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Cover photo:
Newborn calf at Devon Point Farm in Woodstock, CT.  Photo by John Suscovich
Cornell Small Farms Program Update

Top 8 Priorities for Small Farm Investment

You might recall on February 28th of 2012, the Cornell Small Farms Program teamed up with Cornell Cooperative Extension to host the 2012 Small Farms Summit. This statewide meeting provided a venue for small farms to gather and prioritize opportunities to increase the health and vitality of the small farm sector. After a lengthy process coming through responses, we have now published the recommendations. Download the report at http://smallfarms.cornell.edu/projects/summit/. We encourage you to print a copy to bring to a town hall meeting, a producer group, or a legislator. Choose a ‘recommended action’ that inspires you, or generate your own creative approach to addressing a priority area. Start building collaborations that can tackle the complexity of the issue. Cite the report as justification when applying for funding to support your project. Stay in touch. We’d like to share any outcomes of your work.

From Grazing to Goat Marketing, New Grant Program Generates Resources

The Cornell Small Farms Program is pleased to announce a variety of excellent new resources generated from project recipients of the 2012 ‘Small Farm Grants Program.’ This program offers up to $5000 per year to organizations in New York that present compelling projects to serve and support small farms. This year, four projects were funded. They include 1) A new series of 12 “How-to-Graze” videos 2) A study assessing small farmers’ success selling to distributors 3) An initiative to expand ‘Work-place CSA’s’ 4) A makeover to www.sheepgoatmarketing.info, a website that connects sheep and goat producers to markets. An additional project to support a small dairy field day series during Summer, 2012 was also funded. Detailed reports reflecting project successes and lessons learned, as well as educational materials for any of the initiatives, are available at http://smallfarms.cornell.edu/projects/grants/.

Two Farm Financial Management Online Courses Offered January 2013

The old joke goes, “How to make a small fortune in farming? Start with a large one.” For many farmers, this hits too close to home to be funny. Whether you just getting started or have been farming for a while, the Cornell Small Farms Program is offering two online courses this January to give you the confidence and tools to take control of your farm finances.

BF 104: Financial Recordkeeping is an introductory course designed for those who don’t yet have well-established systems for tracking farm financial records. It will help you learn what records to keep, how to set up a system in either Excel or Quickbooks, and how to generate and analyze financial reports to get a picture of your farm’s financial health. BF 104 starts Jan. 14, 2013. More info is available at http://nebeginningfarmers.org/online-courses/all-courses/bf-104-financial-records/

BF 203: Holistic Financial Planning goes beyond the basics for farmers who already have some financial systems in place, but want to increase the profitability of their operations. You will learn how to prioritize your investments in the farm, analyze and compare enterprises, and make your farm work for you. BF 203 starts Jan. 22, 2013. More info is available at http://nebeginningfarmers.org/online-courses/all-courses/bf-104-financial-records/

These 6-week courses include weekly live webinars featuring interactions with successful farmers and ag professionals, as well as readings, discussion forums, and homework assignments. Those who successfully complete a course receive a certificate from the Northeast Beginning Farmer Project. Course registration is $200, which will easily pay for itself in the knowledge you gain about how to manage your farm’s finances well.

Don’t hesitate - courses often fill quickly, and registration is only open until the course fills or one week before the start date, whichever happens first. So visit http://nebeginningfarmers.org/online-courses today and check out your options for learning some new farming skills online this Winter.

Message from the Managing Editor

Happy New Year! I hope many of you are getting some rest and enjoying looking through seed catalogues or planning for new infrastructure. With so much extreme weather the past two years (flooding followed by spring temperature fluctuation and then summer drought), now is the time to think through your farm systems and consider expanding the size of the pond or choosing more resistant crops.

Recently some farmer friends came over for dinner, and I was asking them how they fared with the lack of rain this past growing season. Their pond had run dry, but late enough in the harvest that their vegetable crops sailed through. In fact, they said it was their best season yet. I’m reassured, that despite the volatile weather patterns, farmers are finding it to adapt and continue to prosper.

Even if you’re not an animal farmer, I encourage you to read “A Four Dollar Grazing Chart” by Troy Bishop. He describes making it through the summer drought with very careful advanced planning and consideration of any ‘what if’ scenarios that might arise. He writes “For me, this visual chart reduced stress by constantly informing me of conditions on the ground to form battle plans weeks ahead of when I actually needed to speed up or slow down the rotation.” All of us could benefit from such planning, no matter what our enterprise.

As always, we love to hear from you. Drop us a line anytime!

Best wishes,

Violet

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Four Reasons to Take a Farm Business Class by Jessie Schmidt

As the outdoor growing season winds down, the notices about upcoming classes, courses, workshops and conferences for farmers start filling email inboxes. Sometimes it’s easy to see the value of these learning opportunities. You experienced a problem this season with soil management, pest control and a workshop appears that addresses the issue. However many courses and courses require a bigger investment of your time and focus on the aspects of your farm that are usually put in the low urgency category-planning analysis, assessing values and goals, and the other big picture items. Of course many of us tend to focus on the high urgency categories of our operations-that ‘putting out fires’ mentality is hard to escape when you are managing a highly complex biological system known as a farm.

So is it worth the time to take a class this winter? Can a class really make a difference in the development and success of your farm? Here are four reasons why taking a farm business class is a good investment in the future of your farm.

1. Proof is in the Planning - Whether you have a great farm business idea, or want to grow or change your current farm, good planning pays off. Getting clear on your goals and values, thinking through your strengths and weaknesses, making sense of the market place and how your plans translate into dollars is an investment of time and paper. Paper is cheap, time... maybe not so much. But wasting paper and time on an unproven idea is less risky than wasting money and time. Classes give you the opportunity to discover mistakes and assumptions and fully vet your plan, so you have confidence when you start filling email inboxes. Sometimes it’s easy to see the value of these learning opportunities. You experienced a problem this season with soil management, pest control and a workshop appears that addresses the issue. However many courses and courses require a bigger investment of your time and focus on the aspects of your farm that are usually put in the low urgency category-planning analysis, assessing values and goals, and the other big picture items. Of course many of us tend to focus on the high urgency categories of our operations—that ‘putting out fires’ mentality is hard to escape when you are managing a highly complex biological system known as a farm.

2. Money Matters - Like it or not, farms require money to operate. They might need a little or a lot, depending on scale and markets, but having access to capital to start and run your farm business is a key to its success. Farm business classes help you understand how much income your farm can generate, how much capital you will need to keep your farm humming, how to evaluate where you should invest your money on the farm (land? fencing? greenhouses? marketing?), and how to understand farm finances so you can make smart business decisions.

3. Gaining Focus off the Farm - Farms, like any business, take a lot of time and energy to start and maintain. It’s easy to get caught up in the day-to-day details and forget about the bigger picture. Farm business classes give you the time to concentrate on your whole business and access to experts who can offer input where you need it the most.
The Finances for a Small Organic Broiler Flock

by Mark Cannella

The expansion of production and markets for regional or locally produced poultry products has been a hot topic in recent state processing exemptions that allow small farms to conduct business has opened the door for many small start-ups or add-on poultry enterprises to enter the marketplace. In Vermont, there are many farms now operating through a 1,000 or less bird exemption. This regulation allows farms to produce and sell broiler chickens through certain market channels without requiring the birds to be processed in a state or federally inspected facility. What are the business prospects for a farm seeking to sell up to 1,000 organic broilers? Are these farms viable stand-alone businesses or are they better left as add-on enterprises to an existing farm? Spend enough time with any farm business adviser and you get the standard yet thoughtful response, “It depends.” It certainly does depend on a number of factors, but the UVM Extension Farm Viability program set out in summer 2012 to develop basic poultry budgets to get a better answer. We reviewed finances with several farmers, reviewed older studies and vetted the template with agricultural specialists to develop an “average farm” financial projection for an organic 1,000 bird operation. The conclusion is that it still depends, but at least now we tell you how much it depends on and what to be watching out for.

Summary Financial Table for Year One: 1,000 Broilers

Financial performance for year one of an organic 1,000 bird operation showed a range of net cash income ranging from around $5,116 for a stand-alone operation (FARM A) to near $6,616 net cash income for an operation embedded into an existing business (FARM B). This net cash income describes real cash left in the owner’s pocket for an “owner draw” of profits to be re-invested in the business. This is both the paycheck for your labor and the profit (the return for your investment or risk). We did not include real estate payments or rental rates in this budget, so that is an additional item that might come from this net cash income. This is not to be confused with an “enterprise analysis” which takes certain steps to pro-rate non-cash factors (like depreciation that is an annual expense for an item that has more than a one year lifespan). Our model is a cash in - cash out model. In either case: a $5,116 cash payout or $6,616 cash payout, we can conclude that this is a very part time occupation. This is an important realization for smaller producers who are currently selling 300-500 birds per year. Even if you have found a way to earn a small income now, we can say with certainty that expansion of the operation to the 1,000 bird threshold in Vermont will not get you that much closer to achieving the full-time farm income that many people aspire to. Since this model assumes this is the first year, we have included the set-up of poultry housing into this budget as a one-time expense that won’t necessarily re-occur in year two. We expect cash based performance will improve in year two for this reason.

