



Former Farm Reveals Its Wonders

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By Kate Irish Collins kcollins@keepmecurrent.com



An old tin barn stands on top of a knoll at the Benjamin Farm in Scarborough. A few dozen people enjoyed a rare guided walk on the newly preserved farm last week. Staff photos by Kate Irish Collins

A preserved Scarborough land tract in a densely developed part of town plays host to guided walks aimed at education and fascination.

The Benjamin Farm in Scarborough is chock full of fascinating flora and fauna, from rare bog orchids to stands of red oak and oven birds to milk snakes.

The 135-acre property, located on Pleasant Hill Road, is open to the public now that the land is under the protection of the Scarborough Land Trust.

Last week, a group of about 30, including dogs and kids, participated in a guided walk designed to introduce locals to the former farm and all it has to offer.

A short, half-mile trail has been mowed between a small parking lot and an old tin barn on a knoll that offers sweeping views of the property.

Since the land has not been farmed for decades, invasive species have also popped up, including purple loosestrife and oriental bittersweet.

It's the job of the team at FB Environmental in Portland to do a natural resources inventory of the property and make a report to the land trust this fall about what needs to be protected and what might be eradicated.

Two employees of FB Environmental, Kevin Ryan and Krystal Costa, came upon the guided walk, held on July 22.

"This place is absolutely gorgeous," Ryan said. "It's definitely a gem, especially with how it backs up into the Rachel Carson (Wildlife Refuge)."

Among the species the two have found on the property are a green fringed bog orchid, blue flag iris, an oven bird nest, stands of giant red oaks, St. John's wort, and stands of aspen and paper and gray birch trees, along with more ordinary creatures like deer.

Ryan said the team from FB Environmental began its survey of the Benjamin Farm in May and plans to finish by the fall. He said workers are looking at all the various habitats, as well as taking soil samples and doing a tree inventory.

Kathy Mills, executive director of the Scarborough Land Trust, and Jeremy Wintersteen, a member of the land trust board, led the guided walk last week, and another will be held on Aug. 11 at 5:30 p.m.

Wintersteen said preserving the Benjamin Farm, as well as other undeveloped properties, was the No. 1 goal of the Scarborough Land Trust almost since the group's inception in the late 1970s.

He said with the national wildlife refuge and other land owned by the Cape Elizabeth Land Trust, a block of between 400 and 500 acres has now been conserved from future development.

Wintersteen also called the Benjamin Farm property, which the land trust purchased for \$2.5 million in late December, "a big, important link between the Spurwink and Libby rivers."

The nearly 200-year-old farmhouse on the property, which had not been lived in for more than 50 years, was beyond repair and had to be torn down.

While the Benjamin Farm is now open to the public, the land trust is still making decisions about where to put future walking trails, what rules governing the use of the property should be put into place and the best way to put at least part of the land back into agriculture.

All of this work will take several years, Wintersteen said, but until then the public is welcome to use the property.

However, a sign cautions people from leaving the mowed path because of the debris still littering the property and the chance of disturbing the natural environment. In addition, the land trust asks that all dogs be leashed.

Mills called the farm an "absolutely beautiful property," and said the land trust was "blown away by the community support," that helped the group raise the funds needed to purchase the land.

Betts Armstrong, another member of the land trust board who played a key role in preserving the farm, said since the path was created, she's been "flabbergasted at the views, which makes it hit home so much more how special it was to save this property."

While Jerrerd Benjamin, who died in 2006, used the land for beef cattle, prior to that sections of the property were used to raise vegetables and for hay, as well as for dairy farming.

Mills said it took Benjamin many years to consolidate his acreage from other adjoining farms.

"Pleasant Hill was once a farm hub and this area is just pulsing with farm heritage," Mills said.

She said the Benjamin property was farmed continuously for more than 150 years and other families who worked the land included the Robinsons, the Johnsons and the Coulthards, who often sold their produce to Hannaford and to markets in Portland and Boston.

In addressing those assembled for the guided walk last week, Mills noted that the Benjamin Farm is one of the last large remaining open spaces in a highly developed part of Scarborough. She told the attendees, "Welcome to history."