

GAINING GROUND

— DUTCHESS LAND CONSERVANCY • SPRING 2026 —



President's Letter



As the Hudson Valley awakens from winter, spring brings a renewed sense of purpose and possibility to all of us, especially here at the Dutchess Land Conservancy. The fields begin to green, migratory birds return, and our conserved lands once again remind us why this work matters so deeply.

We are proud to celebrate continued progress in protecting the natural beauty, working farms, and critical habitats that define Dutchess County. Thanks to the generosity and commitment of our community, we have advanced several conservation projects that will safeguard open spaces for generations to come. Each preserved acre strengthens our commitment to ensure this area retains its sense of home – that unique place that we all love and cherish.

In this issue, we profile Charles Bich, whose recent conservation easement donation protects a

remarkable property and provides rich habitat for wildlife. As you will read, his commitment reflects a deep understanding of the long-term importance of land stewardship and the role private landowners play in conservation efforts. In addition to his land conservation efforts, Charles is helping inspire a broader culture of stewardship through the creation of the Land Stewards Program—an initiative that encourages sound and responsible land management.

We also recognize the lasting importance of Bob Schoch and the preservation of his family's Primrose Hill Farm through a purchase of development rights. Protecting this historic and working landscape ensures that its agricultural legacy, scenic beauty, and ecological value will endure. Farms like Primrose Hill are vital to the character and sustainability of Dutchess County, and their conservation represents a meaningful investment in the region's future.

Our new column, "Stewardship Corner" will highlight the ongoing, hands-on work required to care for conserved lands. We begin with our activities at the Bontecou Preserve, where strategic deer fencing is being implemented. Managing deer impact is a critical component of long-term

William Pitt Sotheby's International Realty Heather Croner Brokerage



ecological health, allowing native plants and young trees the opportunity to thrive and ensuring more resilient landscapes for the future.

Much of this work is made possible by our dedicated group of volunteers. We are especially grateful for individuals like Sarah Barber, who we honor in this issue for her commitment and hands-on contributions. Volunteers like Sarah play an essential role in advancing our stewardship efforts and strengthening our connection to the land.

Finally, I can't wait to see everyone at the Spring Barn Dance on May 16, co-chaired by Mimi Babcock, Juliana Pecchia, and Eliza Thorne. It promises to be a wonderful celebration of community and conservation, and a chance to come together in support of the landscapes we all cherish. Spring is a time for connection. Whether you are walking a local trail, supporting a nearby farm, or simply enjoying the landscape, you are part of this shared effort. Conservation is not only about land—it's about people, partnerships, and a collective vision for the future. I remain humbled and grateful for the ongoing commitment of our community to the Dutchess Land Conservancy.

Sincerely,

Becky Thornton, President

Volunteer Spotlight

SARAH BARBER

A steadfast and devoted
DLC volunteer since 2023.



How long have you lived in Dutchess County? What are your favorite parts about living here?

I'm a life-long resident of Dutchess County. I was born in Beacon and currently live in Pleasant Valley. I love living here. I think it's the greatest place in

the world. We have the best of everything – amazing food, easy access to New York City, and – best of all – the beautiful great outdoors always close by.

How did you first find out about the DLC? What attracted you to the organization?

I saw a post on Instagram for a volunteer open house the DLC was hosting in March 2023. My outdoor passion is trying to combat invasives, so I was thrilled that they were looking for volunteers to help with that. I've participated in numerous DLC invasive removal and tree planting events. I enjoy representing the organization at tabling events as well; it's a great opportunity to meet people and share the importance of the work the DLC is doing. I've also worked at trail-building events. It's not the easiest work, but you can really see the progress you and others have made in just a few hours.

What do you enjoy about volunteering with the DLC?

Everyone is so friendly! The volunteer events are open to anyone who wants to help out. The time flies by, and at the end, you really feel like you've accomplished something important. 🍷



For longer than anyone can remember, there has been one constant along Fiddlers Bridge Road in the Town of Clinton: Primrose Hill Farm.