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<th>Key Assumptions</th>
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<td>Cost of Breeder Cobb 500 chicks</td>
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<td>Breeder Cobb 500 chicks</td>
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<td>Processing</td>
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<td>Processing Cost</td>
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<td>Net Cash Income</td>
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Our budget used a cost of $3.50 per bird for processing. This reflected a mix of real-world responses from people who paid up to $5.00 per bird or as low as $2.00 per bird when access labor was available. Basic math tells us that if the processing cost went from $3.50 to $5.00 per bird, then our projected net income of is reduced by $1,425 (we figure only 950 birds survive to processing). Consider your access to processing or what it will cost you to do the job.

Reasons from page 3

Where to Take a Farm Business Class

UVM Extension New Farmer Project - Classes focused on farm business development at locations across the state and also online for out-of-state participants. http://www.uvm.edu/newfarmer

Northeast Beginning Farmer Project - Many online classes, many with a production focus, for beginning farmers. http://nebeganfarmer.org/


Networking for New Opportunities - Ag based businesses can be isolating. Classes provide a rich environment for collaboration and support from other farmers, service providers and technical experts. By building these networks you are investing in the social infrastructure that you can rely on throughout your farm’s development.

So as you think about your plans for this winter, consider how a farm business class might support your farm’s success. Many classes are offered online to accommodate your schedule and location, or you can search for an in-person class with the organizations on left.

Jessie Schmidt is the Coordinator for Community & Agriculture Programs at UVM Extension and may be reached at newfarmer@uvm.edu or 802-223-2389 x203.

Mobile Pens at City Chicks Farm, Burlington, Vermont

Price points stand to have a significant impact on net cash income for this operation. Under our research, this operation gets 950 birds to slaughter with an average finish weight of 4.68 pounds each. That’s 4,453 pounds of meat. Every change of $0.25 per pound in price results in a swing of $1,113 up or down in net cash income. Prices under $4.00 in 2012 would result in a loss of money for the farms we studied. Price points matter, so make sure you revisit this often.

Now for the last number to write down, the impact of a change in feed price. For every increase of $100 per ton of feed ($2.50 per bag) your cost per pound of finished meat increases by about $0.20 per pound. Remember this calculation when you adjust your pricing for new feed prices in 2013. At $0.20 per pound, that hits net income with a decrease of $890 per year if you don’t adjust your prices. That’s real money!

I know that many of you are thinking these numbers don’t match your specific operation. That is why “it depends.” Estimates are just that, estimates. But you run the business and collect your own actual financials for the year. This budget model is built as a starting point for planning. You should take these templates and adjust them to reflect the reality for your business. To download details on this poultry budget and other farm business planning resources you can visit the UVM Extension Farm Viability website at: http://www.uvm.edu/extension/agriculture/?Page=farminviability.html

Mark Cannella is a farm business management specialist for UVM Extension and director if the UVM Extension Farm Viability business planning program.
The Cheney Letters: The Night the Willys Went Skinny-Dipping

78 year old Vermont farmer shares memoirs with Lindsay Debach, daughter of a Pennsylvania-based butcher, after reading her Small Farm Quarterly piece “Slaughter Daughter”

by Stewart Cheney

Introduction:
In late February of 2012 I received a letter bearing the name of Stuart Cheney. A native of Brattleboro, Vermont, Stuart wrote to tell me that he enjoyed my memoir piece “Slaughter Daughter” featured in the Winter, 2012 issue of this magazine. I was flattered and surprised to receive such a heartfelt message, especially in the increasingly rare form of a hand-written letter. In the months that followed, Stuart and I became pen-pals.

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I have a first cousin named Buddy. He lives in Roadsboro, Vermont and most every year Bud comes over to my house for a few weeks visit, and I go over to his house for a week in the summer. Well, my father had found me a nice car that belonged to a lady about how his father had been letting him drive to town and pick up a quart of orange soda, and we would share it - so we did. By the time we got there and bought the soda, and had a few swigs, it became about dark and we headed home. Bud began talking about how his father had been letting him drive his car so when he was 16 he would know how and could get his license. (There was no driver training back then.) So, I got it fired up and away we went.

The Willys was a line of automobiles produced by Willys-Overland Motors from 1937 to 1942.

“Yup,” I answered. “I’ll call my father.”

We dragged the car out behind the barn. I tinkered on it for a while and got it running the next summer. I was logging up to Halifax, and I drove it every day, but the radiator leaked so I had to put 5 gallons of water in to get up there and 6 more to get back. I would never be able to get the car inspected again.

Nothing was ever said about what happened or why. Case closed.

Stuart Cheney grew up on a 145 acre diversified farm near Brattleboro, VT. He resides on the farm in a small 5 room house built by his grandfather in 1940.

To read Lindsay Debach’s story, “Slaughter Daughter”, which inspired the Cheney-Debach correspondence, see http://small-farms.cornell.edu/quarterly/archive-2/winter-2012/
Farm Hack: A Community for Farm Innovation
by Kristen Loria

Started in 2011 by a team of farmers and engineers from the Northeast, Farm Hack is a project of the National Young Farmers’ Coalition in partnership with the Greenhorns. The start of Farm Hack came with an offer from MIT to host a teaching event that could connect ‘do-gooder’ engineers with farmer’s needs. Co-founders of NYFC, Severine Fleming and Ben Shute had been working to start up a blog for a project called “Farm Hack” and they jumped on the opportunity to launch a program at the world famous engineering school. Farm Hack has since evolved into a living open-source community for farmer-driven design collaboration.

And so it began... attendees of that first event were inspired to come to the second event; farmers, computer programmers, electrical designers, and engineers gathered again in New Hampshire to work on mapping out the website, the forums, and the methodology of our events, and building a strategic plan for the community. Now, a year later, they have been joined by core members of the community: Dorn Cox of Tuckaway Farms in NH, Rob Rock of Pitchfork Farm in VT, RJ Steinert, Drupal developer, Andy Wekin of Pedal Power, Chris Yoder of Van Gardens CSA and a few others are holding strong and working to develop more and better programming. We have now had 7 ‘Farm Hack’ gatherings across the Northeast and are starting to branch out into other formats, both online and in person.

Why Farm Hack?
Farmers have long been tinkering, designing and building farm technology on their farms and sharing it with neighbors, educating beginning farm-shop users, and connecting everyone involved in the goal of the project.

What is a “Farm Hack” Exactly?
A ‘Farm Hack’ is a gathering to build community, in-person and online. Today’s farmers rely on 21st century technology as well as the old fashioned method of conversation to learn what it takes to farm profitably and sustainably. Farm Hack follows this logic through discussion, demonstration, ‘show and tell’ at in-person events as well as through an online wiki and forum at farmhack.net. Through this accessible platform, we can include and support a community of not just farmers, but software developers, engineers, architects, machinists and backyard tinkerers that are able to pool their knowledge and resources and communicate and coordinate through online and physical meeting spaces.

Farm Hackers meet at regional Farm Hack events, discuss a new tool idea or adaptation, and draw up the beginnings of a design schematic and build plan. After continuing research, discussion and documentation through the online platform, collaborators can meet up once again to complete the build in those colder winter months, testing the design, making alterations and finalizing the tool by spring.

Along with all of the hard thinking and productivity, Farm Hacks always wind down with good food and good drink. This is an important ingredient, that the engineers and other, non-farm team mates understand clearly that this work isn’t about high pay per hour invested, instead it is about satisfying relationships, delicious food, resiliency, network-building, and collaboration.

To date, Farm Hack has hosted 8 events in the Northeast and the Midwest. Farm Hack MIT, Rhode Island School of Design, SUNY-ESF, New Hampshire, Iowa City, Essex NY/Intervale VT, Ithaca NY (with the Groundswell Center), and Brooklyn/Queens. For all Farm Hacks, we partner with local universities or non-profits as well as local farms and farmers. In keeping with the scrappy grassroots spirit of the Greenhorns and National Young Farmer’s Coalition, these partnerships ensure that each particular Farm Hack event is shaped by the needs of the that community, as well as its strengths.

FIDO, a Farm Hack Success Story
One Farm Hack success story is FIDO, a farmer-built electronic tool that can monitor greenhouse temperature, record greenhouse data, and alert the farmer to problems in the greenhouse via cell phone text message. FIDO is a project of Ben Shute (Hearty Roots Community Farm) and computer programmers Louis Thierry and RJ Steinert. The three met at Farm Hack NH, and came together over an idea for an automated arduino greenhouse monitor. Shute came to the event looking for a way to monitor greenhouse temperature and other conditions in a greenhouse located miles from his farm, and without the phone or internet connection usually required by such monitors. Thiery and Steinert proposed the arduino solution, and after continuing their research after the event, the three met up at Shute’s farm to do a test run of the build. The three also applied for and received a SARE research grant from the USDA to develop the tool. Shute now uses the monitor in his greenhouse operations, and the full documentation is posted on farmhack.net. Thierry is in the process of developing pre-made greenhouse monitors to sell to farmers, with the help of a Kickstarter grant.

The Future of Farm Hack
With the Farm Hack project, we hope to provide the spark and the structure for independent collaborative communities to develop and sustain at the local and regional level, while maintaining an online connection to a nationwide community of farm hackers. As with the tools that we prototype, adapt and document, Farm Hack itself is an open-source, evolving concept and framework. After each Farm Hack, we learn a bit more about how we can best facilitate the community and improve the process of design, documentation and dissemination.

