FAIR WINDS FARM

Nowadays, just about everyone has been affected by the high cost of energy and farmers have been hit especially hard. In only the past couple of years, the price of fertilizer has doubled and the cost of on-farm fuel has skyrocketed between 50 and 60 percent. The exorbitantly high price of fuel to run the machinery to maintain land is prompting more farmers to look for alternative ways to save money and time. Fair Winds Farm offers a blueprint for one way to do this, using a method that is both environmentally friendly and fun.

That’s because Fair Winds Farm is mostly powered by animals. It relies on horse power to drive most of its operation, a remarkably sustainable alternative to the mainstream use of machinery that dominates most modern-day farms. Furthermore, the farm uses renewable energy when it can, including a solar powered generator for its electric fencing system.

As its name implies, Fair Winds Farm is a fairly windy parcel of land located just a couple of miles away from bustling downtown Brattleboro. Named after the lyrics of a favorite song by Gordon Bok (“Where you go, go well, and a fair wind home”), the farm encompasses 42 acres of fields dedicated to diverse systems of animals, including two milking goats, seasonal free-range pigs, 300 egg-laying hens, meat birds and sheep.

Jay and Janet Bailey have been farming Fair Winds Farm for approximately 30 years. In 1978, they took over the care of the land from an elderly man named Claude Tate. After Tate’s death, the land came under the ownership of Earth Bridge Community Land Trust, which extended an 89-year lease to Jay and Janet. The Baileys began growing crops and raising animals. In recent years, their daughter Bekah Murchison became a co-owner of the farm and management is gradually being transitioned to her.

“I could never imagine living anywhere else,” says Bekah, who lived in Colorado on and off for a number of years. She tried her hand at other professions before realizing that farming was her destiny.

Though the Baileys used to sell vegetables, they now only grow them for their family. They do sell perennial plants in addition to their animal products, both of which are available through their on-site farm store. Fair Winds Farm’s main focus, however, is to educate people about Suffolk Punch horses, a breed known for their strength, obedience and sweet nature, traits which lend themselves well to farm labor and extended social interactions with people.

Jay Bailey attests the breed lives up to its reputation.

“They are easy keeping and gentle,” remarks Bailey. He further elaborates on the sustainable practice of using horses as an alternative to machines. Besides the low greenhouse gas emissions from minimal petroleum fuel usage, the horses are easier on the soil than a tractor, and so the soil does not suffer from as much compaction or erosion. The horses also provide free high-quality fertilizer for the fields.

In addition to the other farm work, Bekah runs horse workshops which are held from mid-spring to late autumn. The workshops cover the

Photo by Steven Frischling
basics of farm horse handling, from horse care and maintenance, to how to manage conventional horse-drawn vehicles, to the various uses of horses in farm activities.

Fair Winds Farm relies on a multi-faceted approach to their business, implementing elements of recreation and celebration as well as agriculture and education. Fair Winds hosts a number of festivities throughout the year that depend on their horses, such as hay rides in the fall and sleigh rides in the winter. Their biggest events include the Harvest Festival in late September and the Winter Solstice Celebration night in December. The Harvest Festival, which is co-sponsored by Windham Localfores and the Riverview Café, includes camp fires, music and local food. Besides these public events, private horse carriage rides can be reserved throughout the year.

Fair Winds’ success has been further reinforced not only by the popularity of the events hosted on the farm, but by the family’s involvement in sustainable agriculture on the community and state level.

Bekah has begun to play a prominent role in the policies that shape Vermont agriculture. She recently became president of the board of directors of the Vermont Grass Farmers Association (VGFA).

“I cannot believe the number of ways [the VGFA] has helped!” exclaims Bekah. She explains that through VGFA, she has received excellent practical tips on grazing methods, traded animals and even acquired the information and encouragement she needed to apply for—and be awarded—a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) grant offered through the USDA to subsidize a permanent fencing system at the farm.

"Bekah's and her parents’ use of horses is raising the standards of grazing to even higher levels," says Rachel Gilker, the Vermont Pasture Network Coordinator at the Center for Sustainable Agriculture, who has done some soil sampling at the farm. "Bekah’s work as a leader in the VGFA has helped support grass-based livestock farming in so many ways. It's inspiring."

From its horse power to its grass-based grazing system, Fair Winds Farm is an exemplary role model for achieving energy sustainability though successful implementation of animal–power methods.

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