

Adding Horticulture to an Already Diversified Farm

Amanda Ellis-Thurber

Lilac Ridge Farm

264 Ames Hill Rd. Brattleboro, VT 05301
Tel (802) 257-0985 Email: Thurber@sover.net

Lilac Ridge Farm is a family-run, multi-generation, diversified farm. When I joined the Thurber family as an employee first in 1995, Beverley and Stuart Thurber, my now mother and father in-law were operating a 60 cow dairy, 1600 tap sugar bush, 5 acre Christmas tree lot, timber harvest and firewood business. In the spring of 1996 Ross, my now husband and I planted a 1/2 acre market garden to provide the produce and flowers for our wedding that September. The market garden was a success, and has now blossomed into a 5 acre market garden with 1 acre in cupflowers, and new to this year, pick your own pumpkins. We also have a planned commercial blueberry planting for spring of 2004.

This presentation will go over some of the joys and pitfalls of adding horticulture to an already diversified farm. Also, as my own addition, will be some discussion of the joys and chaos when you add young children to an already diversified farm that includes horticulture.

The way it works on our farm is that each member of the farm partnership contributes significantly to his/her part of the farm operation, with of course a lot of overlap. For example, though my mother in-law, Beverley is principally in charge of the books and the Christmas tree operation, she does most any job: baling hay, milking, fencing, washing produce. This is the same for all of us. Whatever the seasonal job emphasis, i.e.: haying, sugaring, squash harvest, we all strive to foster the success of that particular job.

Below is a general list of our farm jobs, when we do them, and who on the farm does them

Bookkeeping: all year for all parts of the farm operation
Beverley (my mother in law)

Horticulture: Seasonal: March-late November 5 acre diversified vegetable and cut flower operation. Greenhouse 21'x48' poly tunnel for spring starts primarily. Organic, not certified. Markets: 2 farmer's markets, wholesale to 3 restaurants, food coop, wholesale flower sales and weddings

Amanda (me) with 1 full time (5days 7:30AM-4:00PM) March-October employee,
1 full time June-August employee
1 part time (2-3 days) May-August employee

Ross (my husband): plowing

Beverley: washing produce during thin labor times and co-running the farmer's market stands

Dairy: all year 60 cow milking herd Holstein and Brown Swiss. Tie stall pipeline milking barn. Cows milked 5:00AM and 4:00PM Feeding: Summer, Fall: Intensive management grazing, Winter, Early spring mixed ration feeding in our free stall

Ross(my husband) and Stuart (my father in law) with 1 evening milker 5days/ week , every other Sunday in summer and fall.

Auxiliary chores: all year. calves, heifers
Ross and Stuart

Forage Production: Seasonal: June-November 17 acres silage corn, 110 acres hay: 700 round bales and 9000 square bales, 60 acres pasture
Ross and Stuart with occasional part time help

Sugar making: Seasonal: February-April. setup: hanging pipeline, tapping, gathering, boiling
Everyone (Ross, Amanda, Stuart, Beverley) and other family and neighbors

Timber harvest: 420 acres woodland, 25,000 board feet harvested per winter starting usually in January

Ross, Stuart, Shabir (my brother in law) Amanda

Firewood: 26 cords for 3 households and 25 cords for sugar wood
Everyone (mostly Ross)

Christmas trees: Seasonal: marketing December, planting April, trimming July, sold directly from farm.

Beverley and Stuart (Ross and Amanda harvest)

Head spinning yet? Mine is.

So, how do we make it work without going crazy?

