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Organic Farmers at Work in Vermont

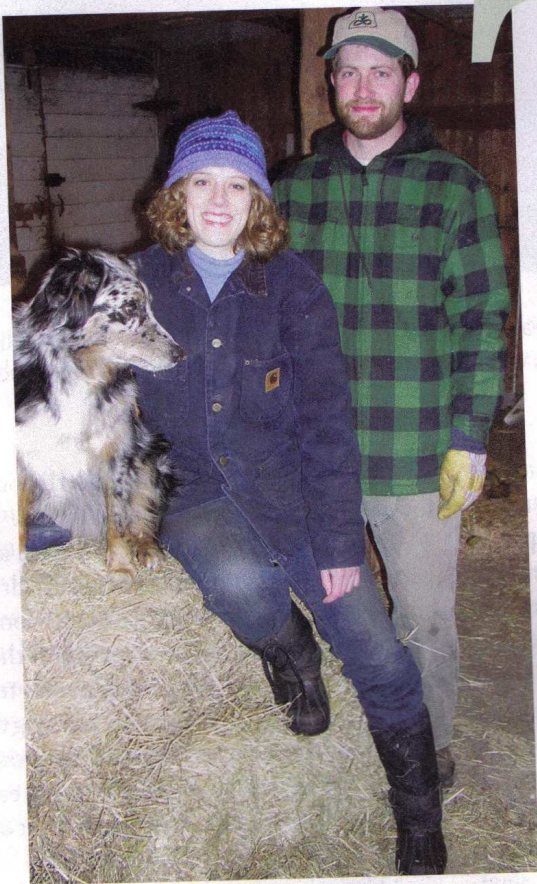


Jack and Anne Lazor of Butterworks Farm, shown here with their granddaughter, were among the pioneers of organic agriculture when they began farming in 1976. They in turn have mentored a new generation of farmers, including Seth Johnson, shown at right with his wife, Jeannette, and their Australian shepherd, Maggie.

The work these Vermont organic farm families do today intends to lead to a healthier tomorrow—and quite possibly a revitalized agricultural market.

NEXT GENERATION FARMING

Story and Photographs by Tanya Sousa



THE FACE OF ORGANIC FARMING IN VERMONT ranges from big-time producers to intimate family ventures, though size doesn't dictate where you'll find the resulting produce, be it in chain supermarkets, local farmers' markets, or on sale at the farms themselves. You might be a bit astounded to hear that I pick up my locally produced organic eggs at an insurance agency. When I walk through the office door, I'm greeted by orderly desks, computers, stacks of papers, and Jeannette Johnson's blue eyes and wide smile. She is a stylish 26-year-old in every way. "You're here for your eggs!" she says brightly and reaches into a small refrigerator to hand me my two dozen, large, flavor-packed beauties. She isn't what I used to imagine an organic farmer would be.

Jeannette works nearly full-time at the insurance business, and her office appearance gives no clue to the hours she and husband Seth spend in Glover tending Morningstar Meadows Farm, their organic business—and the true passion of their lives.

Each morning, before the young couple leaves for "regular jobs," they tend to their beef cows, draft horses, and egg-laying hens. After work, they do more of the same. Seth holds varying jobs, depending on the year and the season, because he oversees and takes part in most of the weather-dependent farm tasks. "It's hard to find employers who can be flexible enough to spare you when the weather is good and you have to bring the hay in, for instance," he says. "I'm not able to plan with an employer for what time I need off. The sun shines when it shines.

"Being a small family venture and not having much capital, it takes a longer time to grow," Seth explains. "We don't believe in get-

ting into debt and taking out a lot of loans.” As their organic business increases and they gain experience and form a customer base, the Johnsons will continue working at their day jobs away from the farm to help make ends meet. Seth says with the calm of determination and just the right mix of enthusiasm and sense of reality: “We hope to farm full-time in five years or so, but who knows?”

The days are long, but it’s an investment in a lifestyle the Johnsons say can’t be found another way. “We don’t have kids yet, but I can’t think of a better way to raise children—teach them the value of a hard day’s work and how to be self-sufficient,” Seth muses.

The Johnsons are not alone in their organic-farming passion. According to Joe Cleary, who’s worked at the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), the number of certified organic farms in the region has consistently grown about five percent a year; many more farms have gone organic but don’t become certified. “There is money to be made in producing food. Organic producers in Vermont are mainly selling locally and getting the direct dollar,” he says; by comparison, non-organic farmers typically have to move their produce through food wholesalers.

Cleary feels that organic farms have the potential to revitalize agriculture—particularly in the dairy industry. “The demand for organic milk is beyond what is currently produced,” he says and continues: “Organic solves environmental issues, individual health issues, and fits well with the image of Vermont as a wholesome state.”

