The New York Times
nytimes.com

June 2, 2005
Wisdom by the Spadeful
By ANNE RAVER

AMAGANSETT, N.Y.

A FEW weeks ago, Scott Chaskey, poet and farmer, was hunkered down in his favorite garlic field to get out of a chilly wind blowing off the ocean. The sand was warm between the perfectly tilled rows of green garlic stalks, mulched with a soft blanket of shredded leaves. Mr. Chaskey calls them "green sail masts," and so they were, all 20,000 of them, sailing down this two-acre field.

Since 1990, Mr. Chaskey has directed the plowing and planting at Quail Hill, a community farm in north Amagansett. And now he has written about his experiences, from growing garlic, his favorite food, to growing a community - of earthworms, bees, birds, foxes and humans - all connected to the earth.

"This Common Ground: Seasons on an Organic Farm," published in April by Viking, is an elegy to the land and to the creatures who inhabit it. It is all about rebuilding the connections that have been lost, over time, as the family farm has given way to industrialized agriculture and real estate development. (At Quail Hill, farmers use a chisel plow to loosen the earth, and plant 3,000 pounds of seed potatoes by hand. And Mr. Chaskey veers wide, with his plow, if a fox family has burrowed into the field.)

The book is also a gardener's bible, packed with practical knowledge that often runs counter to conventional wisdom (garlic, for instance, does better out here if it is planted in late October, not August), as well as insights into subtler and more difficult arts, like protecting land from the pressure to develop, or fostering an awareness that soil holds the key to plant health.

This particular soil, for instance, was enriched with more than 25 tons of compost per acre, a month or so before garlic-planting time. "You don't want to put down compost the day before you plant," said Mr. Chaskey, whose worn herringbone cap and white beard put him somewhere between Walt Whitman and Edgar Wallis, the spry, 80-something gardener who taught him how to wield a long-handled spade in the cliff meadows of Cornwall, England. The two spent many hours putting down compost with a quick turn of the spade. "Edgar would say, 'You turn 'em over rough,' " Mr. Chaskey said. " 'You want the wind and rain to work on the soil.' That's how you get the structure that plants want to grow in."

Gardeners, he said, could put a good four inches of compost down on their gardens in fall. And rock powder, too, which Mr. Chaskey works in with the compost, to add trace minerals lost through hundreds of years of growing corn and potatoes. He favors a brand called Azomite, "the A to Z of minerals," available through Fedco, a goldmine of gardening supplies based in Waterville, Me.

A native of upstate New York, Mr. Chaskey, 55, first learned the secrets of the soil double-digging vegetable gardens in England while studying poetry and writing at Oxford University. There he met his wife, Megan, who was also studying poetry. They moved to the little fishing village of Mousehole, at the very tip of Cornwall, where he gardened high above the crashing sea.

They came to Amagansett in 1989, where a group of 10 families, including Ms. Chaskey's mother and stepfather, had started one of the first community supported agriculture projects, known as C.S.A.'s, in which participants share labor and costs.

At first, the fledgling farmers led a Gypsy-like existence, moving from one borrowed plot to another, but in 1990 they formed a rare partnership with the Peconic Land Trust. The trust had just received 20 acres of farmland from an Amagansett landowner, who later donated her entire 220-acre property to the trust. The community farmers needed a permanent home, so Quail Hill Farm was born.

In a community farm, members buy shares - $690 for a family, or $355 for an individual at Quail Hill - to pay for seeds, fertilizer and supplies. Members there harvest about 225 varieties of organic vegetables, herbs, flowers and raspberries twice a week during the growing season. They agree to accept crop failures due to weather, insects, disease or deer. "It's all about sharing the risk with the farmer," Mr. Chaskey said.

Fifteen years later, Mr. Chaskey works for the trust, managing, among other duties, the Quail Hill Farm, which has grown to about 175 families and 50 individual members. The Chaskey children, Levin, Rowenna and Liam, all born on the East End, are growing up on fresh, organic vegetables chosen not only for their superior taste, but often for their beauty as well. (They even like Mr. Chaskey's favorite spring cabbage, Early Jersey Wakefield, sautéed with olive oil and garlic.)

German White, the garlic variety sailing down the field, is a hard-necked, top-setting type that forms a beautiful curling scape, with a bulbil dangling from the tip. Garlic experts, like David Stern, the director of the Garlic Seed Foundation, advise cutting these scapes off, to keep energy going into the garlic bulbs underground.

"If you don't, they say you lose a third of the bulb," Mr. Chaskey said. "But I've tested it, cutting the scapes off one row, and leaving them on another, and I can't tell the difference." So he leaves them on, because he loves the way they look. (The scapes, though, are delicious sautéed, or chopped into omelets and such.)

One of Mr. Chaskey's greatest satisfactions has been to revive fields long drained of nutrients by constant rotations of potatoes and corn, and by growing cover crops like oats, buckwheat, clover and bell beans, which add organic matter and nitrogen to impoverished soil. "When we took over farming the field we call Hurricane Hill," Mr. Chaskey writes, "there was not a worm to be found in the full five acres." Now, it is like crumbly chocolate cake, teeming with micro-organisms.

Quail Hill Farm is in an enviable position, compared with many C.S.A.'s, which are hard-put to find the capital for a new tractor. Its capital expenses are paid by the Peconic Land Trust, which also pays the salaries of Mr. Chaskey, a field manager and four summer apprentices.

There is a deep sense of place to these flat, sandy acres, where the rooster crows over the henhouse, nestled in a woods of native beech and holly. It's just about time to plant those 3,000 tomato seedlings thriving in the hoop house (where the free-ranging laying hens peck insects off the dirt floor). The peas, planted in early April, are already marching in wide green bands, 175 feet down the field.

"They don't do very well in single rows," Mr. Chaskey said. "Peas like company." The sugar snaps and Mammoth Melting snow peas climb a seven-foot-high fence made of nylon netting, with four-inch squares.

"When the peas are done, we get about five people to lift the fence and carry it over to the cherry tomatoes," he said. There, members weave soft jute in and out of tomato stems and trellis, repeating the procedure every week, to support the sprawling plants.

It's the community part that draws many to this farm. "Whenever I go to harvest in the fields, it's like therapy to me," said Gordian Raacke, a longtime member. Mr. Raacke doesn't have a green thumb; he's more interested, he says, in "growing the community." He flips the pancakes at the farm's annual breakfast, and helps organize the tomato taste-off in August. "It's a wonderful way for people to meet and learn about organic techniques," he said.

Mr. Chaskey has a lot of them up his sleeve. Like adding a half cup of bone meal when you plant tomatoes, or planting carrots in August to get the sweetest crop.

But he also reminds us to pause, as Edgar Wallis did in Cornwall, and listen. "To sense in the natural music of a meadow what a seed or plant senses," he writes, "to feel the interdependence of south wind, granite rock, mist and a robin's chatter."

Now, Mr. Chaskey stood into the wind on the tip of the East End of Long Island, and said: "Both are by the sea, at the end of peninsulas. And the light is very much the same."