

Birds Foot: A Farm

By Kim Houglund

It is the fourth house on the right, one mile past the blinking light on Russell Road. The dirty driveway leads into a small yard. On the left is an old, white farm house, on the right a red barn. Around the yard lie plastic toys, gardening tools, a tractor, a sign which reads "corn, \$1.00 a dozen, 80 cents a quart," and two authentic brown cows. This is Birds Foot, an organic farm, just outside of Canton.

Doug Jones, farmer and resident, walks out of the farm house to test the weather and sees the rebel cows. Immediately, he hollars for assistance to help herd the renegade's back into the barn. It takes five action packed minutes of yelling and swatting to get them locked up. Cows back in place, Jones returns to discuss the farm.

Jones got into organic farming more than eight years ago because, "he wanted to do more for himself." Jones wanted to get away from specializing. He feels that society today forces people into doing one thing until they retire. "Conventional farmers have become so specialized they do not eat their own products," says Jones.

Walking around the farm Jones points to a small garden, "here is where we experiment with vegetables and start early plants." Through a gate lies the fields, some rows were already green. Jones explains that some of the summer crop has been planted already, but most of the growth is rye. Rye keeps the soil from eroding and is used to preserve the land.

The plants will be harvested next week and continue to be harvested until late November. According to Jones much of the land will be used twice. For instance while the spinach is growing, squash will be planted on the same plot. As the spinach is picked the squash will be on its way. All using maximum efficiency of the land.

Birds Foot farm operations are split between the farming of vegetables and the production of yogurt. Nestled in the Adirondack foothills overlooking the countryside, Birds Foot lies on a 130 acre plot of land. Not all of the land is farmland. Some is forest and the rest is divided into land for growing vegetables and land for growing hay to feed the cows.

Birds Foot farm grows, almost, every kind of vegetable that will grow in Northern New York's climate. "Spinach is our main vegetable because it has the longest season," says

Jones. The yogurt is limited to six flavors produced three times a week. The milk comes from eight cows milked twice daily.

What makes Birds Foot unique is the method of farming used. Labeled as organic farming (among other things) it entails the use of non-chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Land management and rotation are also different in organic farming.

Starting a fire in the pot belly stove Jones explains that "At Birds Foot, we are trying to find a niche." Their niche seems to be on more labor intensive crops. Birds Foot can compete on the market if the products need more individual cultivation and care. Large farmers do not have this time nor can they afford the labor.

Birds Foot's main markets are in the North Country. They sell to restaurants i.e. University Inn, supermarkets and co-ops. They, also, attend Farmers Markets. Jones likes Farmers Markets because "you are in contact with the consumer." Economically, however it balances out with selling through a merchant. "It takes more time to go to Farmers Market but you do not have to use a middle man," says Jones.

"The small farmer has it hard all over the country," reflects Jones. But, by farming organically one can cut down on many external farm costs. The demand for energy is lower on an organic farm. Machinery is not utilized as much and fertilizers which are produced with high amounts of petroleum are not used. Also, The erosion of land is much slower in organic farming.

The nutritional benefits of organic farming have not been explored. Jones maintains that because of the way organic vegetables are grown they contain more vitamins and minerals. He complains that big agricultural schools are still focusing all their attention on large farms and chemical farming. They are not exploring the field of organic farming.

Organic farming demands creativity and ingenuity. A simple natural approach of providing plants with nutrients they need to grow. In chemical terms there are two things which distinguish organic and conventional farming, solubility and balance.

Solubility is when less manufactured chemicals are used and organic fertilizers such as manure are employed.



Photographs by Jeff North
Doug Jones

This leaves a slow release of chemicals and nutrients closer to the state of nature. Better balance is maintained when you use natural chemicals because the nutrients are released slower and more nutrients are released. With manufactured fertilizer only the three main proteins are provided, the soil needs at least 20 to 30.

The sun is beginning to peek out of the clouds as Jones begins to express his goals for the future. "We want Birds Foot to be a working farm where all

parts are integrated without using means objectionable to us." Jones says he doesn't ever expect to have a perfect Birds Foot.

Nature is always changing and so must our methods of farming. "We can never find the best way," points out Jones. I always want to get better and better at what I am doing," he says. Birds Foot is a universal effort of all members of the farm. Decisions are made jointly with some specializing in specific areas.

Jones does not have many goals for organic farming in general. He would like to see more research in the area by cultural schools and the Agricultural industry. But, he knows it is not possible or feasible for all farmers to become organic. Also, large farmers receive more tax benefits and he would like to see a more equitable system.

The sun is beginning to set over the fields and the day, what is left of it, is turning nice. Jones walks down to the main house to grab some help to cover some of the garden. The cows will have to be milked in an hour. It is a long day.