Among Bob Schoch's earliest memories of times spent with his grandparents at Primrose Hill Farm are of a rowboat on the pond, walks in the woods, and animals, both those of the farm and wildlife in the woods. Bob's grandparents, Harlow and Sadie Cookingham, who were farming there at that time, were not the first in his family to own the farm. In fact, Primrose Hill Farm has been in the Cookingham family for six generations. Bob's mother, Viola Cookingham Schoch, wrote a book, *The Cookinghams of Primrose Hill Farm*, that details the family's connection to the land and the community since 1810. The family history is known through leather-bound handwritten diaries from the mid-1800s, financial ledgers from the early 1900s, and an extensive collection of farming books and antiques.

"The third farmhouse on the property, built in 1854, is the hub of a historic farmstead that includes a Dutch Bank Barn, a carriage house, a woodhouse, and a large chicken house," notes Bob. "The Dutch Bank Barn has been studied by historians and architects who have determined that its construction dates to the late 1700s or early 1800s. We've turned the barn into a little museum ourselves,

one that houses our antique farm equipment. People love to visit the barn and farmstead on barn tours or when they come to buy Christmas trees."

In December of last year, Bob made the momentous decision to preserve not just the farm's historical heritage, but its natural resources as well when he worked with the DLC to place a conservation easement on the 106-acre property. "It was important to me that it remain a farm forever," Bob says. "Our vision is 'Farming Forever - Past, Present, and Future.'" With funding provided by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets and the Dutchess County Partnership for Manageable Growth, Bob's lifelong dream became a reality.

Among the important natural features of Primrose Hill Farm is a wetland complex that is the headwaters for Crum Elbow Creek. This vital waterway, which enters the Hudson River at the Vanderbilt Mansion Historic Site, serves as prime habitat for several important species. The

property also contains 60 acres of forest under active management through the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's 480A Forestry Program. The last timber sale on the property took place 40 years ago, and the next is scheduled for some time in the 2030s.

"The first trees were planted in 1962 as a means of reforesting some of the property," Bob notes. Since the early 1970s, generations of families have gathered to purchase their Christmas trees at Primrose Hill Farm, and it has become a local treasure that is looked upon fondly by the community. In addition to the Christmas trees, the farm also has a gift shop in a historical carriage house where customers can purchase wreaths and other Christmas-related items.

Prior to selling Christmas trees, Primrose Hill Farm was a working general farm. Livestock included a dozen Guernsey cows, chickens, pigs, and sheep. Workhorses were used until 1948, and the farm grew 40 types of fruits and vegetables, many of which were featured in the market basket competition at the Dutchess County Fair. Prized pigs were shown at the Great Barrington Fair swine competition as well. In recent years, the fields that once held fruits, vegetables, and livestock have been actively hayed, and Bob provides haying services to other nearby properties along Fiddlers Bridge Road, a designated scenic roadway.

Interest in agricultural conservation started early for Bob, primarily through the influence of his maternal grandparents, who had a great deal of concern for the subject. After earning a Master's Degree from Cornell University, Bob's regard for agriculture brought him to Pennsylvania, where he was the first professional staff member for the Lancaster County Agricultural Preserve Board. His attachment to the farming aspects of Primrose Hill Farm and his desire to see it remain in agricultural production are what led him to seek out the help of the DLC to preserve the land. "With Dutchess County's rich farming legacy, it was important that we help Bob fulfill his wishes for Primrose Hill Farm," says DLC President Becky Thornton. Erin Hoagland, DLC's Senior Director of Conservation and Stewardship, further notes, "Primrose Hill Farm is a cherished piece

A farm shaped by time, where barns, wetlands, and woods hold stories of labor, tradition, and care, is now protected so the land continues to give.



