

Old values define a modern philosophy

Millennial desire for a lifestyle that promotes health and happiness above materialism exemplified by these young farmers

BY JANET WALLACE

It's October and the woods are in full colour. After crossing the New Brunswick-Nova Scotia border, I've been driving back roads—roughly following tidal rivers that empty into the Bay of Fundy. Just inland from Joggins, NS, Broadfork Farm overlooks the River Herbert.

As I walk up to the 200 year-old farmhouse, a flock of ducks underneath apple trees announces my arrival. Shannon Jones and Bryan Dyck invite me inside against a backdrop of raucous quacking.

In the dining room, we sip herbal tea made from plants grown on the farm. The room has minimal furnishings but contains an impressive collection of organic farming books. The library reflects Shannon and Bryan's commitment to lifelong education. They read, experiment, and participate in workshops and conferences. Above all, they are keen observers, good listeners and open to learning from others.

Although they want to discover more efficient ways to farm, Shannon and Bryan also explore ways to grow in life. Their wisdom permeates our discussion as they express views on life/work balance and ecological responsibility.

Before moving to Nova Scotia, Shannon, who grew up in Winnipeg and Ottawa, worked on organic farms in several countries including the US, India and Mexico. Both she and Bryan, who is originally from Kitchener, ON, managed organic farms—Bryan in



■ Bryan Dyck and Shannon Jones stand in their garden at Broadfork Farm, near Joggins, NS.

Ontario and Shannon in Costa Rica.

While leasing land at Windhorse Farm, outside New Germany, NS, the couple gave free workshops on organic farming. By sharing their knowledge, Bryan and Shannon were “paying it forward,” giving to others to reflect the help they had received.

“We got a grant from Heifer International,” explains Shannon. “The Canadian grant program is no longer

offered but it's similar to what Heifer does internationally. It's a pay-it-forward program.” For example, the charity might give a farmer a goat, and later the farmer would give away some of the goat's offspring. If Heifer gave someone seeds, the person would plant them, then collect the next generation of seeds and give away a portion of these.

An unexpected outcome of the workshops was an email about a property

IMAGES COURTESY OF BROADFORK FARM



■ Clockwise from top left: Rainbow carrots bunched to go to the market; Bryan with some of Broadfork's produce at the market; standing beside Jerusalem artichoke plants; fresh peas bursting with flavour; Shannon harvesting flowers for the market.

for sale. A woman asked if they knew of anyone looking for land, and told them about her neighbour's farm for sale in River Herbert.

Bryan and Shannon visited the land. They dug pits, had the soil tested and liked the results.

"We didn't think we could afford a farm when we were so young," says Shannon. She was 29 years old and Bryan was 26.

Financing was a struggle. Farm Credit Canada wouldn't consider a loan unless Shannon or Bryan took a full-time off-farm job. Fortunately, the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board accepted that both of them wanted to farm and approved their mortgage and loan.

Now, the business is a success. Broadfork Farm sells certified organic vegetables at the Dieppe farmers' market from spring to fall. They also sell to high-end restaurants including Black Rock Bistro (Parrsboro), Wild Caraway (Advocate), Little Louis' Oyster Bar and the Tide and Boar in Moncton.

The focus of the farm is vegetables, but "not necessarily typical" ones. For example, Broadfork stopped growing cabbage but instead grow senposai, a

related plant with large, tender, flat leaves that can be used for wraps.

Chefs are particularly interested in novel foods, such as Jerusalem artichokes. This relative of sunflowers has red and white fist-sized tubers that can be used like potatoes or parsnips. Crosnes, (pronounced 'cronés') another farm specialty, are small, twisted tubers that add a crunch and flavour similar to water chestnuts. Broadfork also grows many types of greens, Asian turnips, more than 50 varieties of tomatoes, many types of melons, and cut flowers.

"Our customers are adventurous eaters," says Bryan. "They are open-minded and interested in nutrition."

When deciding what to grow, the couple look for good flavour, vibrant colours, high nutritional content and, sometimes, interesting stories.

"We share stories how certain crops came to be, along with cooking and nutritional tips," Shannon says. "For example, we grow a lot of rainbow carrots—we like to tell people how carrots started off as purple and white. Then the King of Holland wanted a carrot in orange, the Dutch national colour, and

asked the plant breeders."

Sometimes, they talk about the farmers who breed unusual varieties.

"Without the story," Shannon says, "people might just say 'I don't know what this is' and not buy it."

"Our customers like that they can ask us things, like how to cook certain vegetables," explains Bryan. "We're not just employees at the market."