This winter, we hope to buckle down on our projects, using the lull of cold weather to wrap up loose ends, return to the bright ideas brainstormed through the season, and document, document, document. Though Farm Hack is still a young community, we have a big vision for expanding the functionality of farmhack.net; growing our network of farm hackers, connecting farmers to seed money to develop and document their innovation ideas, and forming documentation fellows to preserve and share the vast number of tools, old and new, already in existence that can be of use to small farmers.

Find out more on past events, future events, and jump into the Farm Hack community at www.farmhack.net.

Kristen Loria is an organizer with Farm Hack. She may be reached at 807-351-0554 or kal52@cornell.edu

Photo by Kristen Loria
Let the Cattle do the Work!

by Eric Noel

I’ve been studying human behavior and personal development for over ten years now. We as humans have the amazing ability to think. No other creature known to man has this ability. This is a blessing and a curse. Especially when ego steps in. We, and everything in the universe, seek expansion and fuller expression. It’s human nature, a natural law of the universe. Now, you are probably wondering where I’m going with this, and I have to tell you, I am too. Just kidding! I think.

If you apply what I just wrote to anything we do or want to accomplish we tend to get in our own way because we let our ego step in. We as people, especially in our culture and in this day and age, think we are above carrying out our own agenda. It is understandable because we let our ego step in. If you think of doing more, it’s all about the timing and density of cattle per acre. Grass land in general likes higher density for short periods of time. Soil likes herd effect and trampled residual forage. The greatest increases come not from what you take, but from what you leave behind. Once these principles are understood amazing things begin to happen at ever increasing speed and abundance.

Let the Cattle do the Work! Biological mowing machine set at 600,000 lbs./acre

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If you have ever observed cattle grazing you will know that they can balance their own diet. They know that the bulk of the energy and nutrients are in the top of the plants. They only eat more if they are left too long in a paddock or don’t have enough in front of them and are allowed to back graze. All we have to do is to get the timing and density right, and they do all the work. No need for excessive hay making (or any at all depending on location) or clipping. The cattle are our best tool to manage grass land. I get credit for being a good steward, but all I do is watch cattle and move some fence around. I look for ways that the herd can do all aspects of soil regeneration, adding fertility, forage management, and seeding. You can accomplish all of these things without buying in any of them. This is what is so beautiful about this mode of management. It only has good byproducts. We don’t have to pay the workers. They pay us by converting the solar energy of forages to meat and milk. So it truly is a win-win. All things increase in this system. Soil is regenerated, increasing available nutrients for higher nutrient density in forages which boosts animal health and production. This adds to the bottom line with lower costs and higher profits. Side benefits include higher soil water capacity which helps in high precipitation areas by soaking up and storing more water in the soil, and in dry climates by retaining more moisture longer for quicker recoveries and higher forage volumes.

One of the keys that makes this system of grazing work so well is the high amount of residual forage. The goal is to leave 100% of the soil covered 100% of the time. By leaving 40-70% of the plant and allowing the cattle to trample it, this can be achieved. Most of the fertility to be used is from this plant material, not from what is coming out of the back end of the cow. As you graze in this fashion and continue to use it year after year, recovery periods for your forages go down and volumes and nutrient density go up. I have added one whole grazing cycle on my farm. You end up growing your farm vertically. Soil tillth and depth increases and you can add on more animals on the same acres without sacrificing health or production. You truly become one with the land. You can feel it expanding and growing stronger. It gives off a different energy and flow. You see it in the sward, and you see it in the animals. The cattle then in turn work harder for you. They get so well trained to the system and what they want and need that they will let you know when you are going off course or getting lazy.

Let things work on their own. Be patient. Watch the plants. Let them signal when the time is right. Don’t worry about making mistakes, it’s just feedback so you can make decisions and improve the next time. Grass and forages are very forgiving. Nature always wants to heal itself and expand.

We just have to let go and let it.

Eric Noel is an organic farmer, grazing and farm planning consultant, and coach. He lives in Northern, VT with his wife and two children. He can be reached at 802-752-8731 or ericnoel@hotmail.com

The backside of what high density grazing looks like

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The resulting trampled residue, looking across a paddock

Up close look at the amount of residue left behind
NEW FARMERS
The New American Farmer
Groundswell Center supports immigrants who want to farm in central New York

Are you a “New American” immigrant, with experience farming in your home country? Or do you work with refugees or other immigrants in your community who might be interested in small-scale farming?

If the answer is yes, the Groundswell Center for Local Food & Farming is looking for you. Groundswell provides hands-on training and support to beginning farmers in the Central NY region. Now, with support from the NYS Department of State (NY DOS), the Appalachian Regional Commission and Southern Tier East Regional Planning Development Board, Groundswell is developing new programs and resources especially aimed at helping immigrants to get started in farming.

Funding for this effort comes from the “New Americans Initiative” recently launched by NY DOS. The new funding will enable Groundswell to enhance outreach, training and farm business incubation for immigrant and refugee beginning farmers.

“We are proud to be partnering with Groundswell and others to fund a program that helps newcomers skilled in agricultural production realize their entrepreneurial dreams, while strengthening the Southern Tier local agricultural economy,” said Secretary of State Cesar Peralles. “Like previous waves of new Americans, these newcomers are engines for economic growth in our state. By working with this population to fill education gaps, locate capital, and identify property suitable for agriculture projects, new Americans will increase employment opportunities in the region, and preserve the region’s agricultural lands.”

Beginning this spring Groundswell will offer customized training in farm business management, production and marketing, as well as personalized mentoring from experienced farmers and business advisors. For those with limited English language skills, ESL support and/or interpreters and translators will be provided. Affordable access to land, water and equipment will also be available at the Groundswell Incubator Farm, at EcoVillage in Ithaca, New York.

“This project will significantly boost our ability to train and support New American beginning farmers,” says Devon Van Noble, Coordinator of Groundswell’s Incubator Farm. “We’ve already had a number of New Americans in our beginning farmer programs, including recent immigrants from Turkey, Mexico, Japan, Myanmar, Puerto Rico (US), China and Spain.” Many immigrants are able to participate fully in Groundswell’s existing programs, but those with significant language barriers or cultural barriers need more customized support.

“Our goal is to foster a new generation of farmers that reflects the diversity of culture, color, and class in our region,” says Rachel Firak, Groundswell’s New Farmer Training Coordinator. “Support from the Appalachian Regional Commission and the NY Department of State will help us connect with immigrant communities in our area, find out who is interested in farming, and help them get started.”

Groundswell provides intensive classroom training and business planning support for beginning farmers.

Farm Business Planning Course. This 30-hour program runs January to March and provides intensive class-room training and business planning support for beginning farmers.

Finger Lakes Collaborative Regional Alliance in Farmer Training (CRAFT). This is a farmer-to-farmer learning network comprised of experienced Mentor Farmers, beginning farmers and farming interns. The CRAFT meets monthly for educational farm tours and social events.

The Groundswell Farm Enterprise Incubator provides affordable access to land, production infrastructure, equipment, support services (such as tractor tillage), and mentoring from experienced farmers, on a ten-acre site owned by EcoVillage at Ithaca. The Incubator program is now open for applications from immigrant and non-immigrant beginning farmers, and offers a low-risk, low-cost entry avenue for those who do not have access to land of their own.

Groundswell New Farmer Training Programs for English Speakers
In addition to customized training programs for New Americans who have limited English-speaking skills, the following programs will again be offered in 2013 to English-speaking beginning farmers including, but not limited to New Americans. Additional information is available online at www.groundswellcenter.org.

Sustainable Farming Certificate Program. This 100-hour curriculum runs April-November and includes on-farm educational workshops, class-room training, supervised on-farm work experience, and an introduction to business planning.

Farm Business Planning Course. This 30-hour program runs January to March and provides intensive class-room training and business planning support for beginning farmers.

Getting the word out
Groundswell is looking for help from community-based groups who work with immigrants and refugees in Broome, Chemung, Chenango, Cortland, Schuyler, Steuben, Tioga and Tompkins Counties. If you know of individuals or communities who may have an interest in farming, please contact us at 607-319-5095 or info@groundswellcenter.org.

Groundswell has a strong commitment to supporting beginning farmers from historically disadvantaged populations, including people of color, immigrants, and those with very limited economic resources, who have often been excluded from the sustainable farming and local food movements.

Joanna Green is Director of the Groundswell Center for Local Food & Farming.

The Empire State Food & Agriculture Leadership Institute

Getting the word out
Groundswell trainsee receive in-depth instruction from experienced Mentor Farmers like Nathaniel Thompson of Remembrance Farm in Trumansburg, NY.

Photo by Joanna Green

Groundswell is a collaborative initiative of the EcoVillage Center for Sustainability Education/Center for Transformative Action, serving the broader Finger Lakes and Central New York region. Groundswell’s mission is to engage diverse learners and empower them with skills, knowledge and access to resources so they can build sustainable land-based livelihoods and equitable local food systems. For more information about Groundswell’s beginning farmer training programs visit www.groundswellcenter.org.
Using Photographs to Market Your Farm

by John Suscovich

We’ve all heard that a picture is worth a thousand words. So, by that math, you can write a 10,000 word article about your farm in ten photographs. Wouldn’t it be nice to easily show your customers just how awesome you are without having to write a novel in your “free time”?

Your average consumer today is well-connected, in the know, and eager for more information about their interests. Digital cameras and the world wide web makes it easier than ever to reach out to your customers almost instantly and, in doing so, build value into your products and your business.

