

Inspired by EnlightenNext



Teal Farm founder Melissa Hoffman

Designed with the Future in Mind

How EnlightenNext inspired a one-of-a-kind farm project in Vermont's Green Mountains

by Elizabeth Debold

TEAL FARM IS A FARM LIKE NO OTHER. Developed by Melissa Hoffman, a former editor of *EnlightenNext* magazine, it's a new vision for the traditional nexus of food production. Given how many images of the quintessential "farm" populate the collective psyche, this is no mean feat. There's the farm as a slice of Americana — bales of hay, creaking spoke-wheeled wagons, and corn as high as an elephant's eye, right along with mom and apple pie. Then there is the farm as agribusiness, with mud-splattered tractors on six-foot-high wheels and the drone of small airplanes spraying a fine mist of chemical onslaught over genetically modified wheat fields. Or there's the farm as a romanticized back-to-the-future, off-the-grid haven for either left-wing hippies or right-wing survivalists. Hoffman's farm presents an altogether different picture: a food-energy system that is rooted in both natural systems and state-of-the-art technology — it runs entirely on sunlight, produces no waste, and grows food continually without seasonal planting. And Hoffman credits *EnlightenNext* with being "the single largest influence on the project."

EnlightenNext influenced Hoffman in two key ways as she established this one-of-a-kind farm in the Green Mountains of Vermont. First and foremost, it was the energy and optimism that bolsters all of *EnlightenNext*'s work that kept pushing her forward. "Unabashedly, many of the thinkers presented in *EnlightenNext* magazine express a utopian vision that is both sophisticated and well grounded," she says. "And *EnlightenNext* as an organization amplifies that perspective." That vision

became a motivation and the inspiration behind her project. "The energy of that utopian idealism was so powerfully present throughout the development of this project," she comments. "It drove it, as a matter of fact."

Second, Hoffman was also influenced significantly by the organization's unique philosophy. "*EnlightenNext*'s evolutionary perspective leads one to ask big questions," she explains, "like imagining the design of the next iteration of human civilization. What are our communities going to look like? How can we live here in a fashion that expresses a love of life and an integrity with the environment, and that focuses on what's next?" Teal Farm has been her way to explore these questions. "It's a prototype that redesigns fundamental human infrastructures so that we can have a life-giving presence on the earth and not shoot ourselves in the foot by destroying the environment that gives us life," she says.

The result is what Hoffman calls "farming+," which she notes "goes back to the roots of the human-nature relationship, gleaning wisdom from both time-proven practices and the latest technology and design." The advent of agriculture seven-thousand years ago, she reminds us, marked a turning point in human civilization, during which our capacity to produce and store surplus food and settle in one place was key to the development of language and the capacity to innovate. And since then, up to the present moment, agriculture — planting, raising, and harvesting crops — has been the main source of food for the vast majority of humans on the planet.

Teal Farm Center

A demonstration project of Hoffman's nonprofit LivingFuture, Inc., Teal Farm combines permaculture (permanent agriculture), new forms of energy, and a contemporary aesthetic. While all of the technologies and methods of food production that she has used at Teal Farm have been in existence for decades, the innovation of the place lies in the way that these different spheres are fully integrated to create "a total environment designed with the future in mind."

"Often when people think of renewable energy," she explains, "they just think of the hardware that produces the electricity. They don't think of how you have to optimize a building and human behavior in order to use that energy wisely, so that constructing a building in and of itself becomes part of the energy system. You have to think of these things as integrated wholes, not as separate little



Teal Farm's 12,000-square-foot Energy Barn is designed to gather and distribute energy from five different sources: wind, solar, solar thermal, microhydro, and biomass.

pieces of hardware that you put together. So when people come to Teal Farm and experience how everything is tied together, they feel uplifted not only by the surface beauty but also by the new possibility that this represents for human living."

On over five-hundred acres, the farm boasts what may be the largest temperate permaculture installation in the United States. Permaculture, as she has used it, is "a philosophy and methodology of focusing primarily on perennial plants to grow and to supply food rather than relying so heavily on annual crops where you till the soil, replant seeds each year, and apply heavy amounts of fertilizer and water." Teal Farm's permaculture system produces nuts,

fruit, herbs, berries, compost crops, fertilizing crops, and fuel wood. The fuel wood connects to another innovation — the Energy Barn. Barns on most farms accommodate livestock, grain, and hay, but at Teal Farm, the twelve-thousand-square-foot barn accommodates the means to produce the energy to run the entire property. Hoffman explains that "it was designed to incorporate five different energy sources: wind, solar photovoltaic, microhydro for generating electricity, solar thermal, and biomass [wood]."

In addition to the practicality of its structures, Hoffman sees Teal Farm's aesthetics as essential to creating an attractive vision for the future. "It's an uplifting place to encounter, just in terms of its beauty," she notes. "The building techniques that are positive for the environment have been executed artfully. We cut all of the wood — five different varieties — that was used inside the house directly from the property. We took these buildings to a high aesthetic so that the design and the simplicity of the materials could be beautifully rendered in the craft of the woodworking and the carpentry."

After having put over five years into Teal Farm, Hoffman is now moving on to other projects through LivingFuture. She wants to continue to work creatively with people who want to roll up their sleeves and "think about how to do things that will allow us to be here perpetually, that will allow us to continue to develop and create and meet these challenges without being overly distracted and debilitated by the problems that we're facing." That's where she thinks the real excitement is — in seeing the positivity that gets pulled out of people when they are willing to care that much to put themselves behind seeking real solutions. "I am keen on bringing together an evolutionarily inspired utopian idealism with the very nitty-gritty, concrete issues that we have to deal with to create new, life-sustaining ways of living. To me, bringing those two things together is both the challenge and an incredible opportunity." ■

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