

GOLDEN RUSSET FARM

By Laura Kiesel

Just up the road from Middlebury, off route 22A in the middle of what seems like nowhere, are 10 acres of every vegetable an herbivorous Vermonter could ever desire. From buttercup—colored summer squash to blushing tomatoes about to burst with ripeness and everything green in between, Judy Stevens and her husband Will have it handled.

Golden Russet Farm began in 1981 as a small enterprise of the Stevenses when they were newlyweds. It has since evolved to become a versatile vegetable farm that has been certified organic for the past 20 years and won the Sustainable Agriculture Council's Sustainable Farm of the Year award in 2004.

Just about any vegetable one can think of is offered in abundance at Golden Russet -- the farm boasts having the veggie alphabet covered from "A-Z," from arugula to zucchini. In addition to vegetables and herbs, Golden Russet grows raspberries and apples (hence their name) for fruit and cider. But the cornucopia holds more than edibles. Judy Stevens also offers flowers that are a feast for the eyes: colorful bedding plants as well as scarecrow-tall sunflowers that blaze as a backdrop in their field. Their greenhouses are partially accountable for making this diversity of plant offerings feasible.

It all began at the University of Vermont, where Judy and Will met as undergraduates. With a shared creativity in interests like botany and art, they decided through some nudges from family and friends to pursue farming.

The Stevenses also were offering CSA shares long before local food became the hot-button trend it is today and before CSAs were wait-listing people for seasons to come. The Golden Russet CSA started in the late 1980s during the peak of fast food culture. Today they serve about 40 participating families who come on certain days to pick up their shares. A portion of a share is "pick-your-own," which allows families to play a role in farming themselves.

Furthermore, Judy and Will have added a philanthropic aspect to their CSA thereby participating in programs that offer shares to eligible low-income families and the elderly. Vermont Share offers shares of the Stevens' harvest at half-price. The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) subsidizes the other half through donations and fundraising events, namely through their annual fundraiser, "Share the Harvest."

In this event, held on the first Thursday of October, participating restaurants pledge between 5 and 15 percent of that day's sales to the program. These funds are then matched by the amount participating farmers are able to raise in their community or through CSA shareholders.

Currently, over a dozen families have CSA shares at Golden Russet through VT Share and Share the Harvest.

"Farmers like Judy and Will Stevens are essential to the program, not only because of their talents as farmers, but also for their flexibility that allows for different payment schedules, delivery methods and produce preferences that the programs sometimes demand," comments Jean Hamilton, the coordinator for the NOFA-VT Farm Share



Photo courtesy Jennifer Colby

programs. “They also conduct their CSA with a sense of community that inspires their members to help subsidize shares for their neighbors in need.”

A similar program that the Stevens participate in is Senior Farm Share, which offers senior citizens in assisted living facilities access to discount shares, which are picked up and transported to them on a regular basis by volunteers.

“It provides [the seniors] with fresh produce they probably would not be getting,” remarks Mary Woodruff, the Nutrition and Health Promotion Specialist for the Department of Disability, Aging and Independent Living, which co-sponsors the program with NOFA-VT. “This alone has tremendous value.”

Woodruff also explains that the program exposes the senior citizens to a wider array of vegetables than they would likely try in other circumstances. Additionally, she notes a recent survey among participants in Senior Farm Share that indicates that the program helps to free up income that would be directed to food that can then be spent on other necessities like housing and medication.

Besides the obvious benefit of nutritious, fresh produce for low-income and elderly individuals, these programs also allow members to enjoy connections within their community. By having CSA membership, the members develop relationships with their local landscape and their neighborhood farmers in ways they might otherwise not have done.

Judy and Will obviously relish fostering this sense of community among their patrons.

“It’s very satisfying to see someone come to the farm who you’ve known for years and who always knows when what they want is ready,” says Judy. “And then they walk out with a big bag of tomatoes and a smile.”

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