At the Bontecou Preserve, deer fencing is being constructed to help native plants grow while keeping invasive ones out.

of history and farming in the area, and we are thrilled to conserve it and help ensure that it remains viable agricultural land forever.”

In addition to carrying on the farming, Bob plans to continue to share the property with the public through barn tours, hosting Easter Sunrise church services on a high hill with stunning views at the heart of the property, and providing a community gardening space. For more than a century, the family has reenacted *The Legend of Fiddler’s Ghost*, telling the local story of the ghost of a fiddler who played at dances and hootenannies in the area, and was robbed and murdered on a nearby bridge, thus providing the name of the scenic road on which Primrose Hill Farm is located. The history of the land is significant to Bob, and he offers college students opportunities to engage

Alicia Oltz, via Facebook



in archaeological and historical studies. He would also welcome field trips from public schools so younger generations have a physical understanding of the local history.

The perpetual continuation of farming at Primrose Hill Farm, though, is what is most important to Bob. “I’ve known many multi-generational farmers and the variety of life circumstances that have jeopardized the future of their farming legacy. When the DLC helped find an option through the purchase of development rights that supports both the preservation of the farmland and farming business into the future, it was the culmination of a lifelong effort. I will be forever grateful for the expertise and assistance of the DLC and its wonderful staff.”

While they’re often cute looking, White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) are voracious gourmands when it comes to native trees and shrubs. Deer evolved along with our local plants, making these plants ideal food for their palates and digestive systems. They will readily seek out native tree seedlings, chewing off the leaves, twigs, and buds (this is known as “browsing”), and preventing the young trees from becoming full-grown trees. With a forest floor shorn of native seedlings, invasive plants such as Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*) and Multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*) proliferate. That’s where deer fencing can help.

As you walk the trails at the Jesse and Gayle Bontecou Wildlife Conservation Preserve, you may notice 7½-foot-high plastic fencing enclosing a portion of the forest. Constructed by DLC volunteers in the fall of last year, this deer fencing – also called a

deer enclosure – is designed to keep deer out of the area to prevent them from overbrowsing on young native trees. With the deer no longer able to access the area, native plants should be able to flourish and hopefully outcompete the invasive species.

Additionally, some of the native seedlings and young trees within the enclosure are marked with numbered tags, so that their long-term growth can be monitored. An equal number of native seedlings are marked outside the enclosure to serve as a comparison. If the deer fencing is working as it should, the seedlings inside the fence will grow more successfully than those outside the fence.

If you would like to learn more about the forest restoration work taking place at the Bontecou Preserve, be sure to check out our upcoming native planting event, taking place on May 2. You can find details in the Conservationist’s Calendar on Page 10 of this newsletter.



LAND STEWARDSHIP AS A WAY OF LIFE

In late 2025, Charles Bich placed a conservation easement on his property on the slopes of Clove Mountain in Union Vale through the Dutchess Land Conservancy. We sat down with Charles to discuss his land, his relationship to it, and the ongoing restoration work taking place there.

DLC: Tell our readers a bit about the history of your land, both in terms of the land itself and your involvement with it.

Charles Bich: My father purchased the original property, which comprised 790 acres. His love of the land inspired him to continue purchasing adjacent properties to protect and conserve them as part of the whole, expanding to 1,400 acres before his passing. My commitment and love of land conservation have grown into a way of life, and I have continued adding surrounding property to our land to be preserved and stewarded. Robinwood

Lane was of particular interest because I was able to see it before it went to market and observed its need for protection from potential development. I worked in partnership with the owners following my visit to secure its purchase. Given the property's three-acre zoning and its ease of development, I purchased it with the intent to donate an easement to DLC. My desire is to put easements on my other land holdings.

Why is it important to you that your land is preserved and protected?