With today’s technology growing by leaps and bounds, the size of cameras is decreasing as fast as the quality is increasing. The other side effect of a market flooded with good cameras is that they are very affordable. You do not need a four pound DSLR camera with three lenses and an elaborate tripod to capture your farm in the best light. You can use it almost every day and I love it. There are a lot of free tutorials online. On the low end, I would use iPhoto for Mac (free) and Picasa for PC (free download). Each will get you up and running quickly with uploading, organizing, and sharing your photos.

Quick Tips For Better Photographs

Framing. Follow the rule of thirds. Your photograph is a rectangle. Divide that rectangle into three horizontally, then vertically. Those four dividing lines (two vertical, two horizontal) will give you four intersections. Place your subjects on one of those intersections. This can give your photograph direction as well as make it more dynamic and interesting. You want to avoid photos where the subjects head is at the bottom or middle of the picture with a million feet of head space above them.

Interest. You see the world from one vantage point, your own. Somewhere around 4’6” to 6’ high, and at a comfortable distance. To add interest to your pictures get up close and personal, take them seated very high up (get on the roof), or very low to the ground. Looking at the world from a different perspective will give your photos interest and attract more attention.

Lighting. Where is the sun? Are you inside? If so, where are the light sources? Lighting is a huge factor in photography. When shooting indoors, beware of low-light that will blur your images. When shooting in direct sun, be aware of harsh shadows on people’s face that make them less attractive.

The more interesting and zany the photo, the more reaction it will elicit. This spring when we were cleaning hedgerows and burning brush I took this self-portrait in front of one of our fires. It was the most talked about photo of the farm season.

Reach Your Audience Like Never Before

Even in the world of slow food, life is still pretty fast paced. As a farmer you are constantly racing to beat the weather, catch up on record keeping, and get the tractor fixed for the next season. As a farmer you want to be the only one taking photographs of your farm. More importantly, your job is to make your farm and your farm products “picture-worthy”. As a farm apprentice at Devon Point Farm in Woodstock, CT, I had no trouble finding my share of photo-ops because farmers Erick & Patty Taylor invested their time and energy into making their farm neat and beautiful, and their produce healthy and bountiful. I was not the only one with a photographic eye for their farm. While I was there, they were featured in Edible Nutmeg (my photographs) and twice in Foodies of New England Magazine. Which leaves me with a phrase to share: “If you build it, they will come… with cameras.”

Don’t Go It Alone

Today everyone has a camera. As a farmer, you do not have to be the only one taking photographs of your farm. More importantly, your job is to make your farm and your farm products “picture-worthy”. As a farm apprentice at Devon Point Farm in Woodstock, CT, I had no trouble finding my share of photo-ops because farmers Erick & Patty Taylor invested their time and energy into making their farm neat and beautiful, and their produce healthy and bountiful. I was not the only one with a photographic eye for their farm. While I was there, they were featured in Edible Nutmeg (my photographs) and twice in Foodies of New England Magazine. Which leaves me with a phrase to share: “If you build it, they will come… with cameras.”

For more information on marketing your farm please visit www.FarmMarketingSolutions.com to download your free copy of our e-book Farmers’ Guide to Increasing Profits.

Horse Connections

by Haley Claes

The Youth Pages are written by and for young people. We believe there’s a bright future for young farmers in the Northeast. Whether you live on a farm or only wish you did, we’d love to hear from you!

When I started taking lessons at 8 years old, my instructor, Marsha Douglass, introduced us to 4-H. Mrs. Douglass had a club when her kids were young, so my family and I decided to look into it. We eventually started our own club; Horse Lovers Unlimited, with Mrs. Douglass as our leader and my mom as the Project Coordinator. Through 4-H I met many other young ladies and participated in a 4-H horse camp, a horse quiz bowl and I have done Horse Communications for seven years making it to States four times. Horse camp is held at our local fairgrounds for a week, and some kids stay the night in campers. It is open to all 4-He’s in Fulton-Montgomery Counties. Every day we have clinics with volunteer instructors and trainers. We also have guest speakers come in to teach a topic. Sometimes we have a vet talking about first aid or equine diseases. I have learned so much during these 4-H horse camps.

I have had the pleasure of having many horses throughout my life. The first horse I ever rode was an eleven year old quarter horse named Misty. When I turned eight, I decided I wanted to do more than ride around in our backyard; I wanted to show. We had another quarter horse named K.C. who was also eleven, and he was a lazy bomb-proof horse: perfect for a beginner show horse.

I was only able to show K.C. for two years because he had an infection in his coffin bone, and had continuous abscesses. 4-H horse quiz bowl helped me understand and learn about where the coffin bone was and what an abscess was. I ended up with another quarter horse named K.C. who was also eleven, and he was a lazy bomb-proof horse: perfect for a beginner show horse.

It took me a while to get over losing Belle. A few months later we found Missy. I was very lucky to find another wonderful horse; she was perfect for me, again we connected immediately.

I plan to show her and ride her in our 4-H show, 4-H horse camp, local fairs and open shows. I can’t wait until the show season starts.

Haley Claes, age 16, is in the Horse Lovers Unlimited 4-H Club of Fulton and Montgomery Counties.

For more information on how to join 4-H visit http://nys4h.cce.cornell.edu/about_us/Pages/JoinUs.aspx

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photo: Ely Margolis
It's cold outside. Steep a cup of tea and put in a teaspoon of pure, local, raw honey. Then take a sip, close your eyes, and feel that warm golden glow. Give thanks for the angels of agriculture: bees.

Homegrown Honey Bees: Beekeeping Your First Year, from Hiving to Honey Harvest, by Alethea Morrison is an introduction to beekeeping and a recruitment tool for a grassroots environmental movement to protect the pollinators and savor their sweet honey.

There is a resurgence of interest in the traditions of beekeeping and an urgent need to prevent the extinction of *Apis mellifera*. Colony collapse disorder, the drastic disappearance of honey bee colonies in North America which began in late 2006, is something about which most farmers care because many agricultural crops are pollinated by bees. Apples, berries, peaches, pears, cantaloupes, cherries, cranberries, watermelons, cucumbers and soybeans are just some of the crops that honey bees pollinate.

While some attribute the problem of colony collapse disorder to mites or insect diseases, others attribute the loss of bees to pesticides, malnutrition, cell phone radiation, genetically modified crops, or environmental change-related stresses. The USDA reported in 2010 a combination of factors rather than a single cause, but to date has not developed an effective policy.

The good news is that colony collapse disorder is less common in small-scale bee yards than it is in large-scale commercial operations. If you are a small scale farmer, now is a great time to take up beekeeping and help protect our future as farmers.

I've always been a bit nervous about the whole idea of keeping bees. I've spent half a century avoiding getting stung. But who doesn't like honey? Bees aren't naturally inclined to sting like yellow jackets, which are actually in the wasp family and not bees at all. I started to relax when I learned African Honeybees aren't even honey bees but undomesticated swarms. They're the wild pigs who give pork the slur of swine in the insect world. Just like certain meat animals, bees are bred for their tendency to be less defensive and less likely to sting. This genetic trait in bees is known as gentleness. Like rounding up cows to head to the milk house, beekeepers use a smoker to corral the insects. Scientists think smoke may mask many of the pheromones that signal danger and diminishes their natural threat alert. Many of the practices of beekeeping are more steeped in historical tradition than scientific explanations.

"Aristotle surmised that bees collected honey from rainbows. He may not have gotten the science right, but he was spot on with the poetry of its flavor," writes Alethea Morrison in the opening chapter.

*Apis mellifera*, commonly known as the honey bee, is one of about 20,000 different species of bees. European settlers brought the bee with them in the early 1600s and the environment suited the species as it spread widely across the United States. Beekeeping and farming came of age in late 2006, is something about which most farmers care because many agricultural crops are pollinated by bees. Apples, berries, peaches, pears, cantaloupes, cherries, cranberries, watermelons, cucumbers and soybeans are just some of the crops that honey bees pollinate.

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The Sustainable Lease Agreement, A Legal Tool for Land Stewardship
by Jason Foscolo, Esq

Good lease agreements for farmland are more important now than ever before. The cost of farmland is at an all-time high, which often makes leasing land the only viable alternative for many farmers. This is especially true for new and beginning farmers who often begin their careers with limited capital. Of course, it is always a good idea to get an important legal agreement like a lease in writing, no matter how rudimentary the terms of the lease.

With the advent of alternative production techniques and the rise of sustainable farming, farmland leases can be more than a tool for merely securing access to farmland. Leases can be the legal bridge protecting and developing a limitless range of ecological or social benefits that are increasingly important to the agricultural economy. “Sustainable agriculture” is an umbrella term used to encompass the many different production methods, systems, and approaches that seek to meet the goals of profitability, stewardship, and quality of life. As farmers increasingly consider these alternative agricultural practices, such as organic production, both landlords and tenants have new opportunities to use leases in creative and wealth-building ways.

A “sustainable lease”, therefore, can be used to mandate the type of agricultural practices used on farmland that guarantee a sustainable outcome. Some of the characteristics of the sustainable lease are the emphasis it places on things like soil conservation, wildlife protection, wind and water erosion, crop rotation, managed intensive rotational grazing, and even fair farm labor. Examples of “sustainable lease” terms are limited only by the desires of the landlord and tenant. A lease can prohibit a tenant from planting a crop that is known to deplete soil fertility. Conversely, a lease may require crops to be cycled in such a way as to replace those nutrients. Landlords can mandate the planting of buffer strips to prevent erosion on highly-erodible land, or demand that farm workers receiving the parcel receive a set wage above the state and federal minimum wage. The potential list of such sustainable terms is virtually limitless.