1. Passion. For our work, and our farm and our land.
2. The farm evolved, and will continue to do so. We have an ethic we work around which is to start small, with a low but reasonable amount of capital start up cost and a lot of hard work. For example, I originally ran the market garden business as a sole proprietorship, and used my own money resources to finance the startup capital expenses (4000 total). After 2 years, we made the market garden part of the whole farm
3. Our operation fits our land base. The farm is 600 acres, 180 open land for crop and forage production.
4. In order to work well as a group, we all need something to be “in charge of”.
5. The joy of machine multitasking and overlap (for a list of our tractors see p.). We think it is great to use equipment for a diversity of purposes. For example, our Ford 4100 is used for cultivation, wood splitting, raking hay, disking, you name it.
6. The financial earnings of a horticultural business are readily apparent and often cash (from farmer’s market). Because the dairy has always been the principle money earner on the farm, it was surprising when the market garden started keeping the farm financially up when dairy prices dropped to the low levels that they were this summer.

The challenges:

1. Time off (especially with the dairy). We never can go away as a group, but each individual family takes time away.

2. When one seasonal job flows into another or if weather doesn't hold out for adequate job cleanup, storage and maintenance areas can get messy.
3. When we are busy, we are really busy. A "farmathon" we call it. This takes a lot of physical and mental stamina.
4. Household jobs get deferred.
5. The biggest challenge this year for me was managing the gardens and our children. We have two young children; Isabella age 4 and Henry age 10 months. Young children take patience and time, something that "in the thick of it" is difficult to muster.
6. Finances. When one enterprise is earning good profit, it often plays out that another one is not. This situation happened this year. No, our farm was not losing money at the rate of other dairy farms, but for all of the work we were doing, we weren't getting ahead either. Double the work does not add up to double the profit in many cases.

In the slides you see many situations where we are working with our children. This is another area of farm diversity. Balancing the management of a farm and of family life is not easy. We continue to try to figure it out.

Here are some of the guidelines we use

1. Another farmer friend of mine said, "Your kids are your most important crop." This is something that we repeat when the demands of our work are all around us.
2. Hire help, no matter how small your operation. Of course for a while I thought that I was the only person who could do a job the "right" way. I soon learned that I was incorrect, and that I have a lot to learn from people who work for me.
3. Never get "inconvenienced". As soon as you start thinking, "this is terribly inconvenient to be carrying a 21 pound baby on my back while I'm moving this mulch hay," you lose moral. Just have fun. Your body can get used to anything. If the kids are willing to go along, do it! Our son loves being outside no matter what the weather, because he's been with me in the field all season.
4. Create a child friendly field/barn environment. Foster independence by creating jobs for them to do as soon as they want to.
5. Create alternatives to time in the field with Mom and Dad. When Isabella our 4 year old was 1, she went to day care 2 mornings a week. This was much needed space for me, and great socialization for her. We take seriously making some off farm plans for our children. We think it is healthy.
6. Since we are in a family farming situation, there is usually a grandparent or aunt or uncle willing to play for awhile with one of our children. This is so great and helpful. But of course, not everyone has it as easy.
7. It seems to me that we are at one of the easier stages of parenting and farming because we are still pretty much in charge of the family agenda.

Our farm financial philosophy and reality

A diversified farm like ours has a diversity of farm accounting to deal with. On the income end we have on farm sales, farmer's market sales, accounts receivable from wholesale vegetables and flowers, wholesale maple syrup sales, wedding accounts which require charging sales tax, direct deposit for our milk check, log sales, Christmas tree sales. During the market garden season, Beverley must make deposits weekly. Expenses are more intense at some times of the year than other times of year. The good thing about being a diversified farm is that we rarely have to take out operating loans for spring fertilizer and seed costs because our cash trickle is continuous.

One difference between our diversified farm without horticulture and with is probably the payroll. We employ more people. Though our market garden is labor intensive, it is not capital intensive in the equipment area. Adding horticulture allowed us to add income using mostly existing equipment.

Have no expectations.

We are constantly surprised by our success. We do not create enterprise budgets, or figure how many bunches of beets we are going to sell at a farmer's market before we sell them. Just as we can't predict a sugaring season, we can't predict a market garden season exactly. To our family, that is the fun. We are not micro managers by nature. We understand the things on the farm that we can control, and the things that we cannot.

So we control the things we can, by creating efficient systems for doing them and leave up to God the things that we cannot control. We are a happy family and happy farmers.