Iowa couple grows food, family, community on organic farm

Some people are born to farm. Others grow to love it. In Melissa Dunham’s case, she fell in love with a farmer—and now she loves both the farmer and the farm.

“I was happily employed in the Twin Cities,” Ms. Dunham says, “but then I fell in love with this wonderful man who told me he was an organic vegetable farmer. I thought, ‘Sure, why not?’ We got married within seven months.”

It was an unexpected career and life change, she admits. “Everybody thought I was nuts moving down here to central Iowa and be a farmer,” she says. But now she’s growing food she believes in—and in a way that will leave the land in better condition for the generations to follow.

She and her husband Andy Dunham own and operate Grinnell Heritage Farm in Grinnell, Iowa.

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profiles in soil health

The certified organic farm has grown from three acres in 2007, to 22 acres today, and produces more than 60 varieties of plants and vegetables. “We grow everything from asparagus to zucchini,” she says.

Income from the farm is generated through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) with 280 shareholders; produce sales to a few of the larger grocery chains and co-ops in the Cedar Rapids/Iowa City corridor in Eastern Iowa as well as Des Moines areas; and direct-consumer sales through two farmer’s markets.

But the Dunhams also grow another valuable commodity on their farm: Learning opportunities for their customers.

“"We have a very open door policy and tell our customers that they can come out and they can walk around the farm whenever they want to,” Ms. Dunham says. “We like them to be able to ask questions. People really need to interact with their food, so that is something we definitely pride ourselves in.”

Feed the soil, feed the plants

The Dunhams understand that the health of their soil translates into healthier crops and a more resilient farm. A fifth-generation farmer on the Grinnell farmland, Mr. Dunham has made improving the health of the farm’s soil a major priority.

“When I moved here, the soil’s organic matter was somewhere in the 1-2 percent range,” he says. “Now we have managed to get our soil organic matter levels up to 6-8 percent.”

By composting their cow manure, and then applying it on a cover crop, the Dunhams are able to increase fertility and add carbon to the soil.

“Our philosophy is feed the soil, it will feed your plants, and then it will feed us,” he says.

Mr. Dunham seeks to minimize soil disturbance in order to preserve soil aggregation and microbiological habitat, but because the farm is organic, tillage remains a necessary practice to control weeds. Nevertheless, he works hard to minimize its use.

“We use straw mulch. And we do a number of different things that help us mitigate some of the negative side-effects of tillage,” Mr. Dunham says. “As long as we time things appropriately tillage is a fairly useful tool.”

Judging from the farm’s improvement in yields over time, this approach is working. “We read the ‘Knott’s Handbook for Vegetable Growers,’ which is kind of the vegetable grower’s official handbook, and our yields are almost always well above what their best yields are projected,” he says.
Accelerating resource adoption

Working with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service’s the Dunhams have been able to accelerate the adoption of a number of resource-protecting practices through the agency’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). “There were several practices, like adding hedge rows for wildlife habitat, that we probably wouldn’t have been able to do without the EQIP contract,” Mr. Dunham says.

The Dunhams were also able to take advantage of EQIP’s Organic Initiative back when they were converting from a conventional farming operation. “We did an awful lot of stuff with cover cropping and we did a lot of things for managing water quality,” he says. “The program was very helpful.”

Growing diversity, growing resilience

Cropping diversity plays a central role in improving soil health, but it also plays a part in keeping the farming operation resilient.

“We have had some really, really severe weather swings over the last seven years and on numerous occasions. It’s either been too wet or too dry or both,” says Ms. Dunham. “Last year we had both flooding and a drought, but by being diverse we have been able to stay in the black. It’s helped us stay afloat when the weather extremes aren’t in our favor.”

While all farmers have to deal with weather-related issues, organic farming has additional challenges. However, Mr. Dunham believes it’s worth the extra effort. “People who are wary of an organic system think it takes a lot of management—and it does,” he says. “But if you stay committed, if you follow the principles—even if you make a few mistakes—and stick with it, things will get better. The yields will go up and you can rejuvenate tired soils. It can be done.”

Inherent farming challenges notwithstanding, a lot of good things are being raised on the Grinnell Heritage Farm including healthy food, healthy soil, healthy family and a chance to teach other people about farming. They’re among the top reasons the Dunhams love farming.

“And,” Ms. Dunham says, “I love being able to spend this much time with my family.”

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Grass vegetation strips between cropping rows serve as a “beetle bank” to provide habitat for beneficial insects on the farm.