I believe that land conservation and stewardship are ethics in which we all have a responsibility as caretakers of the land where we live. It is especially important in areas that experience pressure from urbanization. These are areas where protecting land is time sensitive. The lands we steward lie within the key Highlands Corridor that connects larger natural areas. These lands are hydrologically complex and valuable because they supply clean drinking water to communities in the region. Soils, flora, and fauna on these lands cannot be replaced, but we can protect, restore, and support these natural systems, resulting in ecologically healthy land and water for all.

You founded an organization called Land Stewards. What are the goals of the organization, how was it founded, what is the relationship between the organization and your land, and where do you see Land Stewards going in the future?

Land Stewards grew out of my passion for land. It was founded after I began a project of large-scale habitat restoration on the property and felt it would be a lost opportunity if we did not document the effects of that work on the land. Land Stewards believes we have a responsibility to take steps to actively heal and care for the land whose natural systems have been degraded over hundreds of years through exploitation and neglect. Human activities have reduced the land's ability to function in a healthy, balanced state. We are creating a living laboratory by: 1) Applying contemporary methods integrated with ancient techniques to restore biodiversity and thriving ecosystems; 2) conducting research on best practices, which we disseminate through scientific data and publications; 3) teaching these methods through educational programs, and partnerships with practitioners and institutions; and 4) inspiring owners and managers of land to improve their own stewardship across landscapes large and small.

Every intervention, no matter the size, can have a positive effect on the environment. Land Stewards, as a demonstrator, strives to cause a ripple effect on land stewardship near and far.



What are your future plans for the property?

Like much of the Northeast, the land shows many scars of ecological degradation and has significant invasive species. Nonetheless, the acreage contains rich ecological resources, including hemlock swamps, pitch pine-oak-heaths, sedge meadows, wetlands, and other important habitats. These rich habitats are essential for diverse species, including rare plants, birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, insects, and many other species. The land under our care will undergo focused land stewardship, including research and living classroom experiences. Land Stewards is planning a professional education program focused on training people in stewardship practices that can be applied to the land under their care and to provide opportunities to gain skills for green jobs.

What is your most memorable day on your land?

Any time I get to spend on the farm instead of behind the computer is a great moment, be it out on the tractor, spending time with the livestock, out in the field planning our next restoration project, or just sitting out on the property getting to see the fruits of our work. I especially enjoy the summertime when the goats are grazing barberry blocks, and I get to go out before work to check on them or set up the fence to move them into a new block to graze. It is absolutely the best way to start the day.

It's days like these that allow me to be so in touch with the land, and it's my personal connection to the land that led me to protect it with the DLC. The needs of the land, my vision for it, and the mission of Land Stewards are all in alignment. You can't ask for much more than that. 🌿



May 2nd: Native Planting at the Bontecou Preserve

Are you interested in learning about native tree and shrub planting?

Join us at the Bontecou Preserve at 9am on Saturday, May 2. We'll be planting bare-root seedling natives in a forest restoration plot that was once overgrown with Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*), a favorite of Spotted Lanternfly (*Lycorma delicatula*). It's a great opportunity to learn some of the fundamentals of planting in our area, how to select plants for particular sites, and how you can do this on your own property. Lunch will be provided.

To volunteer for the Native Planting, please visit www.dutchessland.org.



May 16th: Spring Barn Dance

We're kicking up our heels again! Join us for the DLC's Spring Barn Dance.

Round up your friends and join us for a night filled with music, laughter, dinner, and dancing at the Spring Barn Dance. Co-Chairs Mimi Babcock, Juliana Pecchia, and Eliza Thorne are planning an unforgettable evening!

To learn more or purchase tickets, please contact the DLC office.



