, a cleared field, woodlands, and a wetland with open water. A 3.75 acre field is currently leased out for both hay and vegetable production.

Mathewson Farm has been owned by several generations of the Mathewson family for over 200 years. According to the National Register of Historic Places, the farm is significant to the architectural and agricultural history of Johnston and Rhode Island as a well-preserved, intact example of a family farm. The farmstead has endured over the course of two centuries as much of Rhode Island's rural landscape has given way to urban, industrial, and suburban development. Built in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the farmhouse is a fine example of a rural dwelling displaying the symmetry and details of Federal style architecture. The barn complex, a late example of timber-frame construction erected during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, remains in its original configuration with most of its fixtures intact. The silo and henhouse are valuable examples of specialized agricultural buildings that contributed to the farm's lasting viability. Taken together, features such as the walls, fences, pasture, paths, orchard and mowed fields provide the authentic setting for the collection of buildings. The property also includes a family burial ground, which serves as a contributing element of the landscape.

The Mathewson family provided a significant donation of land value since the total cost for the acquisition of development rights to Mathewson Farm was \$100,000, although the development rights have an appraised value of \$735,000. The Mathewson family's commitment to preserving this farm and their willingness to provide a bargain sale on this highly developable property provides a benefit to the State that goes well beyond the boundaries of the Town of Johnston. Funding for the project comes from State Open Space Bond funds.

Farmers Matt Tracy and Catherine Mardosa lease three acres of land from the Mathewsons where they grow chemical-free vegetables under the name Red Planet Vegetables. In

addition, they also use two acres of the wooded portion of the farm for a maple syrup venture. Founded in 2004, Red Planet Vegetables sells their products to several Providence-area restaurants including Chez Pascal, Kafe' Lila, La Laiterie/Farmstead Cheese, New Rivers, Nick's on Broadway, Ocean State Chocolates and Confections, and Urban Greens; participates in local farmers' markets; and operates a farm stand in Providence. Fruit, vegetables and herbs including grapes, arugula, broccoli rabe, carrots, cabbage, cherry tomatoes, eggplant, leeks, onions, peppers, salad greens, spinach, string beans, basil, chives, fennel, mint, rosemary, sage and thyme are grown on the land Red Planet Vegetables leases at Mathewson Farm.

Preserving this farm has enabled the land to stay as farmland and open space in one of the most densely populated areas of the state, and has also enabled farmers Tracy and Mardosa to earn a living based on their working this farmland.

Farms to which the state acquires development rights are working farms and remain in private ownership. The easements require that the lands remain in agriculture or in a condition available for agricultural use. Currently, Rhode Island has 858 farms, mostly family run, which occupy 61,000 acres. According to DEM's most recent Land Acquisition report, in the 2008 fiscal year over 2,300 acres of land were protected by all conservation interests, including 867 acres of important active farmland protected by the agricultural program through the purchase of development rights.

**Interviews:**

Peter Susi of DEM's Division of Agriculture, talked about the importance of preserving the state's farmland and how Mathewson Farm contributes to the state's agricultural industry.

Catherine Mardosa of Red Planet Vegetables talked about the vegetable business she and her business partner run from this farmland.

Johnston Mayor Joseph Polisena talked about the contributions of Mathewson Farm to Johnston's historic landscape and importance of preserving open space in the town.