

HARLOW FARM

By Laura Kiesel

Harlow Farm, a diversified mid-sized vegetable farm located in the heart of Westminster was founded in 1917. But who would suspect that what started as a traditional dairy operation would transition to an extremely successful organic vegetable farm, one of the first of its kind in the region?

That's exactly what happened when a young Paul Harlow purchased his father's ailing cow dairy in 1975 and gradually converted it to crops. Harlow realized that he needed a vocation that would allow him to be outdoors. A brief stint studying sustainable agriculture in college prompted him to pursue farming despite his family's initial attempt to persuade him to do something else.

Paul's ambition was not confined to merely overhauling the farm to fully embrace vegetable production -- he wanted it to become organic. Within a year, Paul was farming a quarter-acre field organically. Satisfied with the improved soil quality as well as his harvest, he began gradually employing natural growing methods on more and more land until his entire farm was certified organic. It took about a decade. Today, he has 150 acres of organic vegetables on his original farm and nearby leased land. It is one of the largest organic vegetable farms in New England.

Paul has great reverence for his farm's organic status. He often recalls the poor state of the vegetation before employing organic techniques and states he "would never go back" to conventional growing practices. He also expresses respect for the determination and persistence it takes to grow organic. "You need to do a lot of scouting, pay close attention to crop rotation," he observes.

Indeed, it would seem Harlow's enthusiasm for organic growing is the reason for his success. His farm has the distinction of being one of the first farms to receive a Sustainable Farm of the Year reward in only the second year of its existence, 1999. It was an honor that brought a farm visit by then Vermont governor, Howard Dean. And it is no wonder that Harlow now has a contract with the popular and organically-minded food retailer Whole Foods, with his produce available in outlets in Vermont and Massachusetts. Obviously, times have changed since the early years when customers did not seem to value the organic designation on Harlow's products.

However, Harlow doesn't let his current success overwhelm him.

"I try to keep things simple," he says. He mentions he is grateful for the size of his farm and that it is at a state where he can afford to use machinery for big jobs when needed, but small enough where he, his family and dedicated staff can manage many tasks with manual labor. Harlow mentions he would eventually like to completely localize his retail, offering all his products in close proximity to his farm. His brother Dan co-owns and manages the farm stand which had been defunct for 30 years until Paul purchased the farm. The stand's offerings are largely Harlow produce and bedding plants. The farm stand also houses their popular eatery, Café Loco.



Photo courtesy Jennifer Colby

Though his farms offer a wide variety of vegetables, Paul's specialties are lettuce, kale and collard greens. He has also experimented at times with tending animals. Presently he has very small herds of sheep, pigs, beef cows, meat birds and organic egg-laying hens and offers their products to nearby food outlets. The animals

also provide him with natural fertilizer for his vegetable enterprise, so he doesn't have to purchase fertilizers. Additionally, he rears his animals mostly on the "seconds," or spoils from his crops. This makes for a sustainable closed-loop chain.

Harlow is also dedicated to sharing his wisdom with aspiring organic vegetable growers.

Vern Grubinger, coordinator of the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program and UVM Extension professor, has worked with Harlow on a number of projects. For instance, Harlow has hosted on-site research at his farm comparing different cover crops: peppers, kale and winter squash. He has also held demonstrations of mechanical weed control and techniques for improving soil quality. Harlow was featured in a video produced by the UVM Extension Center for Sustainable Agriculture entitled "Vegetable Farmers and their Diversified Horticultural Marketing Strategies." In the video, he relayed his experiences working as a wholesale grower cooperative and offered advice.

"For years, Paul has been an active cooperater with University of Vermont Extension to help share knowledge with other growers," says Grubinger.

Harlow's enthusiasm to educate others is not only a sign of his success as an organic vegetable farmer, but a reflection of the ethic to increase awareness so that more growers will adopt natural growing practices. ↪

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