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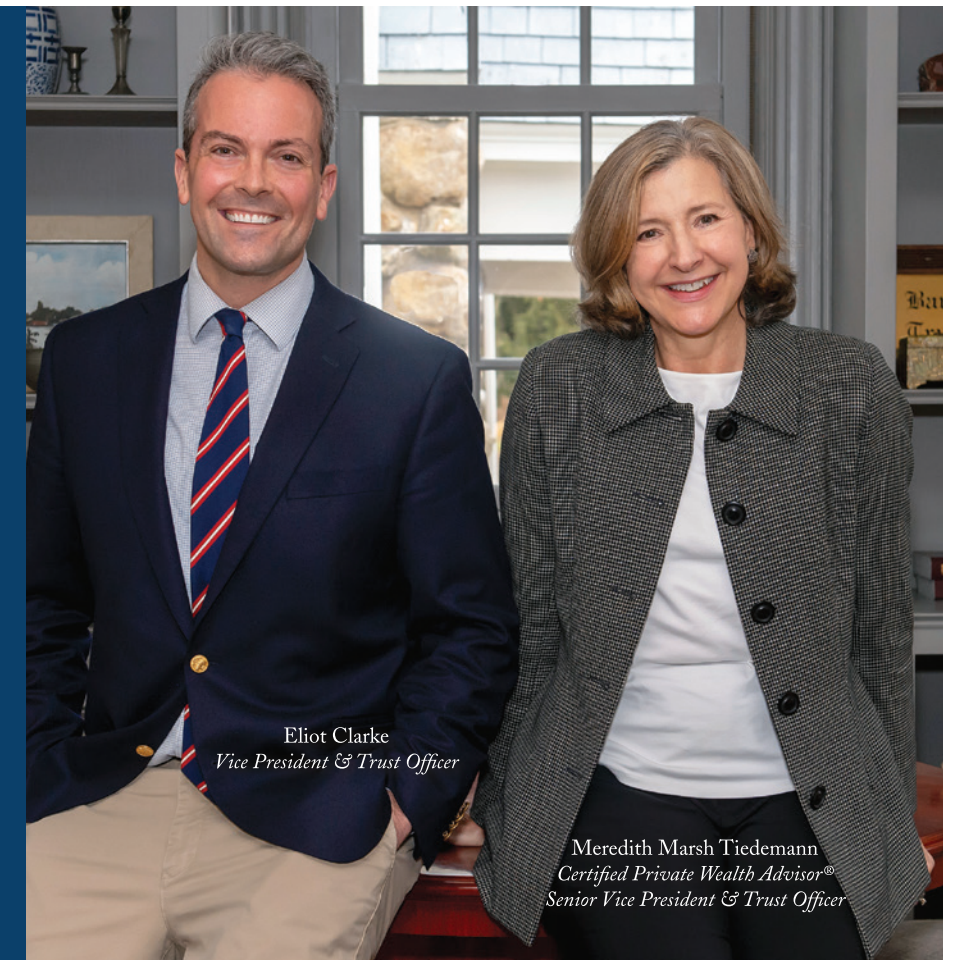


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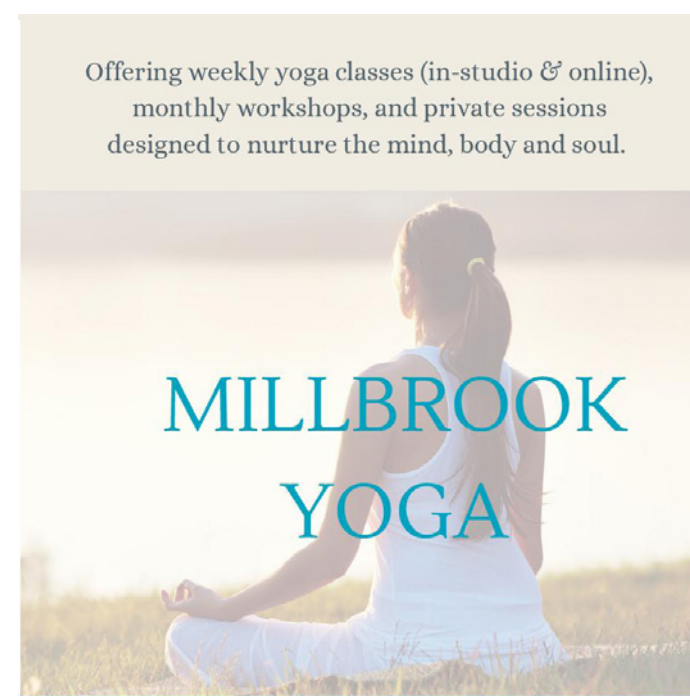

