He took over management of the Culpepper County farm in 2003, but the family was leasing the crop-land to another farmer who hadn’t really done much with it. He knew it would take a lot of work to turn the place into the grazing operation he imagined.

The Organic Connection

Ingram bought his herd from a couple that had hired him as a herdsman on their dairy farm a few years earlier but were nearing retirement age. He brought his new herd home to his family farm and set out on converting his land into a 100 percent organic, grass-fed dairy farm.

Today the Ingrams milk about 220 cows. The herd genetics are predominately Jersey, but they’re breeding in Shorthorn, Holstein and Swedish Red cattle, too.

A smart man learns from his mistakes, Terry Ingram likes to say, but a wise man learns from the mistakes of others.

“I’ll never claim to be a wise man, but I’m at least a smart man. Once you experience what it’s like to farm organic, your eyes open to how abundant nature is. I am blessed to see it every day. I feel privileged to be able to farm this way.”

Terry and his wife, Alyson, their two small children, his parents and his brother all live on and work the Virginia farm where he was born and raised.
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profiles in soil health

When you treat the land as a gift, something that’s given to you, it will automatically respond and give you what you need.

- Terry Ingram, landowner

Ingram can subdivide his paddocks up to four times to accommodate the grazing needs of his cows.

“We want cows that can maintain good body condition on 100 percent grass. The cows are looking better and better. I have gotten much more in tune with feeding the soil, and I can actually see the return on that effort. I have grass when other people don’t, because healthy soil retains water so much better.”

Farming for the Future

Terry says he owes a lot of the farm’s success to his mother, Boo, and his brother, Rush: “They’ve supported my efforts, and we all live right here on the farm. It’s great to raise my kids like this with their grandparents and uncle around them.”

The Ingrams worked with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to reduce polluted runoff from his pastures and to put up fences within pastures that allow Terry to rotate his cows more frequently, improving soil health. They also worked with NRCS to create fences to keep his herd away from nearby streams.

“With help from NRCS, we put in fencing, several thousand feet of laneways so the cows can walk from paddock to paddock, and ran water lines to every paddock,” he says.

Working With Nature

Ingram has no fertilizer bills because he lets nature take care of balancing the nutrients in his soil. Recent soil tests revealed some eye opening results from his conservation activities.

"Most farmers consider three percent organic matter to be really good. My soil has gone up to six percent in eight years of rotational grazing. That equates to 250,000 pounds of carbon added to every acre of soil."

“As a farmer, I’m learning new lessons everyday. One of the most valuable is that healthy land produces healthy food,” he adds. “Once you experience what it’s like to farm organic, your eyes open to how abundant nature is. I am in total awe of it.”


Photos by Russel French courtesy of Organic Valley.

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