

## **Healing Patients on the Farm: Dr. Ron Weiss**

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“Let Food Be Thy Medicine”  
--Hippocrates

Most people don't look forward to spending time at their doctor's office, but Dr. Ron Weiss's office isn't typical of most health care facilities. His practice, Ethos Health, is in the center of an organic fruit and vegetable farm in Long Valley, New Jersey.

Instead of just treating symptoms of disease and illness, Dr. Weiss goes directly to the source of health – food and the environment. “The growing obesity rate, diabetes, everything, was just going in the wrong direction. So being a believer in food as the basis of health, I decided, you know what, I should change things up and get a different model,” he explained.

Dr. Weiss and his family bought an 18th Century farm on 342 acres, where he sees his patients, grows food, conserves habitat, and heals the land. Two farmers help Weiss with the farm and run the Doctor's Farm Market, with “doctor's tips” and “doctor's recipes” next to each fruit and vegetable.

### **Farm-Based Healthcare**

Calling the combination of his medical facility and farming “Farm-Based Healthcare,” Dr. Weiss explains, “A farm-based healthcare system takes different components – the local food movement, sustainable agriculture, primary care, environmentalism, food grown at a high level, community centric activities – and puts them together into this amalgam, this systemic approach to taking care of people, whether it be feeding them, taking care of their health, or taking care of their environment.”

Dr. Weiss sees a lot of similarities between his medical practice and farming work. “Farmers are just like doctors. A good farmer understands that's he's dealing with a complex biological system which is nature, just like the human body is,” said Dr. Weiss.

## **The Farm Team and Farmer Incubator Program**

Nora Pugliese, who has been the farm's manager for five years, marvels at Dr. Weiss's program. She says, "He literally prescribes patients foods to eat, and we make it available for them to buy from here."

She has seen the profound changes in Dr. Weiss's patients with her own eyes. "I was already interested in the connections between diet and health but seeing it in action with these patients has been really a remarkable thing. It really does work! People who were barely able to do anything are doing things they haven't done in decades. One woman said, 'I forgot what it feels like to feel good!' (Diet) is deeply ingrained and not an easy change to make, but it clearly needs to happen," she said.

Dr. Weiss is also starting a farmer incubator project. "Farmland access is the greatest challenge to new farmers," said Dr. Weiss.

## **Healing the Land**

While Dr. Weiss is a healer of people, he also works to heal his farmland. He likens the team of partners he's assembled to a team of medical specialists. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is a key part of that team.

"Dan Mull (NRCS District Conservationist) was one of the first people here. He came when Michael Phillips, the premiere holistic apple and fruit grower, was here. Michael develops systems to grow orchards without chemicals. So, Dan came down that day, and we walked the farm to identify the ten-acre spot for the future orchard," remembered Dr. Weiss.

"Just to know these programs are here, and that Dan and everyone in the NRCS office is always so willing to help... It's a great partnership. Always willing, always suggesting how we can do things better," said Dr. Weiss.

A ten-acre orchard of heirloom apples is next up on Dr. Weiss's plan. "You have the wildlife here, which are basically the enemies of the pests that could damage the fruit. And you have the pollinators," said Dr. Weiss. These apples were originally chosen by farmers for their disease resistance and suitability for the local environment. Today, they are hard to find.

"There are thousands and thousands of different apples that were grown in the U.S. Most of them have been lost or are being lost because no one is growing them anymore. We have five apples threatened with extinction that started in New Jersey, and we're trying to find them and bring them back. We found four of them, but as far as we know there is only one plant left of each," said Dr. Weiss.

## Soil Health and Cover Crops

Though transitioning the entire farm to regenerative organic agriculture is in his future, Dr. Weiss currently leases 100-acres of his farm to a conventional corn and soy grower. The farmer has a three-year contract with NRCS to plant cover crops to build soil health on that land. “They flyover mixed cover crops. Lots of daikon that came up in the winter and now the beautiful rye and clover,” said Dr. Weiss.

