

ACORN Prince Edward Island Farm Tour August 21, 2022

ACORN's last tour of the summer took place on Prince Edward Island where we toured the farms of two ACORN Board Members, Mark Bernard (4th generation farmer) and Judy Loo (6th generation farmer).

Mark and Sally Bernard operate Barnyard Organics, the only organic feed mill east of Quebec, yet in listening to them talk about their farm, their focus is clearly on increasing soil health. They've expanded from a five year crop rotation to an eight year rotation including grazing Belted Galloway cattle on legume/grass pasture. They've also purchased a no-till drill. Mark noted that the no-till drills are still designed to seed into conventional herbicide-killed vegetation but he's experimenting with different scenarios including seeding into winter-killed green manures. Their long-term goal is to till only once in the eight year rotation.



Besides growing a cattle herd, Sally also raises laying hens and meat birds. The layers are on pasture, housed in a large mobile coop surrounded by electric fencing. Predator pressure is high, especially from eagles, so the coop is set up on a wagon tall enough for the hens to get under if an aerial predator approaches. The meat birds are also on pasture in covered mobile shelters. Sally runs a small provincially inspected chicken processing facility where she does her own and custom processing once a week. The family also raises pigs for their own consumption.



The feed mill runs two to three days per week and Mark is regularly buying grain from local certified organic farmers to keep up with demand. They ship over 800 tonnes of feed per year throughout the Maritimes, some in 1 tonne tote bags, the rest in 25 kg 3-ply paper bags (a remake of the old-style paper potato bags). When asked why there weren't more organic feed mills in Atlantic Canada, their answer was "because of the price"; organic grain prices are high and retailers put an extra mark-up on premium products. Meat producers are hesitant to make the switch to organic because they're unsure customers would pay the extra. There are other barriers too including access to certified abattoirs and lack of consumer education/demand for meat raised as part of a regenerative system.



Our next stop was Springwillow Farms where we joined our host Judy Loo for lunch under the shade of an old apple tree. Judy shared the history of the farm which has been in her family for over 200 years. Her father, Gerrit Loo, was one of the early adopters of organic certification in PEI. Interested in experimenting with different varieties, Gerrit and Judy's mother, Joyce, planted lots of fruit, nut and shade trees creating today's wonderfully sheltered site and treasure trove of plant diversity.

After several years working abroad, Judy returned to the farm in 2017. She runs a market garden selling her produce at the Charlottetown Farmers' Market. She likes to offer a variety of products and a tour through the many gardens was a look into the past as well as the future. Judy refers to the plants started by previous generations as "legacy" plantings and we saw many including apples, pears, plums, walnuts, raspberries, gooseberries, and arctic kiwi. Judy's newer plantings include hazelnut, apricot and blackberry. The tour continued through an herb garden, a sheltered "warm-season" garden (tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, okra and artichoke!), and two large plots of field vegetables. Judy also has a flock of 100 laying hens. The spent bedding from the birds is an important part of her soil fertility.



In the greenhouse, Judy showed us her simple set up for starting seeds. A small greenhouse outfitted with shelves is heated by a portable heater. The double greenhouse keeps the seedlings warm in the early spring.



Judy's biggest challenge is weed control. She lays cardboard topped with compost and soil around the vegetables and uses her electric mower and weed whipper between beds but she still has to do a lot of hand weeding. As for pest control, there are no deer on PEI but there are slugs; Judy puts a protective border of broken mussel shells around the perimeter of her raised beds.

And that's a wrap for our 2022 summer farm tours. Another big thank you to our wonderful farmer hosts and to all who came out to share the day under the PEI sunshine. I'm already looking forward to farm tours, 2023!

Written by Desiree Jans, August 22, 2022