

First-time farmers embrace farm life with pride

by Stella Shepard

Agriculture



Byron Sawatzky and Susan Fitzpatrick are realizing their dream of working in agriculture. "Like many farmers, the biggest challenge for us is making a living," says Byron. "Our long-term goal is to have a full-time farming operation but the reality is that most farm families have to work off the farm as well. As we work toward our goal, it's great to get advice from an experienced farmer."

It's early morning on the farm before the heat of the sun greets the day. Huge drops of dew form on endless rows of lush green vegetables. It's a picture perfect postcard of rural living on PEI that has ignited the dreams of a young Island couple from the city.

Byron Sawatzky and his life partner **Susan Fitzpatrick** of Charlottetown are a first-time farm family. They commute 45 minutes from their city home to tend their crops on **Reg Phelan's** farm in the Morell area.

"Our parents were raised on farms but they never farmed as adults," says Byron. "We are new to farming and very inexperienced. As we learn, we are gaining transferable skills that can be applied anywhere we decide to farm."

Why farming?

"I like the idea of farming because it allows me to be my own boss," says Byron. "Farming allows me more flexibility. I don't mind hard work but I need to do it at my own pace."

"The skills I've developed over the years while selling produce at a market in Alberta have been very helpful. It's taken the guess-work out of how to package produce and display product. It has made it easier for us to build a client base in this marketplace."

"But farming comes with the sense of risk. There's no income unless we are out there pounding the pavement to sell our produce." The couple sells their vegetables at the farmers' markets in Charlottetown and Moncton.

Getting started

"In 2008, a job working with another farmer was coming to an end," says Byron. "Through Susan, I connected with an organic farmer, Reg Phelan. Reg hired me to work for the remainder of the season."

Working for Reg gave Byron and Susan the inspiration to try farming on their own. They were not ready or able to buy land or farm equipment, so they gratefully accepted an offer from Reg to use land on his farm.

Informal mentoring

"Not knowing a lot about farming, it's helpful to be able to ask advice from an experienced farmer like Reg," says Byron. "We have a very informal mentoring and partnership relationship. Reg provides invaluable information about plants, crop rotation, and fertility, which are key to farming successfully."

An awesome experience

"This spring, we spent considerable time in the greenhouse planting, watering, weeding and dreaming about what our little seeds would become," says Susan. "The excitement kept building as the greenhouse warmed up and the fields dried out. I really enjoyed being out in the fields, preparing the soil and planting, transplanting and weeding. I love the connection that I felt to the earth."

Off-farm income supports the venture

Just before they started taking their vegetables to market, Susan was offered full-time employment as a social worker. "My income supports us during our first year of farming while living very simply," says Susan. "I continue to be involved in our farm by traveling with Byron to the Moncton market every Saturday. It's been a big commitment to get up at 4 am every Saturday and work a 15-hour day after a full work week."

Direct marketing

Byron and Susan are part of **Sea Spray Atlantic**, a cooperative marketing venture owned by organic farmers. Sea Spray members, other farmers, and consumers are part of a larger cooperative called **Growing Circle Co-op**.

Reg is a fourth-generation farmer and a founding member of Sea Spray. He welcomed the opportunity to share his farming skills with Byron, Susan and another first-time female farmer who is also growing crops on his land.

"It's great to have a closer working relationship with other farmers," says Reg. "It's encouraging to see younger people interested in farming. Many farmers are approaching retirement years. There is going to be a greater need for younger farmers in the near future."



For more information about Byron and Susan's farming experiences, visit their blog at www.lonetreefarm.blogspot.com or contact Byron and Susan at byron.fitzky@gmail.com or susan.fitzky@gmail.com



For more information about the **Growing Circle Co-op**, visit www.growingcircleorganic.com

To contact **Reg Phelan**, call 961-2428 or e-mail rphelan@pei.sympatico.ca