Often, a lease agreement containing these types of mandates can positively affect the commercial or financial interests of both landlords and tenants in the agricultural economy. It’s not only ethical or environmental to have a sustainable lease - sometimes it’s just good business. In our changing agricultural industry, the terms of a sustainable lease can have significant economic affects for all parties to the agreement.

Landlords can use sustainable leases to protect the quality of their farmland. It is within the ability of a landlord to use a lease to restrict a tenant to a specific type of agricultural activity or to prohibit certain crops or certain other techniques. A useful example of this characteristic of a sustainable lease is the organic farmer who will lease land only to another organic farmer. Converting land to organic production requires an investment of time, effort and expense. A sustainable lease could be complete without acknowledgment, and then protecting, these significant costs. This same concept can be applied to any other type of agricultural practice in order to...

See Sustainable page 13

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Wednesday Keynote Speaker
Jim Prevor’s Perishable Planet, the industry’s most important forum for the discussion and analysis of issues relevant to the trade is widely recognized as a leader in understanding and assessing the state of the perishable food industries.

Mr. Prevor is the fourth generation of his family to be active in the food business in the United States. Prior to launching his own company, he served as a director of his family’s company, which was an importer, exporter and wholesaler of foodstuffs.

Mr. Prevor combines the real world experience of one who has worked in the trade with the analytical perspective of an editor and analyst.

Thursday – Direct Marketing Speaker
Don Franz, a three-time winner of the Guinness World Record for the World’s Largest Maze, Don developed a new, outdoor, family game called the “Amazing Maize Maze®.” His American Maze Company has built hundreds of projects, entertained millions of players, instigated a world-wide maze fad and has given him the label of “Father of the Corn Maze.”

The 2013 Empire State Producers Expo is sponsored by:

- New York State Vegetable Growers Association
- Empire State Potato Growers
- New York State Berry Growers Association
- New York State Direct Marketing Committee
- The New York State Horticultural Society
- Cornell University
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- NYS Flower Industries
preserve the characteristics of farmland that are most important to the individual landlord, such as soil conservation or wildlife preservation.

Tenants can benefit from sustainable lease agreements in multiple ways. A sustainable tenant should take the perspective that increasing soil fertility in the landlord’s land should be considered the equivalent of any other capital improvement to the land, like installing irrigation equipment or permanent structures. Sustainable agricultural practices often require that costly soil rehabilitation efforts be conducted on marginally productive or environmentally strained land. Fertilizing and remineralizing depleted land with sustainable inputs adds value to a parcel of land. It is an investment that cannot be removed from the land at the conclusion of the lease term. For farming practices which rehabilitate soil, tenants should either seek a rent rebate for improving soil health or negotiate a longer term lease that will enable them to recoup a worthwhile return on their investment in the land.

The biggest challenge to leasing land sustainably is the relative personal values of the parties to the agreement. Both parties need to appreciate the ecological or social good that can be created by sustainable farming. Sustainable leases are therefore best used between sustainable landlords and sustainable farmers. The ecological or social benefits may not be obvious to all landlords, or to all farmers for that matter, but sustainable leasing has truly tangible and quantifiable value nonetheless. The sustainable lease begins with a mutual appreciation of these values.

The type of landlord most likely to appreciate a sustainably farming tenant is a land trust. These institutions have a strong interest in sustainable endeavors like land stewardship, soil conservation, habitat preservation, and water quality. In addition, they can benefit from sustainable leases in more ways than rehabilitating the health of their soil. Adopting a policy of sustainable leasing is a great way for land trusts to demonstrate to their supporters that they are conducting their stewardship role in an intelligent, responsible manner. They are not only more likely to have an appreciation for the agricultural practices of their tenants - it is in the nature of their mission to indeed brag about it.

Farmers are the first ecologists. Their land is a generational asset that deserves thorough protection and development by all participants in the agricultural community. Whether you are a landlord or a tenant farmer, think of the humble lease agreement as one of the most important tools you can use to fulfill your duties of stewardship.

Jason Foscolo is the principal attorney of Jason Foscolo LLC, a general practice law firm dedicated to the special needs of farmers and food entrepreneurs.
Online Distribution Channels for Farmers

by Rebecca Heller-Steinberg and Laura Hobbs

Are you looking for a new method to market your farm products? Recently, a group of farmers, Extension staff, and community members in Tioga County, NY joined together to evaluate more efficient methods for farmers to get products to consumers. The group is currently looking into online market models that enable producers to deliver pre-purchased products to a set pick-up location once a week. It turns out, in recent years, an overwhelming number of websites have come online for this purpose.

Two members of the group, Rebecca Heller-Steinberg, an AmeriCorps member serving at Cornell Cooperative Extension and owner of local food business Extended Harvest, and Laura Hobbs, a local farmer and web designer, offered to research the options and then present to the group. This article represents our personal opinions and not those of the group as a whole or Cornell Cooperative Extension.

Our hope is that sharing information about these models and how best to evaluate them can help you figure out which model(s) are right for you.

Why do you need a new distribution channel?

What is the problem you are trying to solve by creating a new distribution channel? That is, what is not working for you about your current distribution channels that you want the new model to address? Possible problems include:

• Not selling enough; need a new outlet for products
• Spending too much time on marketing, travel and distribution
• Costs are too high/profit margins are too low
• Not finding enough local customers
• People can’t make it out to or don’t have time to visit the farm

What are your criteria?

In addition to knowing what problem(s) you’re trying to solve with the new system, you may also have some specific needs or features you want available on the online market site, such as:

• Credit card processing
• Ability for each producer to upload and update their own products and availability
• Incorporate actual costs into the system to create long-term viability

Breakdown of the models

As you start to look at the online models, you’ll notice that most fall into one or more of a few major functional categories:

• CSA vehicles (such as farmigo.com or seedleaf.com) - these often have options for adding a la carte items, but are intended primarily for producers operating CSAs and other subscription-based services
• Online farmers markets (such as goodeggs.com) - these are intended for retail customers and often designed to mimic the feel of a farmers market, where customers shop separately from each individual farmer
• Online wholesale markets (such as farmersweb.com) - these are for larger sellers and buyers, including restaurants, schools, and other institutions

Important things to consider

As you begin to look at some of these models/websites and narrow down which type is right for you, there are a number of other details you’ll want to consider:

• Is the audience local, regional or national in scope?
• Is there a start-up cost? How much?
• Does the site charge a monthly flat fee, a percentage mark-up or margin on sales, or both? What are those costs?
• If the site does not charge, how do they make money and does it seem viable long term?
• Are grants or start-up funding available?
• How many producers and/or customers are needed to make it viable?
• What are the delivery and pick-up options for customers?
• How do goods get from the farmer to the customer? If the farmer must transport them, are they able to add that cost into their pricing?
• Is there a way to incorporate consumer education?
• Does it foster connections between producers and consumers?
• Can you integrate it with your website, blog, facebook, or twitter?

For a group distribution model, there are some additional things to consider in your planning, plus what their costs might be. Does the group need a coordinator and a location for distribution and storage? Will any equipment be needed such as a scale or freezer?

Aesthetics and usability

What does the site look like? Some of the websites we looked at are very basic visually or looked a bit dated. If they have the functionality you need, this may not matter to you or your customers. But in some markets, this could turn off potential customers. Also, how easy or intuitive is it to use? It is essential to get on the site and try it out, both from the consumer and producer ends. If it isn’t easy to use, it’s not going to be practical.

Local vs. National

At first we considered having a website created for our group, though after some research we discovered so many existing websites that would fit our needs that having a site made locally was like “reinventing the wheel” and start up would cost more than using an established website. These regional and national companies can offer lower prices since the costs of website development and upkeep are spread out over a larger number of producers.

Websites that could fit our needs

Researching a couple dozen websites yielded a few that had the right model we were looking for. The main differences between these websites were the upfront fees, the aesthetics of the website and the availability of different features. Almost all these websites took a small fee on sales but no start up fees, had webpages where products could be listed and described, processed credit cards, kept track of orders and produced invoices. We have included below some brief discussion on the websites we think could work for us and maybe you as well.

• The Local Food Marketplace (localfoodmarketplace.com) offers four different kinds of online markets for individual farmers to buying clubs. LFMP will design a website to suit each person/groups needs with many different functions.

The Local Food will design a website to suit each person/groups needs with many different functions.
A Four Dollar Grazing Chart
by Troy Bishopp

My farm teetered between a D1 and D2 (Moderate to Severe) on the U.S. drought monitor scale most of last summer which tested my 26 years of grazing experience and thinking skills. Although I must admit to being up for the challenge, at times it was a highly stressful endeavor to manage a newly started organic dairy heifer custom grazing business model without much snow or rain. Surprisingly, what saved me during this trying time was a 4 dollar grazing planning chart hung on my office door.

I know what you’re thinking; a piece of paper (and not money) is credited with getting a farmer through the grazing season. Yep, but let me elaborate a bit. This change of management thinking was due to a Northeast SARE other farmers who were also trying the tool we refined the plans are always in flux. With practice and feedback from months – all in pencil of course because we all know grazing is a living document all aspects that would help a grazier plan ahead a week, then a month, then several seasons. This change of management is largely about employing appropriate risk management techniques.

