

From purple cauliflower to birch syrup

Doing it differently on Fundy Farms

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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Steam rises from the stainless steel vat of syrup and a sweet aroma fills the air. Ryan Smith throws wood into the firebox as his father and grandfather have done before him. But this isn't your typical sugar shack.

"We do birch syrup because I like 'different,'" he says. "We don't want to do what everyone else is doing."

"That's why we grow so many weird vegetables," Angela MacDougall adds.

Angela and Ryan, both in their mid-30s, have created a vibrant and diverse farm business called Fundy Farms: Local Harvest. From purple cauliflower to striped tomatoes, chaga mushrooms to nettle powder, they focus on unusual products. They grow organic vegetables, dry beans and herbs, and make syrup, herbal teas, green smoothie powders and soup mixes.

In 2013, the place looked sad. A relic of a house that may have been considered grand 150 years ago, leaned towards the ground, looking about to collapse with the next gust of wind. A few ancient apple trees stood among alders. Scrubby woods had reclaimed the land, lying between Hopewell Cape and Hillsborough, NB, across the road from the Petitcodiac River where it flows the Bay of Fundy.

This is a common scene in the Maritimes: "picturesque dilapidation" to quote American essayist John McPhee—only this wasn't all that picturesque.



■ Angela MacDougall and Ryan Smith in the garden at their farm.

As people drove along the highway that connects Moncton to Fundy National Park, they could see changes starting in 2014. Dead and dying trees were felled and bucked up into firewood. Land was ploughed for gardens. A 30 x 70-foot greenhouse was erected. In the community, curiosity was mingled with sharing the good news—a young couple had moved in and were starting a farm.



"At one point, the neighbours were all laughing as they drove by," says Angela, laughing herself. "We had an 1800s-style plough, one meant to be pulled by a horse, hooked to Ryan's tractor. To make raised rows, I walked behind holding the handles and our helper sat on the plough. We're more efficient now."

Three businesses, one couple

Rows of vegetables lie between the highway and the greenhouse, which is filled with trellised tomatoes, cucumbers and



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■ Angela leads a farm tour for the Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network (ACORN).

herbs. Radishes are going to seed, but not from neglect: seedsaving is one of Angela's latest ventures.

"We dabble in a lot of things," says Angela. She points out the beginnings of their forest garden. Tall hop vines provide shade for cool-loving greens in between saplings of recently planted fruit trees. Blueberries grow beneath mature apple trees.

When Ryan and Angela were looking for land in 2013, they approached the owner of the 50-acre lot. The woman had turned away other potential buyers but she liked the couple and their plans, and decided to sell to them.

Ryan's family owned adjoining land. In 1970, the Smiths bought a 200-acre woodlot that had been an active sugar bush in the 1950s. Ryan's father and grandfather built a small camp and started tapping. From 200 taps, they made 20 gallons of syrup a year to share among family and friends. This continued until 1995 when Ryan's grandfather died. That year, the roof of the sugar shack collapsed under a heavy snowload and the equipment was stolen. Eric wanted to rebuild the sugar camp, this time with his son Ryan, so they've not only revived the sugaring operations but also created a much larger camp and sugar bush, now with 2,000 taps.

After Angela and Ryan moved onto the land, they spent the first winter in the barely-insulated sugar camp without electricity and far from the highway. "It was tough," says Angela. The next year, they fixed up an old house next to the garden, where they now live and work together at three businesses, Fundy Farms: Local Harvest, Herb n' Joy and Black Sheep Maples.

Nurturing the land

When the couple met, they each ran their own businesses producing healthy products. Ryan loved working in the woods but wanted to find ways to make a living from a standing forest by sell-



ing non-timber forestry products. He harvested woodland plants, such as yew tips (for the pharmaceutical industry), berries, wild mushrooms, and fir branches for wreaths. The focus of his business was chaga, a black fungus that grows on birch trees. Some herbalists claim the mushroom has remarkable medicinal properties and can inhibit cancer, boost immune systems and slow down aging.

Angela was running her own business, Herb n' Joy. She grew herbs and vegetables on borrowed or rented land, dried the plants, and made teas, smoothie powders and spice blends.

Now, she and Ryan grow vegetables and herbs and although not certified organic, they use organic methods.

"We focus on amending the soil," explains Ryan. They add composted manure from a nearby farm and use cover crops—plants that are grown to improve the soil rather than being harvested. They don't use any pesticides, organic or otherwise.

"Once you use a pesticide," says Ryan, "you throw the whole natural cycle off because pesticides kill some of the good bugs that will control pests."

For pest control they use floating row covers for some crops when the plants



■ Clockwise from left: Angela selling produce at the Hillsborough Farm Market; Ryan prefers working in the woods but helps with the garden; Black Sheep dark maple syrup is sold in Boston round medicine bottles.



farmstand contains produce from their own farm as well as goods from other producers, including frozen meat and poultry, hazelnuts, organic canola oil, spices and more.

“We use an honour system in the farmstand,” says Ryan. “It builds community—it builds trust.” People can make their own change in the cashbox. This way, the couple can work uninterrupted when customers drop by.

Angela also grows many heirloom varieties of dry beans and sells them as soup and chilli mixes, complete with home-grown dehydrated seasonings.

Black Sheep Maples

Ryan works full-time from May to October building trails at Fundy National Park. Once he finishes that work, he goes into the woods to cut firewood for their sugar camp, Black Sheep Maples. When it comes time to boil down sap in late winter, they burn a cord of wood every 90 minutes.

“Making maple syrup has become an industry,” says Ryan. “But we see it as a craft.”

From 2,000 taps, including 200 on yellow birch, they produce syrup

are small. The thin fabric lets sunshine and water reach the seedlings but keeps the pests out. Angela makes a spray from rhubarb leaves and another from garlic and hot peppers in water. These sprays don’t harm pests but make the leaves unpalatable to insects.

Vegetables from the farm are sold at the Hillsborough and Riverview farmers markets, to restaurants, and at their farmstand. Ryan recycled lumber from the old buildings he demolished to build several outbuildings. The bright red



■ The new sugar camp during the peak season for boiling sap; Angela serves home-grown and homemade maple beans to visitors to the sugar camp.



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