



VOICES FROM THE FIELD

GRINNELL HERITAGE FARM:

A Soggy Situation, But Not Without Hope

STORY AND PHOTO BY ANDREW DUNHAM

In the Autumn, 2007 issue of Edible Iowa River Valley, writer Brian Morelli met Grinnell farmer Andrew Dunham in his story “Grinnell’s Grip on Local Food.” Although not in the direct path of flooding rivers, the farm was inundated by excessive rains and swelling ground water. We asked Andrew to tell us about how this season’s severe weather impacted his business, his customers and his vision for Grinnell Heritage Farm.

Rarely do I get the opportunity to so publicly gripe about the weather, so when approached to write about the weather difficulties associated with farming we have faced here in Grinnell over the past nine months, I couldn’t refuse. My wife, Melissa and I own and operate Grinnell Heritage Farm, Inc, a transitioning-to-organic diversified vegetable operation. I am a fifth-generation farmer on our 151-year-old family farm, and I’ve been farming it since 2006.

The local foods movement has treated us well. We started 2008 with a record-breaking 109 subscribers to our CSA program. We had plans to vend at markets in Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, and Grinnell. We were also planning to sell directly to seven local institutions and grocers during high season, including the Mayflower Home (a retirement community in Grinnell), New Pioneer Co-op, and Grinnell College. We also had visions of putting in a roadside stand and possibly even making enough money to support our family from our farm income.

When we were preparing the farm for wintering last year, we were looking forward to these plans. Our vegetable fields sit at the top of a watershed and

receive no runoff from other places so we had no expectations of excess moisture. We were just doing the things we normally do once the growing season ends: such as mulching the garlic and onions, digging root crops, and replacing fence.

Then the autumn rains came, saturating the soils as we went into winter. December’s early winter snows melted in January and refroze into a thick sheet of ice winter: killing over 95 percent of our wintering spinach field and nearly half of our mulched onions. Then, late winter snows covered all of our vegetable beds and left a snowdrift nearly 10 feet tall north of our greenhouse. That drift covered our designated leek bed, and since it didn’t melt until early April, our plantings were delayed by four weeks.

In late March, we decided to start seeding transplants in the greenhouse. Because temperatures were record-breakingly low this spring, we had to continue heating the greenhouse through mid-May which meant additional heating bills. In a typical year, we plant onion seedlings and spinach outdoors in mid-April. But this year, we couldn’t even get in the field until late-April/early-May. Unusually low temperatures and saturated soil left the wet ground overly clumpy and compacted soils when tilled. By June 2, we had planted all of our *cucurbits* (*cucurbits* are members of the cucumber family, including squash, melons, cucumbers, etc.), but the seeds rotted in the ground when it started raining again. This time for 12 straight days.

Between June 2 and June 24, we got more than 12 inches of rain. When it stopped, we had lost many of our carrots, nearly all of our salad and arugula

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seedings, sweet corn, and many others. Onions and leeks that had been planted in already wet soils sat in water for days on end during the rains. Our greenhouse flooded with three to five inches of water. We resorted to running a sump pump for both the fields and the greenhouse. It ran for over four days and was pumping roughly eight gallons a minute. We also dug ditches to divert the water. But our early greenhouse tomato plants had already lost two flower sets each, reducing our greenhouse tomato yield by over 1200 pounds.

When it was all over in early July, the fields did dry out. But the farm looked like a moonscape with six acres of once fertile, rich land now ugly, compacted soil with huge cracks. We have since replanted what we could and are trying desperately to catch up on weeding. However, our market and commercial sales have suffered greatly, our CSA boxes look quite different than we planned, and the roadside stand is being put on hold until next year. Our county, Poweshiek, has been declared a disaster (as have so many others) and we have begun filing paperwork with Farm Service Agency to make us eligible for any federal farm relief package. We are also trying to recoup some of our loss through disaster relief programs. This channel is easier for conventional row crop farmers to navigate than vegetable farmers because there is federal crop insurance for corn and soybeans and doing the field mapping and associated paperwork for these big crops is much easier than for a diversified farm like ours.

Although our expansion plans have been put on hold for this season and things are looking slightly different than we had planned, we'll have to crunch financial numbers this winter to see what we can do for next year. In the meantime however, we are still very hopeful about the future and at least our chard is still dry and happy, and more importantly, available for sale!

As Edible Iowa River Valley was going into production in late July, Grinnell Heritage Farms took on another seven inches of rain in less than a week. This destroyed a bumper, replanted arugula crop, rotted carrots, and allowed weeds to run rampant over beets. Yet, Andrew remained optimistic. "Every farmer has a year like this," he said with almost a chuckle. "We'll make it through."

When asked what can people do to help farmers like him, Andrew has a simple answer: Buy your CSA share for next year early—preferably before Christmas. This will give farmers like Andrew a much needed cash infusion and a plan for the growing season. "We are taking care of our CSA members first," Andrew says. "They are our future."

Grinnell Heritage Farm
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A GROWING market!

Market Info

May-October
Wed: 5:30-7:30 pm
Sat: 7:30-11:30 am

Lower Level of Chauncey
Swan Parking Ramp &
Chauncey Swan Park,
across from City Hall on
East Washington Street

2008 Market Events

Opening Day Celebration
Sat. May 3
Chef demo, Master Gardeners,
compost demo, live music,
Art in the Park.
FREE gift to shoppers

Market Music
Wed & Sat, June – August
(sponsored by UI Community Credit Union)

Monthly Chef Demonstrations
First Saturday of each month
(sponsored by Edible Iowa River Valley)

Kids Day
Sat. August 23
Live Music, Art in the Park
Kids Games

Taste of Market
Wed, Sept. 3
5-7 pm
Live music and samples of the
Market Vendors' produce &
baked goods

Motley Cow Café
*Serving seasonal fare with local &
organic ingredients since 1999.
Now at a new location.*

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