On a trip to Missouri visiting Greg Judy’s farm the light really clicked for me. As the ‘microbe messiah’ was showing me all the exciting things he was doing on the farm and quoting scenario days’ recovery periods and such, I finally told him to stop yacking and show me how he makes decisions in grazing management. After the shock, he ushered me into his office where his wall was covered with 3 years of planned grazing charts like a military war room. He knew where he was, where he was going and where he had been all in a cohesive chart complete with paddocks, rest periods, weather info, animal dry matter calculations and major events identified like vacations, calving, breeding and stockpiling. It’s exactly what I needed. At that moment I thought, I’ve got to get busy with this kind of management instead of always chasing grass or worse, losing money.

This led me to Allan Savory’s Holistic Management Handbook with associated grazing charts but like many farmers, I had to tweak the chart to fit my needs and environment. At first I used it mostly as a visual diary of how long my farm teetered between a D1 and D2 (Moderate to Severe) on the U.S. drought monitor scale most of last summer which tested my 26 years of grazing experience and thinking skills. Although I must admit to being up for the challenge, at times it was a highly stressful endeavor to manage a newly started organic dairy heifer custom grazing business model without much snow or rain. Surprisingly, what saved me during this trying time was a 4 dollar grazing planning chart hung on my office door.

For me, this visual chart reduced stress by constantly informing me of conditions on the ground to form battle plans weeks ahead of when I actually needed to speed up or slow down the rotation. There was a point from June 8th to July 22nd when we had 16 days over 90 degrees and a 1/2’ of rain. About June 24th I made a big circle on July 30th that said ‘Decision day’ for considering whether to supplement with hay which was still 30 days before I ran out of grass. On July 23rd it started to rain and for the next 21 days we got over 5 inches of rain and I never touched the emergency hay fund but it was planned anyway.

By monitoring longer recovery periods and maintaining higher residual levels, when the rain finally fell, it popped back like springtime. However I planned for it not to rain and was rewarded for my conservative stocking rates. You’re a hero when it all works the way it’s supposed to.

Beef Magazine’s contributing editor, Troy Marshall, noted a good plan helps protect personal health - physical, relational, mental and spiritual. He poignantly mentioned, “Drought management puts a premium on acting early, being willing to adapt, and being creative. The best news is that it will rain again; it is nearly as inevitable as drought. Drought management is largely about employing appropriate risk management techniques.”

In the final analysis, simple grazing management decision-making tools and using your noggin may be more valuable than increasing outside inputs to solve the weak links in your and mine grazing operation. If you are a visual learner like me, a 4 dollar piece of paper might be just the ticket to get through another weather event. Remember to stay focused on the things you have some control over. Focusing on the things you have no control over is a waste of time and energy.

For more information on the grazing chart and its planning process, visit http://cnrdoc.org/planned-grazing-participants/ or contact Troy Bishopp, aka ‘The Grass Whisperer’ at the Madison Co. SWCD 315-824-9849.
Doubling Local Food in Vermont

The Vermont Farm to Plate (F2P) Network is re-localizing food production and distribution in a statewide collaborative effort to rebalance the food system. A network of over 160 organizations encompassing all types and scales of agricultural-related production and processing are working together to execute the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan.

In 2009, the ‘Farm to Plate Investment Program’ was signed into legislation by then Governor Jim Douglas. The legislation tasked the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund with the creation of a ten year ‘Farm to Plate Strategic Plan’ to increase economic development in Vermont’s food and farm sector, create jobs in the food and farm economy, and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters. An economic impact analysis showed that every 5% increase in the consumption of locally produced food translates to at least $197 million in additional annual output and 1,700 new jobs. By supporting instead of duplicating existing efforts through a cross-pollinating network approach, the Farm to Plate Network is working to strengthen Vermont’s working landscape, build the resilience of farms, improve environmental quality, and increase local food access for all Vermonters.

Vermont has developed the most comprehensive food system plan in the country to date and the first in the New England states. All six New England states recognize that long term viability lies in regional food systems growth and each were represented at the recent Farm to Plate Network Annual Gathering, held in October at Lake Morey Resort in Fairlee, Vermont. A New England food system planning committee under the leadership of Food Solutions New England at the University of New Hampshire is convening to further cultivate conversations and share progress as each state begins to relocate their own food system.

“Vermont leads the nation in direct-to-consumer farm product marketing, Farm to School programming, and community based agriculture. We are putting people back on the land to learn from it, work it, restore it, and steward it for subsequent generations,” Chuck Ross, Secretary of the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets commented at the start of the Gathering, where connecting across the 160-member Network and creating action plans were the themes of the two-day event.

At the start of the Network’s second year, new processes are being facilitated allowing for collaboration among players who are not usually in the same room with one another. Sodexo, the state’s largest food service provider, with contracts to serve all of the state’s K-12 systems and two universities serving 34,000 meals per day in aggregate, does not typically have regular conversations with local food hubs, processors, and distributors. From participating together in the Network, local relations are developed to accelerate farm to institution purchases. A Sodexo “matchmaking” event held at the University of Vermont in November is helping small producers partner with institutions to determine the scaling up or down necessary on both ends to make for mutually beneficial relationships.

Farm to Plate Initiative Progress

In 2011 Fletcher Allen Hospital served more than 2 million meals. Actually making hospital nutrition services the largest restaurant in Vermont. They partner with 70 local farmers and producers providing healthy, fresh, meals from scratch to patients while boosting the economy. Convivium, a Vermont-based restaurant is actually one of Burlington’s most popular lunch spots to the general public.

Legislation passed in the spring of 2011 created the Working Lands Enterprise Fund and 15 Vermonters were appointed to the Board which will focus investment in Vermont’s forests, farms, and agricultural producers. The Board is in the process of determining the funding criteria for proposal grants for $1 million in infrastructure development and technical assistance services.

Vermont Technical College’s Institute for Applied Agriculture and Food Systems received a $3.4 million federal grant in the fall of 2012 to serve the applied research and educational needs of agriculture, food production, waste disposal, and energy production businesses in the region through a cooperative education learning model.

Also in 2012, Vermont Law School established and hired a director for the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems to provide support, research, legal counsel, and leadership for community-based agricultural systems expansion.

Kingdom Creamery in Hardwick utilized the Vermont Farm Viability Program to diversify dairy farm production to premium ice cream, yogurt and cheese. Ingredients are grown to include Black River Produce and Vermont Roots, and channels are developing through the F2P Network with Sodexo. Additional collaborations with the Vermont Fresh Network to reach restaurants, the Vermont Grocers Association to reach independent grocery stores, and Farm to School programming to reach educational institution are strengthening dairy farm sustainability.

The Newport Fresh by Nature program launched this year as a downtown culinary designation of restaurants in Vermont’s northernmost community serving food harvested or produced within Newport and the surrounding rural communities. The participating farms offer farm visits and educational partnerships through Green Mountain Farm to School.

Black River Produce, the state’s leading fresh produce distributor, responded to Vermont and New England meat processing demands by purchasing the former Ben & Jerry’s plant in Springfield and is converting it to a high capacity processing facility. Scheduled to open in the spring of 2013, the facility will relieve current processing bottlenecks and create new market opportunities for local producers.

The Mad River Food Hub opened early in 2012 and offers meat processing, storage units, and business planning at its facility in Waitsfield to over 17 value added producers, like Joe’s Soups and VT Bean Crafters. The Food Hub also distributes fresh produce for local non-profit, Food Works at Two Rivers, an organization which provides nutrition training and farm-based agricultural education in the community.

As recognized by facilitators Curtis Ogden and Beth Tener at the annual gathering, the Farm to Plate networking approach navigates the multiplicity of organizations and missions and helps weave through “turning” collaborative opportunities, business processes are being facilitated allowing for self-identified working group representation which meet less frequently, including food processing, consumer education and marketing, technical assistance to producers and processors, education and workforce development, farmland access and stewardship, and dairy development.

The six operating working groups cover high impact leverages across areas of aggregation and distribution, consumer education and marketing, technical assistance to producers and processors, education and workforce development, farmland access and stewardship, and dairy development.

“This self-governing collaborative made up of over 160 member organizations are working together to reach the 25 goals in the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan, as well as to advance their own organizations’ goals,” explains Campbell.

“Often, businesses and organizations get so busy with their day to day activities and work plans that they lose sight of the bigger picture. Working groups are meant to function at a higher elevation-viewing both the trees (specific strategies) AND the forest (how strategies interconnect). We really work to develop disciplined reflection during our meetings, so that we ask the bigger questions about what high impact projects can really move the dial in reaching our intended goals and outcomes,” offers Ellen Kahler, executive director of the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund which oversees the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan.

Kahler continues, “The Farm to Plate Network also has a number of cross-cutting teams which meet less frequently, including food access, financing, soils and water, research, and policy. These teams are meant to support the needs of all the working groups, since these areas of focus are relevant to all aspects of the food system.

As the F2P Network delves deeper into action to meet strategic plan goals, the final key component nears completion for an early 2013 launch. The Vermont Food Atlas will be a web portal which will feature a mapping interface of Vermont food system’s key attributes. An online database will provide people representing all areas of the food system the ability to locate and examine spatial relationships between farming, research, educational institutions, non-profits and state entities. The Atlas provides a communication and coordination forum for Farm to Plate Network members and is an information clearinghouse of food system resources to be presented through industry relevant social networking capabilities.

