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JANET WALLACE

Free range

Life lessons and good farming practices at PEI's Barnyard Organics

BY JANET WALLACE

Four barefoot children run and laugh in the wheat field. Soon, just nine-year-old Lucy and seven-year-old Wilson are visible; the wheat is taller than Thane (six) and Sol (three), but they keep up. Earlier, the older kids were swinging from beams in the barn before letting go and dropping into a bed of straw. These are farm kids—confident, healthy and active. They're more comfortable with real animals and tractors than toy ones. Fields of buckwheat, soybeans and wheat, along with roaming chickens, form their childhood backdrop, and the basis of healthy food.

At Barnyard Organics, in Freetown, PEI, Mark and Sally Bernard give their children the freedom and adventures they enjoyed while growing up on farms; and the responsibility. The three older

children are paid to help with chores; Lucy is saving up to buy a dirt bike.

Mark follows the footsteps of his father and grandfather but on a slightly different path. The 550-acre farm is still in the family but Mark grows organic grains, clover, field peas and oilseeds rather than potatoes. Sally raises organic livestock—sheep and pigs in the past, and now chickens. In 2012, they were recognized as “Atlantic Canada’s Outstanding Young Farmers” by Canada’s Outstanding Young Farmers Program.

Mark’s parents live in the century-old farmhouse at the heart of the farm while his young family lives in a small house around the corner. Mark’s father, Wendell, claims to be retired but helps out on the farm almost every day, along with the full-time worker, Blain.

“Dad didn’t want me to come back to the farm. He wanted me to get a government job,” Mark says. “I just knew I wanted to farm. I went to agricultural college with a completely open mind. Organics seemed wild and wacky. But then I developed an organic business plan as an assignment. The organic plan really made sense.” Wendell was willing to try it with his son and, later, new daughter-in-law. Sally and Mark met at the then-named Nova Scotia Agricultural College in Truro, now known as the Dalhousie Agricultural Campus.

The farm was converted to organic production one field at a time. They bought a feed mill and grew certified organic livestock feed. Growing feed for animals “was a good fit to learn how to grow grain because it isn’t as

■ The Bernard family of Freetown, PEI: Mark holding the youngest Bernard, Sol; and his wife Sally with Lucy, Thane and Wilson.

demanding [as human food],” explains Mark. For example, chickens can thrive on wheat that lacks the high gluten levels needed for bread flour.

“We’ve had our struggles,” he says, “as the market has gone up and down. We started when the Maritime organic dairy industry was just starting and there was a huge need for organic feed. But then the organic dairy industry fell through. We supplied a lot of feed for an organic pork producer who was shipping pigs to Quebec, but that fell through.” External factors, such as marketing board decisions and slaughterhouse closures, can have major impacts on product demand.

Barnyard Organics now grows crops for people as well, including soybeans for tofu or soymilk. With human food, even soybeans, aesthetics plays a role. A bit of green staining from leaves means a crop can’t be sold for tofu, but can be used for livestock feed.

“A labour of love”

The Bernards also grow wheat and spelt. Most is ground into flour at Speerville Mills, but some goes to the nearby Whole Grain Bakery.

Acadia wheat is a farm speciality. The variety was developed in 1937 in Saskatchewan and grown in the Maritimes in the 1950s, when the Atlantic region was more self-sufficient in grain. The revival of Acadia wheat has been “a labour of love,” says Mark. Eight years ago, Speerville Mills gave the Bernards two kilograms of seed (enough to plant 1/32-acre). Now Barnyard Organics grows 50 acres of Acadia, in addition to spelt and other types of wheat.

Mark and Sally recognize that the key to successful crops and healthy livestock is the soil. They constantly find ways to improve soil quality and create conditions that nurture soil life. Although their formal education is complete, they couple continue to study by reading, attending conferences and learning through a lot of trial and error.

One step to building healthy soil is their well-designed crop rotation. The Bernards alternate grain crops with



■ Top: Barnyard Organics farm sign. Right: Mark holds stalks of heritage Acadia wheat. Above: Nine-year-old Lucy helps her mother with organic chicken and egg production.

legumes, including field peas, soybeans and clover. Legumes take nitrogen from the air and, with the help of specialized soil bacteria, convert the nutrient into a form plants can use. Much of the Bernards’ fertilizer is made by these plants, not from fossil fuels. They also barter with a dairy farmer—trading hay for aged manure.

