

roots & folks: meet your local farmer



Growing their future

Young farmers put down roots at Olde MacKenzie Farm, PEI

Story and photography by Janet Wallace

YOUNG farmers are a rare and precious commodity on PEI, as in the rest of Canada. So when Jeff and Carey Wood moved to the Island to start a family farm, they were welcomed with open arms.

Twelve years ago, the Woods joined a Community-Shared Agriculture (CSA) program near their Ontario home. They had a 'working share'—a lower-priced plan for a weekly supply of vegetables which required helping on the farm.

For the Woods, it was a life-changing experience. Carey got her "hands dirty for the first time in years and ... the itch to farm."

The following year, as full-time farm apprentices, they learned how to grow and market vegetables, and fell in love with farming, says Carey.

Jeff convinced Carey that having their own farm would be great. "He was right," she admits. The question was where to farm.

"We always loved the East Coast—the lifestyle, the ocean and the food," says Jeff. "We hemmed and hawed between Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and PEI,

but we kinda liked PEI better because of its small size."

While in Ontario, the couple looked online for properties. After narrowing down their search to several farms, Jeff travelled to PEI to assess their short list. In Rose Valley, in the middle of the Island, Jeff found a 15-acre farm with a house, barn and outbuildings. Carey, trusting Jeff 100 per cent with their future, agreed to the purchase sight unseen. In 2010, Jeff, Carey and their daughter, Olivia (now 11), moved to their new home.

Carey recalls, "Everyone kept asking where we lived. When we told them, they all said 'Oh, the old MacKenzie Farm.'" The Woods decided to name their farm in honour of the family who settled the land in the early 1800s. Gordon MacKenzie, the last of his family to live at the farm, had moved away several years earlier.

Moving always has its challenges. For the Woods, they were moving into a new province, a new business and a whole new way of life. It involved a lot of trial and error.



Carey Wood, a new breed of farmer in PEI.

"The scaling up was a large learning curve," says Carey. Selling vegetables to restaurants and 100 households was a far cry from selling some vegetables from their porch in Ontario. "We have learned nothing is to be expected and goes as planned," she adds. "And to take each day, week, month and year as it comes."

Finding their happy medium

Olde MacKenzie Farm is now a thriving business with six acres of vegetables, five greenhouses, four of which operate year-round, and a huge barn, as well as another 50-acre parcel that includes 35 acres of woodland, plus apple orchard,



Clockwise from top left: Jeff Wood; kalettes, a cross between kale and brussels sprouts, is a popular new crop; cole crops growing in a field; a chicken wanders by the barn; a handful of new carrots to be sold to restaurants or the Woods' weekly 'veggie box' customers.

asparagus and blueberry plantings (both low- and highbush). The white farmhouse overlooks a patchwork quilt of colourful crops. Bright orange squash sparkle in dense green foliage. Further down the valley, purple brussels sprouts complement the bluish-green kale in neighbouring rows.

Chickens wander behind a huge old barn covered with grey shingles, while a kitten chases its tail nearby. Round bales of golden straw provide a wind-break for three long greenhouses. One of the greenhouses is a jungle—a nearly impenetrable wall of plants heavily laden with tomatoes. Another greenhouse is full of hydroponic salad greens.

Colourful flowers grow along the

edge of the cucumber greenhouse. The cheerful-looking nasturtiums are doing double duty—they repel cucumber beetles and the edible flowers and spicy leaves are sold.

Jeff and Carey grow vegetables and fruit for restaurants and weekly 'veggie boxes.' The Olde MacKenzie Farm Veggie Box program is like a mix between a CSA and farmers market experience. With a traditional CSA, people pay up front for a season's worth of food and receive a weekly assortment of vegetables selected by the farmers.

At the Cornwall Town Hall on Tuesdays and at the Farm Centre in Charlottetown once a week, the Woods meet their customers. Vegetables, fruit and eggs are laid out in plastic bins. Everything is bundled or bagged and colour-coded.

"We have different coloured tags corresponding to different price values," explains Carey. People can get half items, like one English cucumber, or lots of pickling cukes. Customers pick and choose the food they want up to a total value of \$25 each week.

