

Life on the land

Meet Amy and Verena, the energetic couple behind
PEI's Heart Beet Organics

Photography and text by Janet Wallace



"We both really love bringing new products to market and knowing that they are really healthy," says Amy Smith (right) who, along with Verena Varga, owns Heart Beet Organics in Darlington, PEI.

"AFTER WE MOVED to the Island," recounts Amy Smith, "an elderly neighbour—he was so sweet—listened to our plans and shook his head sadly."

"I don't mean to be rude," he said, 'but you're not going to make it,'" Amy laughs at the memory. "And I told him, 'I don't mean to be rude, but I intend to prove you wrong.'" And she did, along with her partner, Verena Varga.

"People wondered how we could make a living by farming just an acre and a half," continues Amy. "Although we leave the neighbours scratching their heads and wondering about our farm, which just looks like a big garden to them, they have been very supportive. They're happy to see young people getting into farming."

Amy and Verena moved to PEI in 2010 with a desire to farm, a wealth of creativity, and energy to burn. They bought a small homestead with a house, two greenhouses and a garden. Through hard work, ingenuity and passion, Heart Beet Organics has become a vibrant and successful farm business.

Colour and connections

Although only a 15-minute drive from Charlottetown, Heart Beet Organics feels a world away from a capital city. This is potato country—with large fields of uninterrupted foliage—acres of potatoes, oats, canola and more potatoes. Heart Beet Organics is an oasis of biodiversity, colour and productivity.



Amy and Verena grow between 40 and 50 different types of vegetables, including yellow squash (above left) and eight varieties of beets and carrots.

Turning off a country road, Amy and Verena's place looks traditional at first glance—an old white farmhouse between windbreaks of tall trees. A dog bounds up to meet us, followed by Verena and Amy. Coming straight from the garden, they wear well-seasoned work clothes and soil on their hands. They look hot, tired and very happy.

Verena leads us into an orderly, yet beautiful, garden. Rows of tall sunflowers preside over the vegetables, providing shade for the greens that prefer coolness. Heart Beet is home to between 40 and 50 different types of vegetables, including eight varieties of beets and carrots, and 20-plus lettuce types. "We like variety, different shapes and colours," Verena says. Colours range from dark red kale to yellow squash, deep green Swiss chard to purplish kale. Yup, kale again... Kale is the couple's second favourite crop; tomatoes reign supreme.

"I think tomatoes are the reason I got into farming," says Amy.

"We love tomatoes," confirms Verena.

Amy and Verena grow 40 varieties of tomatoes and celebrate the crop at the Heart Beet Tomato Fest. At last fall's taste test, Chocolate Stripe tomatoes won over contenders such as Orange

Plum, Black Krim, Great White and Green Zebra. Tomato Fest also includes food, garden tours and activities for kids. No balloon animals here... instead, kids attach vegetables to make strange-looking creatures with carrot legs, green bean arms and beet heads.

Families are encouraged to visit the farm as part of the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. Forty members receive a weekly mix of vegetables throughout the growing season. The farm offers a CSA even though most of Heart Beet's vegetables are sold at the Charlottetown Farmers' Market or to restaurants.

"With the CSA, there's way more work involved than just bringing whatever we have to market," Amy explains. "We have to put a lot of thought into our planting calendar to get a great variety of vegetables in the boxes each week. But we have such amazing connections with our members."

Hands-on training

For Amy and Verena, farming is much more than just growing vegetables. They want to give back to the community, their customers and neighbours, but also the farming community in general.

The couple also share their experience, enthusiasm and knowledge with apprentices.

"With the average age of farmers being 55-65 years old," explains Amy. "We need a new generation of farmers. The best farming education you can get is getting your hands dirty and working side by side with farmers."

Amy acknowledges she wouldn't be farming today without mentors and hands-on training. She apprenticed on organic farms for three years in her home state of Massachusetts. She then managed a farm at a yoga and meditation retreat in Quebec, where she met Verena—who, originally from Germany, was also volunteering at the retreat.

They decided they wanted a life, and a farm, together. After looking in New England, they considered PEI and emailed all the certified organic farmers on the island. Many organic farmers responded, including the late Raymond Loo. He told them they were needed on the Island. His philosophy, shared by Amy and Verena, is that the more organic farmers, the better.

A visit to the Charlottetown Farmers' Market clinched the deal.

"The market is awesome," says Verena. "We felt that right away. When



A love of kale

Verena and Amy love kale, so much so that they named their dog Kalee. Young kale goes into salads and mature kale is used in soups and stews.

A kale omelette is a house speciality—a protein-rich and fast meal that tastes great. Kale is stir-fried with garlic and onions before adding it to the eggs. Crispy kale chips make a healthy, home-grown snack. For a treat, Verena and Amy make kale spanakopita with feta cheese and phyllo.

you go to a new place and want to get a sense of the area, you go to the market. It's where the good people go."

"We fell in the love with the East Coast, especially the people," she continues. "We love the slower pace where people still have the time to talk."

The farm is certified organic and the couple don't use any products to kill pests. Instead, they use floating row covers (like sheer curtains) to protect their crops from flea beetles, and they limit other pest problems through crop rotation, good soil management and providing habitat for wildlife and beneficial insects.

"We believe the earth is sacred," they write on their website. "We receive nourishment and support from it every day. As stewards of the land, we believe we have an obligation and an opportunity to feed the soil....We also believe a farm rich in biodiversity is a sign of true health and harmony in nature."

When they first started growing in their greenhouses, an aphid problem developed. Amy and Verena made a pest repellent with cayenne, garlic and peppermint soap. Then other insects



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arrived: helpful ones. After referring to insect books, they realized the bugs that Verena called ‘helicopters’ were hoverflies and the strange black bugs with red markings were ladybug larvae. The hoverflies and ladybug larvae are voracious predators of aphids. The spray was no longer needed.

“We would love to get to the place where we have no pest pressure at all because the soil is balanced and we have so much diversity on the farm,” explains Amy.

“We still might have pests,” says Verena. “But they won’t be much of a problem; they will be a food source for birds and beneficial insects.”

There is always room for improvement on the farm, says Amy. “For us, winter is for learning how to improve. Going to conferences in the winter is part of the farming experience.”

I first encountered Amy Smith at a greenhouse conference, where she was on two panels—one on salad greens and one on exotic crops.

The other speakers described the need for fastidious tasks and expensive equipment. “Well, I guess we did everything wrong, but it worked,” Amy said.

The Heart Beet approach to farming is low-tech and environmentally sustainable, such as growing pink oyster mushrooms in reusable buckets rather than disposable plastic bags.

Beyond teaching how to farm, the couple also teach people about food.

“I’m almost hoarse at the end of the market from talking about new vegetables and fermented products, like kombucha,” says Amy. “But we both really love bringing new products to market and knowing that they are really healthy. People share our excitement and enthusiasm.”

New ideas

Their foray into fermentation began when they had a huge crop of cucumbers but no time to make pickles the usual way. “So we just fermented them all in one big container,” says Amy. “We were blown away by how easy it was and how delicious the pickles were. Then we started reading about how healthy fermented foods are—the nutrients are much more easily assimilated by the body.”

“Now we make three types of sauerkraut, kimchi, curtido, fermented carrots, fermented hot sauce, even miso and tempeh. We’re planning our garden around what we can ferment in the fall,” says Verena.

“We just keep expanding our horizons,” she adds.

“And we’re getting into seed saving,” says Amy. “We have to train our brains to think about saving seed and how to fit seed crops into the crop rotation.

“It’s exciting and fun but also challenging,” she says, summing up both the couple’s approach to farming and their way of life.