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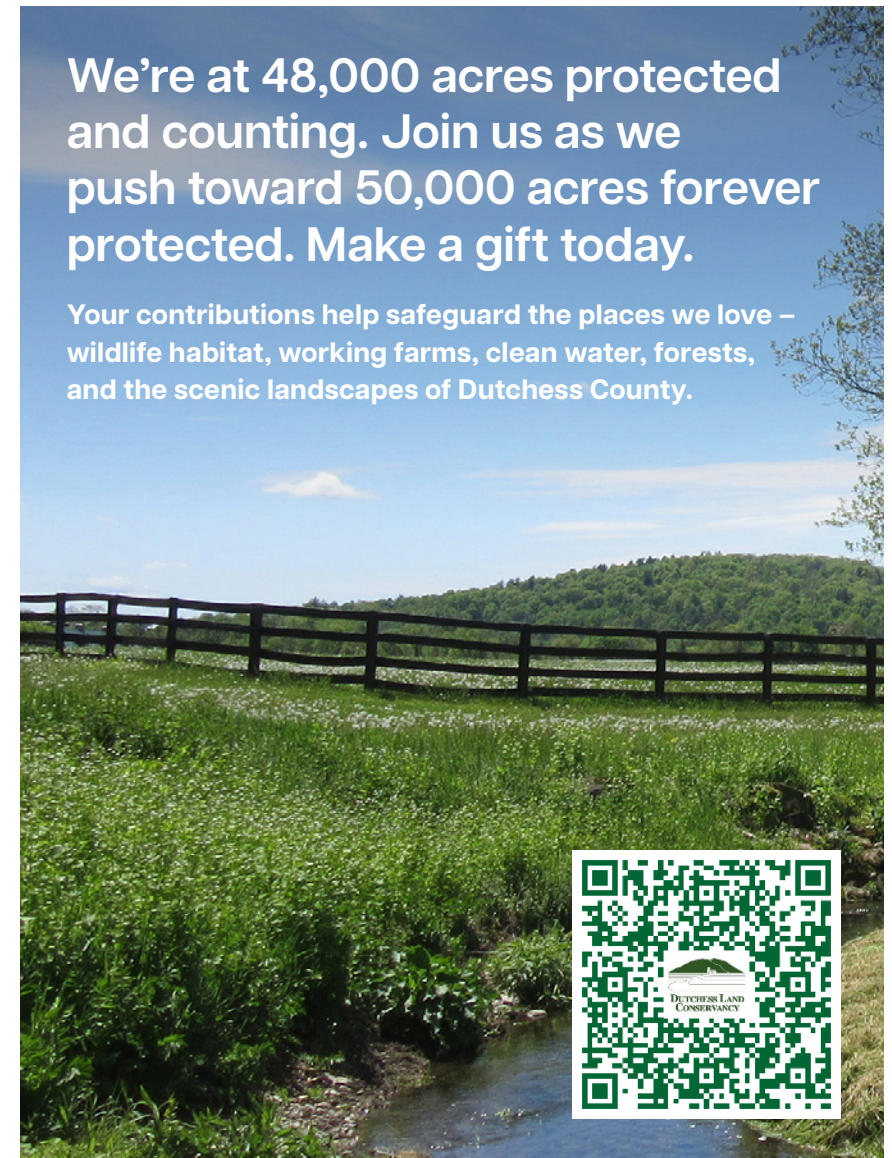
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