## New Jersey Audubon

Bringing in partners adds to the technical assistance available to the landowner to make informed planning decisions, and Dan saw potential benefit to introduce Dr. Weiss to the New Jersey Audubon Society. “There was a lot of work to be done to help Ron reach his goals, and we get so much more accomplished when we work with our conservation partners,” he said.

John Parke, Stewardship Project Director of New Jersey Audubon, said, “We work a lot with NRCS, and tend to have companion grants with a lot of NRCS programs. Dan came by to let us know that a new guy in town could use some help and likes the idea of wildlife.” So, John went out and they all walked the land together.

“This area is good for grassland-dependent birds which make up about forty percent of our threatened and endangered species in New Jersey. We’re talking Bobolinks, Grasshopper Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, American kestrel, Horned Lark, that kind of thing. It’s hard to get native warm-season grasses into the landscape,” said John. Unlike cool-season grasses that are harvested during peak nesting seasons, native warm-season grasses are harvested after the nesting season is over.

Dr. Weiss took some eroded fields out of production, enrolled them in the [USDA Farm Service Agency’s \(FSA\) Conservation Reserve Program \(CRP\)](#), and planted native warm-season grasses. John is pleased with the progress, saying, “The erosion stopped, the habitat is unbelievable, and he also wound up with a lot of pollinators as well. With the available programs and the habitat Ron wanted – along with correcting the resource concern of the erosion – it all worked out.”

Dr. Weiss also used a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) program that provides plant materials for use with NRCS programs. The wildlife is thriving. “FWS also put the birdhouses on site. You get bluebirds, tree swallows, a lot of bats, so it’s good for your Integrated Pest Management plan,” said John. The wildlife eat pests, eliminating the need for pesticides.

There is a lot more happening in these grass fields than meets the eye. “These grass fields take years to mature... So, the first growing season it looks like a failure on top, but what’s happening underground is another story! The root systems can grow six to ten feet below grade. This deep root system helps infiltration, builds organic matter, improves soil health, and sequesters carbon. “To me, these grasses are wonder plants,” said John of the native grasses. And, when the grasses dry, they use the straw for the organic strawberries.

### **High Tunnels**

NRCS also helped Dr. Weiss obtain a seasonal high tunnel for his farm. The tunnel protects crops from harsh weather and extends the growing season. That means Dr. Weiss’s patients and community have access to local, healthy food for more months of the year. “The tomatoes that grow in the high tunnels are the stars of our farm stand. Normally, we put our heirlooms in there, and the protection is really helpful to them,” said Nora, the farm manager. Early season lettuces, radishes, beets, an assortment of fall greens and roots, carrots, turnips, and buckwheat cover crops are all being planted in the high tunnels this year.

### **Vegan Pot Lucks**

In 2017, Dr. Weiss began hosting monthly vegan pot lucks on his farm. They are free and open to the public; everyone is welcome. “We had people come from Canada, Maryland, New York City. About 70-80 people,” said Dr. Weiss.

John recently led a bird walk at one of the potlucks and was impressed with the fare. “I ate like a king! It was phenomenal. It was stuff I never would have thought to put all together; and the people were so cool. Everyone was outside. Everyone brought their vegetables and cooked it all up. They were talking about how great the farm was with the wildlife, the landscape, and you had that sense of community. I get goosebumps just thinking about it,” he said.

### **The Future**

Dr. Weiss and his team of conservation partners continue to make a difference on this farm and in the community. Dr. Weiss said, “The technical assistance that NRCS gives, and partnering with the NJ Audubon and all these people, knowing that there are agencies and organizations that want to help us and the environment and move things in a positive direction... that’s the number one thing.”



This unique farm is different than most that NRCS assists as most farms don't integrate food production with medical care. Dan said, "When I got here, I asked him 'Why are you doing this?' And he told me that the whole idea of eating healthy food and growing healthy food and getting some of these medications out of your body is a much better approach. And, you know, who can argue with healthy eating? I can't."

For more information on how NRCS can help you, visit [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov)

For more information on NRCS and high tunnels, visit [www.nrcs.usda.gov/hightunnel](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/hightunnel)

For more information on NRCS assistance for organic farmers, visit [www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic)

For More Information on NJ Audubon, visit <http://www.njaudubon.org/>