

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

8/27/2014

A Passion for Farming

Anne-Marie Hardie



It was 1945. The Giffen family had just purchased a plot of land in Minesing, Ontario, to use as a dairy farm. Jim Giffen grew up on his parents' farm, learning about farming through his father and majoring in agriculture at the University of Guelph.

More than 400 miles away on a small farm in Michigan, Maureen was also immersed in agriculture, growing vegetables with her family and selling them at their roadside market. After college, Maureen left farming to work as a business developer for Telus Mobility. She didn't return to farming until she met Jim and the two decided to begin their next adventure at Edencrest, Jim's family farm.

Pictured: Jim and Maureen Giffen started Edencrest Farms after they married and have been sharing their passion for farming ever since.

"We got married at Christmastime, and a week later, somebody gave us a book about CSAs and asked if we would do it for 10 of her friends," said Maureen. "That's how we got started and we thought, 'Well, if we can do 10 families, we can do 20.' So I think we did 21 our first year and then it went up to 50, and now this year, we have 202."

It was the CSA business model that originally attracted Maureen to begin this farm, growing vegetables for families that invested directly in the program.

"I didn't want to work forever in a corporate environment, but the farm had to be financially sustainable so two of us could work from home," said Maureen.

Over the years, Maureen has discovered that each person has a different reason for being part of a CSA farm. Some join for the organic food, others want local, while other individuals are looking for the farm experience.

This year marks the ninth year that the summer CSA has been in full production, providing approximately 40 organically certified vegetables to their members. In 2010, the Giffens started a winter CSA, offering customers both storage crops and freshly grown greens using a passive greenhouse system throughout the colder season.

Today, Edencrest Farms is no longer a dairy farm, but continues to be the home of several animals, including Angus cows bred for their beef, and chickens. Part of the land is now designated for growing grain, including hay for the cattle, wheat, barley and oats. The barley and wheat, like the other produce on the farm, are organically certified. When the first wheat truck arrived last year, Maureen was excited, looking forward to being able to expand the selection of organic, GMO-free foods locally. She quickly learned that the flour was being shipped out of the country. Maureen shares that both the local and organic food movement, although growing, have a long way to go.

This limited demand is partially the reason that Jim and Maureen sell produce at an all-organic market 50 miles away, in Richmond Hill, Ontario, instead of their local farmer's market.

When you're doing an all-organic market, the people come there because that's what they want," said Maureen. "There's no sense of competing with the conventional guys that can sell it cheaper and try to convince people to buy our organic over conventional when you have a whole market of people that that's all they want, and they want you, and they really respect you, and they rely on you."

Connecting to her customers is extremely important to Maureen, making farming well worth the effort. Families often come to the farm not only to pick up the food, but also to check on both the animals and watch the produce grow.

"At least once a week, there's a child that wants to stay longer and I think that's great," said Maureen. "I hope that down the road when they get older, that they will remember that this is where food really comes from and not be taken in by the companies that are trying to grow food in a lab."

Running an organic CSA, shares Maureen, means that you have to prepare for the unexpected, whether it's a crop surplus to the lack of warm evenings delaying the warmer weather crops like tomatoes, peppers and eggplants.

To manage pests, Edencrest Farms uses both companion planting and will hand remove insects from the plants. If there's a bad infestation—like the cucumber beetle of a few years past—Maureen feels that the loss of a crop is just part of what comes with an organic CSA. Wildlife is one of her bigger challenges. Currently, they have bears that are a fan of sweet corn. The local wildlife control recommended killing the mother bear, however, Maureen came up with an alternative solution: She planted additional corn, enough for her business and her nonpaying guests, the bears.

Each year, Jim and Maureen have an experiment. This year, it's looking at the viability of growing Asian vegetables to meet a currently unmet demand in the area. Last year, it was finding a more efficient way to wash and spin lettuce.

“We tried one of those front load washers for spinning lettuce. We thought that this front load washer could spin massive bags of lettuce at the same time,” said Maureen. “We get the lettuce all picked, washed and into the drum. We spun the lettuce and the machine juiced it. This was a bad idea.” However, the vegetable washer they purchased that same year was worth its weight in gold, saving hours of scrubbing time.

One of Maureen’s concerns is that there has been a decrease in the amount of individuals willing to commit to the farming lifestyle. She shared that even in the rare event that they are away from the farm, it usually involves driving to look at new equipment or to look at another farm. In the future, Maureen believes that farming may become more of a community initiative, with a few families working together to take care of the produce and livestock.

“Farming, in a lot of people’s view, is a very romantic business to be in—the birds chirping and at night, just sitting on your porch petting the dog and looking out over your land. That is not how it happens,” said Maureen. “It’s something you have to love, but yet, it is a business, so it’s somewhere between a passion and a business, and you have to keep a balance of that, otherwise if you let it be too much passion, you’ll go broke.” **GT**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.