Small Organic Farm Has Impact in South Dakota

Cycle Farm, Spearfish, South Dakota

Trish Jenkins and Jeremy Smith are in their sixth year on the farm. They grow a mixture of vegetables on four and eight-year rotations. They feel they have a good crop rotation with a four-year rotation for peas, beans, corn or garlic, potatoes and winter squash. The rest of the beds are on an eight-year rotation.

Jenkins and Smith first started marketing their vegetables through a local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farmer’s market. Three years ago they moved an old farm stand down the road in front of the farm and now sell directly. They also take produce to a couple of local restaurants which supports local food systems.

Jenkins said, “We grow the mixed vegetables with no-till and with a lot of mulching and cover crops.” They try to keep the ground covered at all times. “If there are gaps between vegetable rows, we try growing cover crops to feed the soil, pull carbon dioxide out the air through photosynthesis, increase soil biology, and improve our soil organic matter,” said Smith.

One of the benefits of increasing soil organic matter is to improve infiltration and moisture holding capacity. The ditch system that provides the water to their farm is 140 years old. “If a line breaks and water is shut off,” said Smith, “we do not stress as much since the ground has the resiliency to manage some dryness.”
Smith says there seems to be a big push with no-till and soil health from large farming systems down to small scale farms. He says, “for new farmers and people like us who did not grow up in agriculture, we can see the benefits of soil health practices.” They use the practices that have been successful on large scale farms, but try to scale them down to fit their farm without disturbing the soil.

Jenkins says they are farming organically but also trying to minimize their off-farm input by using compost and nutrients from the farm. “Crop rotation has helped with nutrient cycling so we can feed everything appropriately,” she said. Not pulling a certain nutrient out of the soil by not having the same crop in the same place year after year helps keep the soil healthy and improves plant growth.

They enjoy bringing people on the farm and engaging them in the local food system, which is a big part of their enjoyment. They host a number of events on the farm over the season including workshops on seed saving and pollinator habitat as well as farm tours and a harvest party. They have seen a growth in local support for locally-grown food. “In the past six years,” said Smith, “just seeing the interests and benefits of locally-grown food has just snowballed here, which is very exciting to be here at the beginning and see the local food system develop.”

Smith says occasionally they get asked why they got into farming, why are they doing what they do, and why in Spearfish. “I guess we both like massive challenges,” he said, “that are multi-faceted.” They have a friend who farms in New Hampshire with a saying, ‘Farming is not like rocket science, it’s more complicated than that.’ They take that saying as a challenge to know they can do really good work. Smith said, “It is so beneficial in many ways like with the carbon sequestering, feeding the community, the education component.” Every aspect of farming can have positive and the rewarding outcomes, and that is a big reason for their choosing to grow mixed vegetables and sell direct to the end user.


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