The Farm to Plate Strategic Plan will be accessible through a searchable dashboard and a scorecard system will track progress in reaching the plan’s goals. The Atlas will provide the interactive tools necessary for the Farm to Plate Network to expand Vermont’s local food system and double food production and consumption by 2020.

Ellen Kahler perhaps puts it best when she says, “we’ve made incredible progress thus far because of our small size and the strong relationships and programs which have been built over the past 30 years. No one business or organization can transform our food system and it can’t be done overnight. The new food system is one that is fundamentally based on relationships; it is community supported; and largely consumer driven.” If the current path continues, it seems likely that Vermont will exceed their goal of doubling local consumption in the next eight years.

For detailed Farm to Plate Strategic Plan and Network information, please visit http://www.vsjf.org/project-details/5/farm-to-plate-initiative.
I met my wife, Kerry, planting garlic. It was an unseasonably warm October day during a crew exchange between the farm I worked for and the farm she worked for. I knew from our first date, that if we were going to stay together, we would be farming together. Our wedding planning was intertwined with farm planning, and our gift registry contained more items for the barn than the kitchen. We started Provider Farm in the winter of 2010 searching through classified advertisements and pouring over the details of our business plan. After spending hours driving all over New England looking at "farms" that were really gravel pits or swamps we finally found our farm in September of 2011. Provider Farm is located in Salem, Connecticut. Salem is a small town that you pass through on your way from Hartford to the ocean. Other than that, we don't seem to get much attention.

We raise a small herd of mostly Devon cattle for beef and compost on twenty acres of pasture and we grow vegetables for a 200 share CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), Farmers' Market, and wholesale on twelve acres. We use organic and biodynamic practices but we are not certified. We lease all of the land and buildings that we use but we own our business and we own our equipment. I don't know if this situation will be appropriate for us forever but it was a great way to get started.

We both believe strongly in the CSA model for small farm viability. Although we have branched out into farmers' markets and wholesale, we are at our hearts a CSA farm. It is our goal to provide the best possible share at a reasonable price. I want our members to feel like our farm is essential for their lives. If people are buying a share from us because they think it is trendy, or the "right thing to do", as soon as times get tough, we will be the first thing they stop spending money on. However, if we can make our farm essential to how they feed their families, when times get tough, we will be the first they write.

We strive to achieve this goal by distributing high quality produce, keeping good communication, and offering our members choice. We put our CSA first when it comes to produce. While one of the major advantages of the CSA is that your crops don't have to be perfect like they do for market, we make sure everything that goes into the share is fresh, clean and high quality. We spend as much time and energy setting up the display in the share room as we do setting up our farmers' market display.

We have found that offering our members choices makes our share more appealing to a much broader customer base. We offer three share sizes, and distribute all of our produce through a mix and match system. This allows people to take more of things they like and not be stuck taking home stuff they will never eat. We encourage people to try new things and are always delighted when we get requests for more Kohlrabi and Rutabagas. While in some ways, this creates more work for us in managing and planning the different share sizes, I think that the benefits for our business vastly outweigh the drawbacks.

As much as possible we try to build good will with our shareholders so that if we do lose crops, or have bad years, they will remember the good times and forgive us. We strive to do this with regular reliable communication through our weekly newsletters and quick responses to business inquiries, regular facebook updates, and always staffing our shareroom with a farmer who strives to meet every shareholder.

Our CSA faced a major challenge this year when we lost 100% of our tomato crop to Late Blight in early July. At that point in the season, we had only had six distributions and our members had only been members for six weeks. The decision to destroy our crop was a tough call to make, but ultimately I believe that we made the right decision.

I felt physically sick from the moment I saw the first oily Late Blight lesion on our crop. This feeling stayed with me as I spent hours talking with our extension agent and other farmers about what we should do. The pit in my stomach would keep me up all night and was certainly present as we cut down thousands of feet of what only days ago had been beautiful healthy tomatoes. Sitting down to write the newsletter informing our members that they would have no tomatoes this year was equally as tough. However, within hours of sending out this email, responses started to pour in. We were completely overwhelmed with the amount of supportive and positive feedback we received from our members. Finally, the terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach subsided. Not only were our members willing to accept the loss, but rather than blame us for letting them down, they viewed it as a collective disappointment. Our members seem to be more committed to the farm after this loss.

Now that we have reached the tail end of our first year, I like to look back on the time we spent last winter trying to conceptualize the farm that we are now running. We would spend hours pouring over maps of farmland available in New England and looking through our bank statements, tallying up our meager net worth, trying to figure out how we were ever going to start Provider Farm. I can remember sitting with Kerry, overwhelmed and over caffeinated, thinking to myself that if we ever do make it into the field, the actual farm work would feel like a relief from the stress of starting a business. Well, between late blight, tractor tires flying off the tractor, weed forests and too much or too little rain, the hands-on work hasn't presented the relief that I had imagined. The farm seems to present a new challenge almost every day, keeping us on our toes and keeping our minds in a constant state of problem solving.

This year we grew just over half an acre of Sweet Potatoes: 8 rows, about 550 feet long, just over 1,000 pounds of sweet potatoes per row. With 100 feet of full sweet potato buckets behind me, 400 feet of unpicked sweet potatoes in front of me and beautiful, brilliant sky above, it was in the sweet potatoes that I finally found the relief I had hoped for. Covered from head to toe in dirt and sweat, I couldn't think of anything I would rather be doing on a fall day than picking our sweet potatoes. I don't crave a Caribbean vacation and I don't covet the iPhone 5. All I need, all I want, is a long row and a good day.
Farmer-Professor Finds Fulfillment in Grass-fed Sheep
by Tracy Frisch

Jennifer Phillips’ love affair with grazing animals, and her subsequent farming career, began when she acquired a few lambs to mow her then two-acre yard. In 2001, after two decades in New York City she had just moved to Stuyvesant, in northern Columbia County, NY, to take a faculty position at Bard College’s Center for Environmental Policy. Today, the part-time assistant professor of environmental science produces grass-fed meats in the sleepy town of Clermont, where she owns Gansvoort Farm.

Jennifer’s animals - a flock of 55 ewes and their 100-plus lambs plus a dozen Red Devon cattle - spend their entire lives outdoors, even in the winter. For most of the year, they graze on a diverse mixture of pasture plants, including orchard grass, perennial ryegrass, meadow bromegrass, timothy, white, red and alsike clovers, birdfoot trefoil, alfalfa and chicory. When the pasture runs out in winter and during severe drought, they receive hay. Grain and other concentrates have no place in their diet.

At one-day intervals, Jennifer moves each group of animals to a fresh paddock using portable electric fencing - netting for sheep, and a strand of wire for cows. She gauges the size of these temporary paddocks to allow the animals to eat the plants down to about 3 or 4 inches in height.

Each patch of pasture gets at least a three-week rest to allow grasses and legumes to recover and re-grow every year. By comparison, where pasture is grazed continuously, even for periods as short as a week or two, preferred plant species tend to get depleted. In their place, undesirable plants like thistle, burdock or multiflora rose often take hold. And animals’ constant nibbling and trampling may expose bare ground, setting the stage for soil erosion.

Reluctant marketer finds a niche
Jennifer said her weak link lies with marketing. Until now, Jennifer has been selling her lambs directly to individual customers as whole or half animals, with a few carcasses going to chefs. Her lambs are ready from late September to early December. She distributes the meat from a cold storage facility five miles up the road where she rents space. Most of her animals are butchered and cut to order at a tiny state-inspected custom slaughterhouse operated by another farmer in the fall and winter. With such a “super small” facility, she can have confidence of getting back the meat from her own animals. “I like the fact that he’s not killing animals 24-7,” Jennifer said.

Jennifer attracts new customers with a bright yellow sign at the foot of her driveway and an EatWild.com listing, which draws “tons of traffic” to 100 percent grass-fed producers. Even so, with her growing flock, she was unsure how she would sell all of her lamb. She got “lucky” when another farmer told her of a family-owned business in New York seeking a local source of wool and pelts. Farmers with larger flocks have been turning to hair sheep because the wool pool price was so low, Jennifer noted. The husband-and-wife team owns Marlowe and Daughters, an artisan butcher shop, as well as two farm-to-table restaurants and a boutique hotel. Last year they bought all her wool.

This year besides buying her wool and pelts, they arranged to receive regular deliveries of whole lamb for meat this fall. They add value to the wool with attractive handcrafted products, such as knitted sweaters and felted vests. Jennifer was astonished when they encouraged her to raise her prices. Previously Jennifer had gotten woolen comforters made, which were slow to sell. Now with an eager, discerning buyer, she considers wool in her breeding decisions. She also abandoned her goal of an all-white flock since she is well compensated for colored pelts.

Low-stress lambing?
By lambing later and on pasture, Jennifer has been able to take a laissez-faire approach to lambing, without fear of significant losses. In 2012, from April 26 until mid-May, the 55 ewes of Gansvoort Farm gave birth to 115 lambs. Only two lambs didn’t survive. Jennifer believes her pasture system is more conducive to successful lambing because the animals have space to get away from the flock and give birth without interruption. Rigorous selection process has also paid off. “If you select very stringently for characteristics like good health and reproductive success, rather than relying on drugs or a lot of handholding, you end up with a flock that is more or less maintenance-free and requires less labor,” she said. At the end of every January, she pulls the flock based on her records. Ewes that had worm problems, lambing difficulties or mastitis go to the butcher. These days, she usually culls only three or four animals annually.