"We had to find that happy medium," says Carey. "So we're not giving our customers big bags of radishes when



not everyone wants radishes."

"Over the years, we've gotten to know what people want. If we have 50 people picking up food, we need 25 bags of beans and 18 of those have to be yellow."

The system works for both customers and farmers. "It's not like going to the farmers market with \$2,000 of produce and coming home with \$1,000 because a hurricane is coming and no one shows at the market," Jeff says. In the summer and fall, they sell 80 to 100 boxes a week, averaging between 60 to 80 in the winter.

"People feel they're getting value for their money because they get to pick out their own food," Carey explains.

In the winter, the boxes contain greens (salad, chard, arugula or kale) along with storage vegetables, such as squash, leeks, black radishes and garlic.



"The favourite winter vegetables are potatoes, parsnips, carrots and rutabagas," says Carey, "We can't grow enough of them. We go through piles and piles of potatoes."

"Islanders love their potatoes," she says laughing.

The Island way

Learning what Islanders like was one learning curve. Learning how to deal with Island weather was another.

The farm has a clear view of the wind turbines in Summerside. "If there are high winds," says Carey. "We usually get them."

The worst storm they have experienced so far was March 26, 2014—what local meteorologists called White Juan 2.

"We thought we were prepared," wrote Carey in her blog after the bliz-



zard. They had stocked up on food, fuel for the generator, candles and games.

After a tough winter, they were prepared for a bad storm, but nothing that bad. After the power went out, the family camped out in the living room where it was warm. The generator kept the double-layered greenhouse walls inflated while the storm raged.

"As we waited for power to come back on and winds to die," Carey wrote, "we went through all the gasoline we had. We siphoned it out of everything we could." Eventually, they lost three high tunnels and a greenhouse full of plants ready to harvest.

Neighbours came to their rescue bringing gas, hot coffee, fresh-baked cookies and an invitation to a hot meal in a warm house. That helped enormously but, between the cold, loss of the structures and need for more repairs, the Woods weren't sure how they were going to get by.

More people came to their aid. Hannah Bell, a customer, started a crowdfunding campaign to rebuild the greenhouses. Donors received future gifts from the farm, such as a casual barbecue dinner cooked on the farm (\$35), a dozen eggs a week for four months (\$75) or a veggie box for the food bank (\$30). In 16 days, 156 people contributed \$8,555.

"We've had some great support behind us," says Carey. The couple's sense of community includes farmers across the nation. "I don't think we

would be where we are today without Young Farmers of Canada." Carey served on the board of directors of the national organization and is now vice-president of Young Farmers of PEI. (A 'Young Farmer' is under 39 years old.)

Carey (now 35) and Jeff (39) connect with others facing similar challenges. "We learned how to become more efficient from the guys who worked at a big scale," says Carey recalling how a Saskatchewan farmer with 10,000 acres helped them design windbreaks.

While the Woods have received help, they also give back; sometimes help flows both ways simultaneously. Volunteers from the PEI Food Exchange practice the millennia-old concept of glean—harvesting leftover crops for people in need. At Olde MacKenzie Farm, volunteers helped harvest a field and the food bank received corn. The Woods regularly donate produce and eggs to the Food Exchange, and before Christmas were making squash soup to donate to families in need.

People helping others—it's the Island way. When snow removal was overwhelming, volunteers from the PEI Food Exchange helped clear snow off the greenhouses. Similarly, in the off-season, particularly around Christmas, Jeff does 'relief milking' on neighbouring farms so dairy farmers can get away. Jeff and Carey also volunteer to teach people, from elementary students to chefs from the Culinary Institute of Canada, where their food comes from.

Visitors to Olde MacKenzie Farm learn about more than vegetables. They also get a sense of the labour needed to grow food on a small farm.

The couple and their daughter, Olivia, work hard on the farm and appreciate that they get to spend more time together.

"Life and farming," concludes Carey, "are full of obstacles and challenges which we are always looking for the lesson and good side of. Some are easier to find than others. The challenges have made us stronger as a team and operation." 🐔