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Guest column: Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust grateful for members, supporters, success

By Emily Swan and Angela Twitchell Guest column

The theme of the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust's work in 2021 was gratitude. As we brainstormed to come up with an organizing theme, it just seemed to be the most salient sentiment any of us could pinpoint to sum up 2021. We're grateful for our members, for our extraordinary staff and volunteers, for the communities we serve, and for all the new ways we are finding to forge connections among people, and between people and the land we conserve.

We are proud of what we achieved in 2021 despite ever-changing challenges posed by the pandemic.

First, land conservation. Long-time BTLT friends and collaborators John and Carla Rensenbrink donated a conservation easement on 17.5 acres on land that is part of the Cathance River Trail in Topsham. This is in addition to a 34-acre easement they had previously donated to Friends of Merrymeeting Bay. We are deeply grateful for their long-time partnership in conserving the Cathance River corridor and ensuring public access to this priceless resource. In addition, several other conservation initiatives on the Cathance corridor and on the shores of Maquoit Bay are nearing completion at this writing.

Another key achievement of 2021 was the completion of the Androscoggin Woods trail in Topsham. The public now has access to this extraordinary property that stretches along almost two miles of the Androscoggin River in Topsham. We hope you will take time to visit the river's wild shores when this beautiful trail re-opens in the spring.

This isn't all that our hard-working crew of stewardship staff and volunteers achieved in 2021. They also replaced 120 feet of rotten bog bridge at the Cathance Nature Preserve with a permanent crushed stone pathway; completed a controlled burn of the blueberry barrens at Crystal Spring Farm; installed interpretive signs at Crystal Spring Farm that include details about the farm's conservation, its farming history and natural history, and the legacy of the Wabanaki people in the history and stewardship of this land; and much more.

A core part of BTLT's mission is to support local agriculture – not only do we manage the Saturday Farmers' Market and Tom Settlemire Community Garden (TSCG), but we also collectively conserve 1,928 acres of agricultural land across 25 properties. 2021 saw numerous

achievements in promotion of our agricultural mission: The return of our Saturday Farmers' Market to its beloved location at Crystal Spring Farm under the guidance of our outstanding agricultural programs manager Julia St. Clair.

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Construction of raised beds outside BTLT's office at Brunswick Landing where New Mainer families were able to grow familiar foods and create community. We are excited about extending this partnership both at Brunswick Landing and at the TSCG in 2022.

Creation of a one-acre plot at Crystal Spring Farm where BTLT is sharing stewardship with Mowita'nej Epijij ("welcome to the gathering place"), where Wabanaki people are growing traditional foods and medicines and re-establishing connections to the land. Again, we look forward to nourishing this relationship in 2022 and beyond.

The return of our beloved Taking Root Plant Sale after a 2020 hiatus. The sale raised a record-breaking \$13,000 for the Common Good Garden, which this year donated 3,177 pounds of fresh organic produce to the Mid Coast Hunger Prevention Program. Both the plant sale and the Common Good Garden are run almost entirely by dedicated volunteers.

In 2021 the BTLT board of directors embarked on an update of our five-year strategic plan. This process involves a comprehensive review of our work in conservation, stewardship, and programs, and a deep look inward to discern ways we can better accomplish our mission. We are grateful for this opportunity to work together to make BTLT a better, more resilient, more diverse and inclusive organization, one poised to address deepening environmental challenges posed by climate change and development pressures and to serve the needs of our whole community.

We thank all of our members and supporters for making the successes of 2021 possible. We look forward to 2022 and the possibilities that await us to conserve special places and connect the people of our region to them. Happy New Year!

Emily Swan is the president of the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust; Angela Twitchell is the executive director.