Heat, predators and pests
Besides lambing on pasture in mid-spring, Jennifer follows other practices endorsed by the organization Animal Welfare Approved. She doesn’t dock tails on sheep or cows, and she always provides fresh water in every paddock. On any day when the temperature will exceed 75 she provides them with pasture that has shade. She’s also planting more shade trees around the farm.

Jennifer vehemently disagrees with the practice of killing coyotes. Though she hears coyotes every night, she has never had a problem with them. “I have a theory that the coyote you know is better than the coyote you don’t,” she said. Not all coyotes attack livestock. Pups learn to hunt and what to eat from their mothers and other elders in the pack. When resident coyotes are killed, Jennifer says, the ones that move in to replace them may be more aggressive. Keeping a high-voltage charge in her portable electric fence has been a sufficient deterrent. She takes care though never to leave an un-electrified fence upright.

Jennifer started out with Finn Dorset crosses but the 140-pound ewes were a little big for her to easily handle. Many also had long tails and she doesn’t dock. Today her flock is predominantly Icelandic. She chose the breed for its extreme hardiness and ability to grow well on grass. They also have short tails and are known for their delicious meat and exceptional wool. They have a coarse outer coat that sheds rain and snow and a very fine, soft undercoat once prized for underwear.

In a typical year, Jennifer only has to worry about 5 percent of her sheep. “There’s a big environmental cost to using chemical wormers,” she said. “They kill dung beetles and all kinds of other things. Also, repeated use of wormers causes parasites to develop resistance so when you really need a wormer, it’s not effective.” Instead she employs other strategies to reduce worms, such as feeding chicory, which is high in condensed tannins. These compounds are known to reduce worms in sheep.

Eight years ago, Jennifer added Red Devon cattle to her farm. The two types of livestock play host to different worm species. By grazing cattle after sheep in her pastures, she aimed to significantly reduce the worm load. But she hasn’t been able to make the small herd profitable. Selling the cattle should enable her to extend the grazing season for her sheep so she won’t have to feed hay until January.

As a farmer, Jennifer is seeing the effects of global warming and climate change, like the drought and extended spells of hot weather this past summer that stress plants and animals alike. “This is going to become the new normal for us,” Jennifer said. “We’ll need to adapt our systems.”

Tracy Frisch is a homesteader, writer and community activist in Argyle, New York. She served as the founding director of the Regional Farm & Food Project from 1996 through 2004.

A longer version of this article appeared in the September 2012 issue of Hill Country Observer.
Aroostook Hops: SARE Grant Results in Increased Yield

by Erin Roche

Located in the heart of Maine’s potato production

To the passerby, the hops trellis rising from the ground at Krista Delahunty and Jason Johnston’s farm triggers a second glance if not a close inspection. Tucked within a county of potato fields, Aroostook Hops LLC is an island of uniqueness, welcoming back the production of hops to the Aroostook, Maine, to meet the growing demand for craft beers. As local microbreweries, hops production has returned east. As flash forward 200 years and with a growing interest in high humidity of the East, hops production largely migrated west where arid conditions limit the spread of pests and disease. Flash forward 200 years and with a growing interest in local microbreweries, hops production has returned east. As scientists and avid gardeners, Krista and Jason’s interest in producing hops began with their own homebrew. When they searched for hop rhizomes (rootstock) to plant in 2008, they found them expensive and difficult to find. Noting this surge in demand and counting thirty microbreweries in Maine alone, the couple felt that local, organic hops would be a promising enterprise.

The SARE Project

Aroostook Hops was awarded a one-year grant of $10,197, which covered labor, irrigation, mulch and soil sampling costs. Beginning in the fall of 2010, Krista and Jason experimented on their 1-acre hopyard, containing four varieties of hops of three planting ages (1, 2 and 3-year old plants). The couple devised a two-factor experiment to test the following questions.

Are the costs of drip irrigation outweighed by an increase in yield and net revenue?

Krista and Jason installed drip irrigation on every other hop row and irrigated 3-4 hours every two to three days without a soaking precipitation. It is unclear why this same increase wasn’t observed in the non-irrigated treatments and increased revenue more than compensated for the costs of irrigation installment and operation (Table 1). Krista and Jason analyzed the economic returns per acre for each treatment by subtracting treatment costs (material costs and labor at $15/hour) from estimated gross returns (calculated using the 2011 USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service average price for hops of $2.77/lb). Of all of the treatments, irrigated rows with straw provided the highest revenue gain per acre. Based on soil sample results, alfalfa produced an increase in soil nitrate while soil test phosphorus and magnesium levels were higher in straw plots (data not shown). The alfalfa treatment produced an increase in yield in the non-irrigated plots. It is unclear why this same increase wasn’t observed in the irrigated plots. See Table 1.

The Results

By implementing drip irrigation and mulching, a Maine hops farm significantly improves yields and net revenue.

Located in the heart of Maine’s potato production

Throughout the growing season, Krista and Jason recorded supply costs, labor hours, and hop cone yield so they could evaluate the cost effectiveness of each treatment. Additionally, soil samples were taken at the end of the growing season.

Summary

This positive SARE experience encouraged Krista and Jason to apply for another SARE grant focusing on methods of establishing and maintaining a weed-free hopyard. Overall, Krista and Jason found the budget sufficiently covered all grant expenses.

To learn more about Aroostook Hops, visit their website at http://www.aroostookhops.com/ To read the final report, visit http://mysare.sare.org/mySARE/ProjectReport.aspx?do=vie wProj&pn=FNE11-711

Erin Roche is a graduate student at the University of Maine. She can be reached at erin.roche@maine.edu.

SARE offers sustainable agriculture grants, bulletins, books, an online events calendar and many other resources. Learn more about the Northeast SARE program by visiting www.nesare.org or by contacting Northeast SARE 655 Spear Street University of Vermont, Burlington VT 05405 Phone 802-656-0471 Fax 802-656-0500 E-mail: nesare@uvm.edu
Does Red Clover Cause Infertility in Sheep?

by Ulf Kintzel

Various legumes and clovers, especially the red clover, are said to cause temporary infertility in female sheep when grazed during breeding season. If grazed for a prolonged period of time, red clover can supposedly cause permanent infertility in ewes. The cited reason for that infertility is an estrogen-like substance called phyto-estrogen. If you are a subscriber to one of the national sheep publications you probably have come across an article warning you of red clover, perhaps even of white clover as well as other legumes. I seem to see at least one article every year.

Most studies conducted on clover were with grazing sheep on subterranean clover in Australia, starting in 1946 (Bennett et al). This was the first field trial to identify what is also referred to as “clover disease”. According to my research there have been several other studies with sheep grazing subterranean clover. However, there has been only one field trial in North America on red clover (Fox et al. 1959) and absolutely none with grazing white clover.

On the other hand, there is ample anecdotal evidence of sheep farmers grazing clovers, including red clover, throughout the year and during breeding season and yet having lambing percentages. This includes me. I have grazed all kinds of legumes as well as lots of red clover during breeding season and have found no negative effect. My lambing percentage of my adult ewes averages 180 percent and has reached at times 200 percent. I also recall a field study conducted in my native east Germany that found no significant effect of red clover on sheep fertility. Unfortunately, I am unable to cite the study.

In my view, this begs the question if these stark and firm warnings of red clover are indeed warranted.

Let’s examine what we do know about red clover. First, red clover, like many other legumes, forms a symbiosis with a soil bacterium called Rhizobium. This bacterium is able to fixate air nitrogen, which benefits the clover itself but also leaches in part into the soil, which benefits other species like grass. In return, this bacterium gets some energy in the form of sugar from the plant. Figures vary greatly but with only 20 to 30 percent of red clover in the pasture mix, 80 to 200 lbs. of nitrogen per acre can be fixated. I have red and white clover as well as some other legumes well above the 30 percent mark. That means the need for commercial nitrogen fertilizer can be completely eliminated.

Secondly, red clover is high in digestible nutrients and is well liked by sheep. High amount of nutrients, digestibility, and intake all enhance animal performance.

Furthermore, red clover is very easily and quite cheaply established by means of frost-seeding. In fact, I find red clover the easiest of all forage plants to be frost-seeded. Seed cost is relatively low, especially when you consider that only four or five pounds of seed per acre are needed in order to get a good stand of red clover in existing pasture.

There are additional advantages to red clover like relatively good drought resistance, good ability to be stock-piled for winter grazing, and high yield due to its relatively big plant size.

To make the list complete I should mention that red clover, like many legumes with the exception of birdsfoot trefoil, can cause bloat. However, that is entirely a management issue.

So should red clover be incorporated into sheep pasture? I believe so and I have done so for many years. Conception rates of 90 percent and lambing percentages of no less than 180 percent that I’ve achieved have long made me wonder about these studies conducted down under with mostly subterranean clover. I don’t dismiss the science. In fact, I am a firm believer in science. However, I do doubt the relevance of these studies for us in the US. Therefore, I would like to see studies conducted in the Northern Hemisphere in North America. Studies should include field trials with grazing sheep on red clover at different stages and on different varieties, and trials that examine the effect on various breeds. One study (Croker et al. 2007) suggests that the estrogen level is lower when red clover blooms - which is exactly when I graze it. There are more questions than answers and until we know more, I would find it appropriate if there were less warnings against such essential legumes in sheep pasture. Meanwhile, I will rely on my 28 years of experience in grazing sheep and will continue grazing red clover throughout the year, including during breeding season.