

# Jane Iredale wants to inspire others to save land for farmers. She started by buying 79 acres in Great Barrington until a land trust can raise the money

By Heather Bellow, The Berkshire Eagle  
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HEATHER BELLOW — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

GREAT BARRINGTON — It’s a familiar pattern in the Berkshires: A large slice of good land goes up for sale and the farmers can’t afford to buy it.

Neither can conservation groups that need to first raise the money.

So, the sale goes to the highest bidder, whether it’s a developer or someone with a lot of cash looking to build their dream house

Now, one town resident has just disrupted that sequence.

Last fall, Jane Iredale, founder and former CEO of Iredale Mineral Cosmetics, bought River Run, 79 acres off North Plain Road so that the Off the Shelf Farm's owners would have a stable place for their 2,800 egg-laying hens, sheep and broiler chickens. All completely grass-fed.



The 79 acres at River Run were bought by Jane Iredale for conservation until the Berkshire Community Land Trust can raise the money to buy it from her and keep it for farming.

photo provided by BERKSHIRE COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

She bought the riverfront property to make sure it remains farmland — now and forever — until a conservation group could raise the money to buy it from her. Enter the Berkshire Community Land Trust.

This fundraising campaign by the Land Trust's Farmsteads for Farmers initiative will kick off at an event at the farm from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. Friday, where Iredale, Land Trust staff and farmers will speak and give a tour of the property. There will also be wagon rides, live music and food and refreshments.

“The idea is to make it possible for farmers to farm without being crushed by land costs,” Iredale said, after walking the property, and pointing to evidence of a winter of clearing and burning heaps of invasive plants like honeysuckle that were smothering trees. She estimates it will take another six months to finish the job as well as clear tree stumps for a grazing area.



The women behind the preservation of River Run for farming into perpetuity. From left, Jane Iredale, Molly Comstock, Anna Houston and Susan Witt.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY SUSAN WITT

Iredale is also renovating a small house that came with the land. She’s doing it with love, having hired architectural colorist Carl Black to pick the interior paint, and designing a mudroom suited to the farmer’s life: a washer and dryer and radiant heat in the floors for after the boots come off.

The house will be affordable and for workers. Off the Shelf owners Anna Houston and Rob Perazzo will continue to live at their place in New Marlborough, which they’re hoping to buy.

“Jane said, ‘I want to improve it,’” said Susan Witt, a Land Trust board co-founder and board member, who came to the property Wednesday, and spoke to Iredale’s knack for making things beautiful. “That’s her gift. Now it’s a real home. The whole project is fulfilling an ecological commitment, a social commitment and an aesthetic commitment.”

It could have been ugly. Out of three offers from buyers for the property, one was planning a solar farm and gravel yard.

It was Witt’s idea to have multiple bluebird boxes planted near the house. While bluebirds were out Wednesday afternoon, so were the hawks, given so many chickens.

Houston was away, but Perazzo, with “Sid” the Australian cattle dog, was chasing down several hens that had escaped.

## ‘Running around’

But so many chickens on one piece of land is a relief to Houston and Perazzo, who before they moved their operation here a month ago, were “running around all day long” to their various rented pastures, Iredale said.

“They spend their lives on the road,” she added, “and without any sense of security.”



Anna Houston and Rob Perazzo of Off the Shelf Farm will make a new home for their 2,800 egg-laying hens, sheep and broiler chickens at River Run in Great Barrington.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY BERKSHIRE COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

Houston said they were driving daily, sometimes 40 minutes, between four pastures ranging from Southfield to Great Barrington.

“We are always looking at real estate,” Houston said, noting that land like this is usually “developed into something fancy.”

Houston, Perazzo and Iredale know each other from the town's farmers market. Iredale is a customer and owns the parking lot where the market pops up every Saturday during the season. Off the Shelf also sells to town grocery stores, including the Berkshire Food Co-Op, as well as New York City's Eataly. They also partner with groups that acquire food for local pantries, and consolidating their animals will allow them to do more of this, Houston said, adding that "this is every farmer's dream."

So when Houston and Perazzo found this land, they told farmer Molly Comstock, who is directing the farmsteads campaign for the Land Trust and knows what it's like to have a landowner decide to sell a farm out from under a farmer who is dependent on that lease. Iredale got involved, and set to work.



Jane Iredale, left, and Rob Perazzo of Off the Shelf Farm with Sid the Australian cattle dog take a tour of the farm, which still needs about six months of work to clear the land, according to Iredale.

“She’s a hero,” Houston said of Iredale.

Iredale, in a cream-colored coat and hat on Wednesday, walks through the tall grass to the eastern edge of the property, where it overlooks the Housatonic River. She explains that the overgrowth had previously blocked a view of the water and the mountain beyond it. She knows the names of all the invasive species and tells them “their days are numbered.” She recognizes various plants sprouting up. She visits the hen houses, and says “they’re as happy as can be.”

Iredale said she doesn’t want this story to be about her, and she doesn’t want to disclose the price she paid. It’s not the point, she says. A look in the Registry of Deeds reveals that it is a significant sum.

“I want it to be an example for others who might have the wherewithal to step in,” Iredale said of her ability to be an intermediary in order to preserve farmland. “I wanted to inspire others to step up and save land.”

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### Heather Bellow

Reporter

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