But neither money nor image is a prime motivator for the Johnsons. “Organic farming can make money, but the amount of time you put into it is always more extensive than the money you get back,” Seth says. “The lifestyle is the payoff. You need to love farming, and then it’s your hobby and your work all in one.”

The Johnsons feel that living well means using and enjoying the resources placed before you in life. “If we’ve been blessed with the land, it’s our responsibility to use it to be good stewards of Earth and to help as many people with it as we can,” Seth says.

And they have been blessed with land. Morningstar Meadows is a postcard Vermont farm that benefits from a rare, rich soil—silt deposited by the famed Runaway Pond (a flood resulting from a pond being drained in Glover in the early 19th Cen-



The organic beans at Morningstar Meadows Farm, which is run by Seth and Jeannette Johnson of Glover, are planted, cultivated, weeded, harvested, threshed, and sorted by hand.

tury). The land is laden with nutrients and nearly free of the stones with which many Northeast Kingdom farmers must cope.

The farm itself belongs to Seth’s mother. Seth and Jeannette began farming organically with Seth’s father, who passed away from cancer three years ago. Now, Seth and Jeannette work together to produce seven kinds of beans, eggs, beef, and vegetables such as squash, sweet corn, potatoes, carrots, beets, cucumbers, and string beans. They also raise oats for their draft horses and to sell for seed, and they cut and sell hay.

“The hardest work is in the summer and the pay comes in the fall and winter,” Seth says, laughing, although Jeannette sells eggs

all year at a local grocery store, and through the insurance office to regulars like me.

Spring and early summer find Seth and Jeannette preparing the fields with draft horses instead of tractors, Jeannette sometimes astride the wide backs of one of their animal partners, enjoying a ride as they toil. Then there is the planting. After tending the crops over the summer, fall is harvest time and the young couple begins working earnestly on the seven kinds of beans that are Seth’s favorite crops.

“These beans are planted, cultivated, and weeded; pulled, dried, threshed; and sorted by hand,” Seth says, pointing to an old hand-powered mill that aids in cleaning the bean plants of seeds, dust, and leaves.



One of the fundamentals of organic farming is treating animals with care and respect. The cows at Butterworks Farm have room to move around even in winter. The hens at Morningstar Meadows nest comfortably in their cageless coops.



hands like Seth Johnson who became as impassioned as the Lazors are and then struck out on their own. "It's hard to keep help," Jack says. During our interview, two young people from the Lazors' past stop to visit, showing how the thread of the mentoring relationship remains intact over the years.

Jack and Anne began farming at the Butterworks site in 1976. They are among the pioneers of organic agriculture in Vermont, and now produce yogurt, cream, cottage cheese, beans, and grains. Jack grins proudly when he speaks of his love for the beans and grains, and for the direct work of building healthy soil, free of chemicals, that feeds growing plants in a way chemi-

cal fertilizers can't. His eyes sparkle with enthusiasm when he describes the challenge of keeping those crops pest-free and healthy without pesticides and other chemical treatments.

It's clear where the Johnsons found inspiration.

Although Anne Lazor also takes pride in using natural materials and methods to enrich and rejuvenate what they call "dead soil," she finds her joy elsewhere in the organic-farming lifestyle. "I enjoy the animals most." She smiles, reaching to pat one of their calm, friendly milking cows.

It's clear that a fundament of organic farming is treating living creatures with care and respect. The Butterworks cows

move freely, approach visitors curiously, and still have tails and horns. Anne points out each one by name. "Animals can be healthy without antibiotics," Anne explains, looking around at the Jerseys. "It's pretty exciting to have young people want to come and learn about it."

The Johnsons' animals are equally calm and well-cared-for, in the image of the Lazor's example of animal husbandry.

"In the winter, we give the chickens warm water and heat lamps. We make sure the animals are comfortable," Jeannette says as we walk through the coop of Buff Orpingtons and Aracaunas, comfortably nesting and eating despite several people walking and talking among them.

Hope for Hopefuls

“It’s hard to get started,” says Jack Lazor, shaking his head ruefully, when he speaks of others entering the organic-farming life. Those who want to experience the life enjoyed by the Lazors, the Stevenses, and being tasted by the Johnsons, may have trouble finding land already clear and certifiable. If it’s available, it can be expensive. Farmers must spend three years preparing the land before it can be certified by a group like Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA). Although farmers could still produce something to sell in the meantime, it couldn’t be considered organic.

The Intervale Center, founded in 1988 in Burlington, is working hard to offer solutions to the hurdles organic-farming hopefuls face. Will Raap, founder of Gardeners Supply Company, developed the original vision and mission. He saw that restoring the Intervale lands back to their agricultural roots could help feed the Burlington community and support organic farmers. He saw the land and felt obligated to use it to help people.

