

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY FOR TOMORROW'S FARMERS

BY LYNN PEEMOELLER



A whole new generation is turning to life on the farm as the land of opportunity. Earlier this year, four local farmers joined together to form a new CSA (community supported agriculture) business after meeting each other in the Stateline Farm Beginnings course, the farmer training and support program offered by Angelic Organics Learning Center. All four farmers are new to farming. As a second career they have chosen to tend the soil and face the forces of nature as a way of life, and hopefully earn a living as well.

Just 80 miles northwest of Chicago, the McHenry County landscape is checkered with corn and soybean commodity farms and urban sprawl. But tucked into the hills and hollers, are remnants of a time when small farms dominated the landscape.

Cindy Nawiesniak is stamping the name of her farm, “Freedom Organix” on a stack of egg cartons as we pull up. She purchased the farm in 2005 in pursuit of a life that would involve her love of animals. Even though her official residence is about 50 miles away in Barrington, she arrives at the farm every day to tend to her flock of nearly 300 heritage breeds of poultry and a handful of heifers.

Turkeys, ducks, and geese run around our feet as she takes us to visit the chicken coops that are set out in the thick green pasture. She is raising unusual varieties like the Araucana hen which lays greenish blue eggs, the uniquely coiffed Sebastopol geese and the Bronze Broad Breasted turkey.

“Did you know that fresh eggs last up to six months?” she asks me. I didn’t know that, but it hardly matters because they sell out faster than she can raise them. Although livestock is the focus of the farm, Cindy is raising vegetables like kale, sunflowers and winter squash and she anticipates that her vegetable offerings will expand in the upcoming years.

Next we head to Pine Row Farm, Don Larson’s place. It’s actually in a suburb of Rockford, and here in this hamlet it seems that all the neighbors share a penchant for kitchen gardens and chicken coops on a small scale. Larson’s five-acre property is full of activity with two lush acres of vegetable crops, chicken coops, a few goats, and a horse.

Don, a tall man who wears his overalls like he was born in them explains that he is not yet a full time farmer and he still maintains his job as a music professor at Rock Valley College. “I’m still on a learning curve,” he claims, though he has been farming for five years.

Don is at the center of Tomorrow’s Harvest. He has a big and organized barn that serves as a hub for his fellow CSA partners. They each bring their bounty here to be distributed to the members of the CSA. The day we visit is packing day. I imagine him in a few hours, conducting the CSA box assembly, directing dancers in a musical, as all four partners sort their collective harvest of vegetables into customer boxes. I am sorry that we will miss it.

But we have a tight schedule and are off again this time to visit Michael Keefe whose Mighty Sprouts Farm has resisted the forces of sprawl. Just around the corner from a Starbucks, it’s a charming postage stamp

Pictured top to bottom: Cindy Nawiesniak, Don Larson, Michael Keefe. At right: John Logli.

Photos by Greg Loehou

sized property dotted with old farm buildings in excellent condition and five acres of cropland surrounded by trees.

Michael is sorting through plastic trays full of unusual heirloom variety tomatoes as we pull up. He and his family are new to the area, having just moved from Colorado last year. Like many other new agrarians, he does not farm full time and spends his other life as a part time environmental engineer. He represents a new multi-hybrid, the urban/rural, professional/farmer. And why not?

For Michael, farm work has an appeal that largely stems from his desire to feed his family good food. "I grow food that I know my children will eat," he says. He takes us on a tour of his newly planted perennial crops like asparagus, blackberries, gooseberries, apples and pears and annual crops of heirloom tomatoes, fingerling potatoes, radishes, squash, and an experimental mushroom log. He is proud of his acreage, but since this is his first year we talk about the possibility that things will change quite a bit over time. As we leave, Michael sends us off with goodie bags of delicious pink and green zebra tomatoes and a handful of basil that perfumes the car for the rest of the afternoon.

At our last stop we visit John Logli at Brookwood Farm in Cherry Valley, just down the road and across the river. He is the only full time farmer of the group and, like many other new farmers, it has been a gradual transition, going from business owner to full time farmer.

The farm is situated on 30 scenic acres next to the meandering Kishwaukee River surrounded by a forest preserve and old Victorian homes on adjacent property. Although he has been here for three years, he is growing vegetables for the first time on 1.5 acres on a big field in front of his house.

We take quick tour and he shows us rows of spinach, lettuce, carrots, zucchini, summer squash, and winter squash, 100 percent of which will go to the CSA. He then points to several rows of corn that haven't quite made it and says, "Those will probably end up more for the birds than the CSA members." Farming is a combination of luck

and skill. Even though the Rockford native has always had a green thumb, he still feels like he is learning how to farm.

Eager to get to Don's barn to start packing the CSA boxes, John shows us his already packed car and a cooler full of summer squash that will make its way onto the shareholders' tables over the next few days.

With dust rising from the gravel road behind us, we leave his farm and head back to Chicago while the sun is still high.

As Tomorrow's Harvest's first season winds down, the four CSA partners will have winter to assess the business and start planning for 2009. "We've had great customer feedback so far," John says. "People seem to really like the variety of produce we offer." Michael sees the future niche of the CSA in specialty heirloom varieties like tomatoes.

There's room for growth and that's just the way they like to see it. ☺

Lynn Peemoeller has her hands in the dirt right along with the farmers she supports through her work as an independent consultant on sustainable agriculture projects. She is also on the board of directors for Slow Food Chicago. To watch a video of this interview called Tomorrow's Harvest CSA go to: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksA8OZeQSHU

Last summer, in its first year, Tomorrow's Harvest delivered more than 40 shares—boxes brimming with fresh produce weekly—to locations throughout Rockford.



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