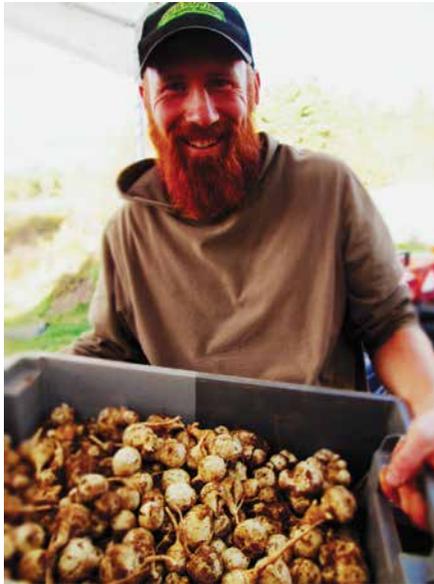
Bryan and Shannon's approach to produce farming has been influenced by studies that indicate that vegetables in the 1950s had higher levels of nutrients than vegetables currently found in supermarkets.

While walking on grassy pathways between rows of burgundy-coloured radicchio, Shannon says she believes that soil health affects both the nutritional quality and the flavour of food.

"That's one reason we keep our pathways covered with grass and not tilled," she adds. "This allows fungi, bacteria and earthworms to live there and quickly repopulate the beds after tilling. That's our hope."

Broadfork has 15 acres in total with 1.5 to 2 acres in vegetables, herbs and flowers each year, and another three or

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■ Above: Bryan holds a crate of recently harvested Jerusalem artichokes; Shannon with a bouquet of colourful radishes; harvesting carrots and more in the autumn.

more acres in cover crops. Cover crops provide no direct income to the farm but they help improve the soil, provide nutrients and promote soil health.

“There’s so much going on in the soil that we don’t really understand—plant/soil interactions are very complex. It’s hard to know what we, as humans, should do,” states Shannon.

They don’t use any sprays, not even organic ones, and they even resist using deer fencing.

“We’re really uncomfortable with the idea of excluding other species,” adds Shannon, “but if the deer damage gets really bad though, we would consider fencing a small area.”

In a similar vein, they allow many weeds to live. The rationale is that weeds provide diversity and ground cover, which leads to healthier soil, which helps crops handle competition. It seems to work. The fields are filled with weeds along with crops that look great even after a droughty summer.

Crop yields may have suffered from lack of water but Shannon says they don’t want to irrigate as a regular practice. Neither do they want to dig a deeper well because they feel that’s “stealing water from the water table.” Instead, they want to increase water-holding capacity of their sandy soil.

Every winter, the couple reflects on their long-term vision. They consider whether they are meeting their goals,

such as environmental stewardship, personal health, happiness as individuals and as a couple, and economics.

“If we made a living, but our health and relationship suffered, we would have failed,” comments Bryan. “In farming, we’re taught to focus on money. We could make more money if we worked longer hours or didn’t take time off, but we don’t want to trade that time for money.”

The couple try to take Sunday and Monday off each week, except for critical chores like tending the ducks.

Likewise, Shannon describes how they don’t want to compromise their health for income. Protecting their health is a long-term investment, whereas money for vegetables is a short-term payoff.

Unusual for a couple in their early 30s, they have no Internet access, not even a dial-up connection, at home. They don’t have cell phones. Instead, they go to the library to check their email and use the Internet. I can’t help but wonder about the connection between their wisdom and the limited access to the Internet. They intentionally chose not to have the distraction of Facebook, Netflix and Google in their home, and this allows them to spend more time reading, reflecting and discussing issues.

On their website, Shannon posted her Farmer’s Manifesto, which includes

“When I die, I want to be remembered as a person who left her farm better than she found it. And who inspired others to nourish themselves with beautiful, unique vegetables too.”

In the farm’s name, ‘Broadfork’ has two meanings. A broadfork is a hand tool that promotes soil health because it has minimal effect on soil life. But also, they like the idea of “a fork with a ‘broad’ diversity of food on it.”

On the farm, I feel relaxed and appreciate the peaceful feeling Shannon says they are working to create. Birds sing and swoop overhead. Flowering herbs are covered with bees bumbling from one blossom to the next. Many life forms, big and small, benefit from the hard work and vision of Shannon and Bryan.

At the Dieppe market, customers talk with the couple. The topic is vegetables; both customers and farmers speak with passion and enthusiasm. The customers get delicious and nutritious food along with the great feeling of supporting young farmers. But to summarize the economic transaction as a win-win situation is far too limiting. The benefits go beyond just the farmers and customers. The land benefits from the couple’s stewardship. Bryan and Shannon are committed to sharing their knowledge, which leads to a new cohort of farmers. And so, the cycle of growth continues. 