While not a farm itself, the organization runs the Intervale Farm Incubator Program, which “provides affordable access to fertile land, equipment, and other infrastructure, mentorship and technical assistance for new market farmers to get started,” explains Intervale Executive Director Kit Perkins. The foundation also educates by operating the Healthy City Youth Farm. Participants grow fruits and vegetables for sale to the Burlington School District as part of the Burlington School Food Project and distribute food to social service agencies for families in need.

You can learn more during one of Intervale’s regular tours or informal workshops. “Thousands of people visit the Intervale annually,” says Perkins. “The Intervale is offered as a classroom to groups who focus on curriculum development and teaching.” For more information on organic gardening, go to Gardener’s Supply, www.gardeners.com; The Intervale, www.intervale.org; NOFA, www.nofa.org; and Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, www.nofavt.org. —Tanya Sousa

WILL AND JUDY STEVENS OF Golden Russet Farm in Shoreham are also pioneers in Vermont’s organic-farming community. Like Jack and Anne Lazor, they find teaching one of the most exciting parts of their business. “We don’t just employ. I’d like to think we offer something more than a paycheck and forty hours a week,” says Will Stevens, who was also recently elected to the state House of Representatives and will serve as one of only two independents in the House.

Golden Russett is a larger farm than the fledgling Morningstar Meadows. They have eight to 10 acres of vegetables in production at any time as well as herbs and bedding plants, and have had about 120 employees over the years. “I’d say five

The culture of small farming has always been passed on from parents to children and from experienced farmer to farmhands.

percent of them go on to (organic farming) commercially,” Will Stevens says. Many others take the lessons they’ve learned and fit them into their lives in other ways. Some eat organically and locally produced food. Many raise their own organic vegetables but don’t sell them. The commercial route may not be for everyone, but the Stevenses feel that any difference they’ve made in people’s thinking is part of living organically, and is time well spent.

Like the Johnsons, Will and Judy Stevens started modestly, in their case with a non-organic apple orchard in Monkton. Will wistfully describes one event that helped change their course. “One winter’s night, we were visiting with a woman who ran the Burlington Farmers’ Market. She said to make it, we needed to show up earlier in the season with vegetables and build relationships.”

The idea of building relationships with customers rather than having them remain faceless struck a chord with the Stevenses. “If I’m going to sell something to real people, I wanted to be able to say, ‘Yes, this is good food,’” Will says.

Benefiting the community with locally grown food is the passionate belief of many organic farmers. Judy and Will Stevens

choose to only sell within a 15-mile radius. The Johnsons sell mainly within the Barton and Glover area, and although Butterworks ships a small portion of what they produce, most stays in Vermont.

CHEF RON HEATLEY AND HIS wife Kathy own the Sweet Onion Inn of Hancock, Vermont. They are on the receiving end of the organic-farming lifestyle, reaping the benefits that the Lazors, Johnsons, and Stevenses hope to offer. “Organic food tastes better. Oh, the flavors!” Heatley says reverently. For instance, according to Heatley, guests rave about his oven-roasted potatoes and want to know the secret recipe. “I tell them, ‘Potatoes and olive oil and I stick them in the oven,’” he says and laughs. “They can’t believe it. ‘How can they taste this good?’ They always ask me. I tell them it’s the organic potatoes.”

The Heatleys serve a menu that is 99 percent organic. High flavor is certainly important to any chef, but it isn’t the main reason that Ron and Kathy believe in organics. “I started becoming interested in my health when a friend became ill and went to a homeopathic doctor. I saw the unbelievable change in him just from eating better food and taking some supplements, and I thought, ‘I’m ten years younger than he is. If I start now, maybe I’ll stay in good shape.’” Did it work for him? “I was a teacher for eight years,” he says, “and I never took a sick day.”

He continues: “There’s a Native American saying I was told: You should live your life for seven generations into the future. We’re messing up our environment. Eating organic may look more expensive on the surface, but if we look at the cost to the earth (of using traditionally grown foods), along with medical expenses and sick days, we can’t afford not to go organic.”

It’s a global and a local way of thinking that organic farmers transfer into a living. “Our children will know how to raise and prepare their own healthy food,” Seth Johnson says. He may or may not be thinking seven generations into the future, but he and Jeannette, and those like them, are definitely preparing well for the next one. ▮

Tanya Sousa grew up and continues to live in the Northeast Kingdom. She has published stories in various magazines and e-zines, and about a dozen of her essays and creative nonfiction stories have appeared in *The Green Mountain Trading Post*.