“Our approach is to feed the soil and let the soil feed the crops,” explains Mark, “but that doesn’t always work well with the cash flow.” Green manures such as clover and buckwheat are grown for the soil and not harvested. There is no income generated by a green manure, although there is a long-term payoff in terms of soil improvement and weed control.

“Nothing in farming is simple,” says Mark, who wants to spray crops with fish emulsion, molasses and compost tea. “The whole idea of thinking about soil life is a completely

different realm.” The Bernards also try to foster biodiversity so birds, dragonflies and other beneficial lifeforms can control pests.

Life lessons

As a girl, Sally raised lambs for 4-H. At Barnyard Organics, she raised sheep for six years, followed by pigs outside. The pigs ate grass, rooted sod and played in mud puddles. The Bernards might raise pigs again in the future but for the time being Sally is focused on pasture-raised chickens.

Similar to a vegetable CSA (community-supported agriculture), Sally runs a poultry and egg CSA. People pay in the spring to get a fresh chicken every two weeks, with a total of seven chickens, and/or two dozen eggs every two weeks. The pick-up is co-ordinated with Jen Campbell’s vegetable CSA and the Whole Grain Bakery’s CSA.

Sitting on the grass, Lucy strokes a hen in her lap and points out a bald eagle overhead. A downside of raising chickens on pasture is vulnerability to predators. Sally mentions the Island Nature Trust’s “Bird-Friendly Land Owner” sign next to the farm sign.

“We never had a problem before, but ever since the sign went up last year, we’ve had attacks on the chickens from hawks and the eagle,” Sally laughs.

“And a raven took a chicken,” Lucy says in a soft voice. After seeing the chicken walk into a wall, she adds, they realized the bird was blind.

“Lucy fed it and took care of it until the raven attack,” says Sally. “We brought it to events so kids could see and touch a live chicken.”

Community outreach and support is part of the farm ethic. Sally donates eggs to various non-profit organizations. After the deadly shootings in Orlando, Florida, she

raised money through egg sales for Pride PEI and the LGBTQ community.

Rent-a-hen

In addition to the pastured birds, which are moved daily, Sally ‘rents’ chickens so people can have their own fresh eggs and the fun experience of raising laying hens without hassle. People ‘rent’ two laying hens from Victoria Day to Thanksgiving, along with a small portable coop, chicken feed, and everything else they need. Rentthechicken.com is based in Pennsylvania with affiliates in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and PEI.

Renters include Islanders and vacationers with cottages. One coop is at a nursing home where residents can watch the hens and reminisce about their rural childhoods.

“When we bring the hens, people get so excited. During the summer, we get

■ Left: The organic feed mill at Barnyard Organics. Below: Lucy, Thane and Sally inspect one of the rental units. Lucy is holding a hen which is moulting (going through the seasonal change of feathers).

lots of pictures of people cuddling their hens,” says Sally. “Many people are tearful at the end of the summer. The goodbyes are emotional.”

The Bernards like being able to give people a sense of self sufficiency in their food production. “Plus,” laughs Sally, “some people with spouses who don’t want livestock say the rental hens are ‘gateway’ livestock.” They start with chickens, then grow to having a farm with more animals.

“I wish we had more organic farmers on the island,” says Sally. “I think I’m the only farmer on the Island with certified organic poultry. We have had a waiting list for chicken ever since we started farming.”

“But I don’t want to expand. Right now Lucy and I can do the chickens and eggs by ourselves. If we expanded, we would need to hire people. I much prefer to manage chickens than people,” she explains.

“Mark is like a captain of industry, a legacy builder,” she says. “But I prefer the beach to success. Summer is short.”

Growing a future

Make no mistake. Sally isn’t lounging; she is farming, homeschooling and raising the kids. Already, Lucy wants to be a livestock farmer.

Mark and Sally help the farming community grow through community outreach and their success.

“At first, the neighbours were curious about our organic practices and didn’t think we would make it,” explains Sally, past president of ACORN (Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network). “More and more people are calling up to ask about transition. There is an increasing amount of respect for organics.”

The quality of their products may also encourage more people to farm. Some people who rent chickens say they can’t go back to store-bought eggs.

Six-year-old Thane sums up a reason to farm. “My favourite part of the farm is the orchard,” he says with a big grin. “Because I loove apples.”

After all, at its essence, farming is all about food. 🐾