

Our First Five Years in Farming

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Farming is my third career choice having been a teacher and a small business owner for numerous years. I was raised in the Midwest on a small piece of land where we grew all our own food. It was there that I learned and loved growing food. Over 10 years ago I decided that I wanted to farm and began reading, attending conferences and workshops and visiting farms to see if my dream could be a viable way to make a living. While looking for land, I gained some experience apprenticing and working with other farmers. Five years ago, with the help of two land trusts and numerous other people, we purchased two adjacent parcels of land totaling 18 acres that once had been part of a larger farm and established Ol'Turtle Farm. We are mainly a CSA farm marketing our excess to local markets and farm stands and donating to two shelters.

The cropland was approximately 12 acres. The infrastructure included an 1800 farmhouse with very little updating, two barns, one in very poor condition and the other structurally sound but needing a new roof and siding.

Year #1 (1999)

We took possession of the property in September 1998, and immediately began work on the main barn and put up a 19' X 96' greenhouse. The cropland was in hay and the farmer currently using the land took the hay off in late October. I divided the field space into two 5-acre parcels with a small 2-acre triangle on one side. In late October I had the north field rough plowed in preparation for the following season.

At that time my equipment consisted of a cub lowboy with cultivators. My farm plan involved working with permanent beds so the first purchases were a 4' Imants spader, an International 274 hi mount cultivating tractor that was capable of carrying the spader, a Buddingh basketweeder and an old planet Jr push seeder. I also bought a DR Brush mower to handle the headways and to help push back the brush that was moving into the fields.

Originally I had planned to start with a small market garden selling at farmers' markets and to local stores but the group of people who helped with acquiring the land were so enthusiastic about the CSA that I was gently nudged into starting with a 60 share CSA. Excess produce was sold to a local grocery, health food store and neighboring farm stand. Considerable produce was donated to two shelters. The labor force consisted of myself, one apprentice and several volunteers from the membership and surrounding community. In the spring of 1999, a "for hire" farmer, composted and disced the north field in preparation for planting. We then spaded into permanent beds the first 5 acres. We planted approximately 4 acres of vegetables. Management of the rest of the fields was done by the "for hire" farmer. I contracted him to plow, seed into cover crop and mow the remaining cropland. I did not have the equipment or the time necessary to handle it. We started all our transplants in the greenhouse and planted them by hand. Most of the crops were transplants though we did direct seed carrots, beets, greens, peas and beans.

1999 was a very dry year and though we had been granted permission from the Conservation Commission to pump from the brook behind the farm we did not have money for irrigation equipment and as it was the brook went dry that year. We did irrigate, however, two times that season with the help of a neighboring farmer's pipe and the water department hooking us up to a fire hydrant. We had to pay for our water.

Distribution for the CSA was set up in a small area of the Big Barn, which was nearly completed. We had stabilized the main structure, replaced the roof, replaced siding on two sides, built new doors and brought in electricity.

Year #2 (2000)

The south field had been seeded in oats and peas the previous Fall by the "for hire" farmer and was ready early spring to be disced and composted by him. We then proceeded to spade that field into beds in preparation for the season's crops. The north field was in rye and vetch planted by hand the previous fall.

Part of the winter months had been spent researching equipment. Since the north field was now in permanent beds, we needed a way to manage the cover crops on that field. I purchased a 4' flail mower so that we could mow each bed individually. This would allow me also to mow old crop beds as they finished and put them into cover. I also bought a Kifco irrigation reel and layflat hose. Our only available reliable water source was town water. After much research I had a 4" line brought onto farm property. The Kifco reel is small enough that I could manage it myself when necessary. The last piece of equipment was a flat bed trailer that was adjusted to fit our bed size. This became a amazing time and labor saver for moving things around the farm but also in harvesting as we could take it down the beds to pick up barrels of melon, baskets of onions, barrels of winter squash and baskets of potatoes.

The CSA consisted of 100 shares and the excess was sold to local outlets and given to two shelters. This season I had one apprentice and a part-time farm hand that worked 3 days a week. We also had volunteers from the membership and the local community.

The remaining field area consisted of a 2-acre triangle, which had been in oats, peas and vetch. When the vetch was in flower, we mowed it. The "for hire" farmer disced that section. Part of it was planned for a u-pic raspberry section. We cut out the beds for the raspberries with the spader and had the remaining area between beds seeded into a permanent grass. The beds were planted in oats and peas.

The CSA distribution was once again in the Big Barn. We began work on the Far Barn, stabilizing it, replacing the roof and putting in a cement floor.

Year #3 (2001)

Year three heralds the beginning of managing the whole farm. All the crop areas had been put into permanent beds so only our equipment would fit the system. This meant that one major equipment purchase had to be a manure spreader. We worked with Millcreek to adapt a spreader that would fit our beds and that would drop, rather than throw, compost onto just the bed area. This saved us a lot of compost that was not needed in the pathways. I also purchased gauge wheels for the flail mower to run in the pathways as the roll bar that was originally on the mower compacted the beds. Our third

equipment purchase was an old potato digger. Just could not dig anymore potatoes by hand.

Our rotation this year brought us back to the North field. It had been planted in oats and peas the preceding August. Cover crops were being planted by hand with a bucket of seed and then basketweeded in and rolled with a pipe dragged on the back of the tractor.

The CSA consisted of 125 shares and we sold to two groceries, a farm stand and gave food to two shelters. The work force consisted of a full time experienced apprentice and a part time experienced farm hand who worked 3 days a week. We also had our volunteers. This season we also added a few laying hens to the farmyard.

In the fall of 2001, we began re-siding the Far Barn and during the winter we enclosed an area in the barn for distribution and insulated a room to provide a cold storage space.

Year # 4 (2002)

This year marked a major change in our rotation. Instead of moving back to the South Field we divided the field space into 30 bed sections. This was based on the capacity of our irrigation equipment. In the fall of 2001 as we began seeding beds to cover crops, sections were determined and the areas to be fallow were seeded in rye and vetch. The areas to be cropped in 2002 were seeded in oats and peas. We ended up with a section of crop between two sections of cover crop creating more diversity and closer proximity for beneficial habitat.

Equipment purchases for 2002 included a Kennco waterwheel transplanter which fit our bed width and could be changed from a single row to a double row quite easily. As up until now we had done all the transplanting by hand, this was a major labor saver. I also bought a 4' Shaper Bros. drop spreader to spread our cover crop and to drop gypsum. Again this was a major time saver as all the cover crop had been put down by hand.

Added to the mix this season were a few more layers and 3 lambs. The chickens were in a mobile coup. They and the lambs were moved around the fallow cover crop areas confined in an electric fence. They provided some cover crop management and dropped some fertility for us as well. At the end of the season the chickens stayed but the lambs moved on to greener pastures.

The CSA was 135 shares this season and we continued to sell the excess. The Far Barn was not finished but the distribution area was done enough to use so the CSA was moved to that area. The siding and doors were finished on the barn late fall and a porch roof was added to provide a covered wash station and room for the u-pic information station. It also added space to the distribution area where people could congregate without congesting the pick up area. Our labor force this season consisted on a full time assistant farm manager and an assistant grower who worked 4 _ days. Volunteers are always a part of the mix.

Year #5 (2003)

The concentration this year has been on fine tuning the systems—better planning, better successions, better methods to managing remay, better cultivation set-ups, more efficient methods.

I did not buy any new equipment but we did put down a drip irrigation system on the raspberry beds. Reaching them with the reel is difficult and irrigating the grass areas is not needed. We retired our 12 old hens and got 30 adolescent layers, 15 chicks and 25 meat birds. The laying hens are a “keeper” as we can sell far more eggs than we can manage hens. The meat birds were a trial, which I do not think we will do again in the near future.

The CSA was 146 shares this season again selling the excess to local outlets and giving to two shelters. We did develop a Farm Market to go with the CSA. The Market sells other local products including bread, milk, cheese, ice cream, butter, various fruit and our eggs. This has been very well received by our members.

This season’s work force includes a full time assistant manager who is a returning apprentice and a returning assistant grower working 4 _ days. The assistant grower has also taken on the responsibilities of harvest manager and farm market manager. It is my hope to develop this consistent work crew. Volunteers were also an important part of our labor force. Some volunteers come from our membership while others are just interested persons.

We are continuing with this strip farming of 30 bed sections of crop next to 30 beds of cover crop. We have been experimenting with different cover crops and combinations of cover crops to add diversity and hopefully reduce management.

As we end year five, we look forward to the challenges and changes coming for year six.