

Neighborhood Farm

Locally grown produce makes small acreage vital to Fairbanks community

By Mike Federman

Long before supermarkets made shopping for groceries a one-stop convenience, people got their food from specialized vendors: the butcher shop, the bakery and the produce stand.

With an escalation of national food scares in the past few years, many consumers are rethinking what they buy and where their food comes from. A preference for locally grown has returned.

Century-old farms are trying new practices—and new family farms have emerged—to give their neighbors options beyond what the supermarket has to offer.

“Small-scale, community-based ag is the way this country should be headed in agriculture,” says Mike Emers, who runs Rosie Creek Farm with his wife, Joan Hornig, southwest of Fairbanks, Alaska. “Almost everything I sell is direct to my customer. This is the best way for a farm my size to make it. There is a demand for high-quality produce, where the consumer knows the farmer.”

A lot more Fairbanks-area residents are getting to know Emers and what his farm has



Above, organic farming intern Matthew Poitras washes carrots while community supported agriculture program shareholder Cathy Donaldson bunches the carrots at Rosie Creek Farm in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Right, Max Donaldson, 11, harvests beets with farming intern Jen Becker.



to offer as his business—and the size of his operation—grows.

Rosie Creek Farm is certified organic. It grows produce for a community supported agriculture (CSA) program.

CSA members buy a share at the beginning of the growing season, then receive a weekly allocation of fresh produce during harvest.

The farm did not exist until Emers bought the wooded property and cleared the first patch of ground in 1998, removing trees in an area of minimal development reached by progressively rougher roads.

“I started small,” Emers says. “I cleared a little bit and farmed until I was successful, and then cleared a little more. I have to stay within my limits. I can’t sell more shares than I can accommodate.”

Four of the farm’s 6 acres are in production. Emers has 38 acres to draw from, but will wait to clear more land until he needs it.

In 2008, Rosie Creek Farm’s CSA program had 90 members. Emers would like to see that number reach 200.

Knowing how many people he grows food for takes some of the guesswork out of what he will plant each spring.

“Everything is sold at the beginning of the season,” he says. “The aspect I like is that I know what is harvested will be taken home, and it’s already paid for.”

Field Work

On a sunny morning the first week of September, there already is a chill in the air that portends the fast-approaching Alaskan winter.

It doesn’t seem to bother the

mosquitoes, who are out in skin-covering force. Once the sun warms the field, their activity increases.

But the small field crew has too much work to do to worry about airborne pests.

Cathy Donaldson’s sons Ti, 8, and Max, 11, pick beets and carrots for CSA shares.

“They like to do the harvesting,” Cathy says. “The weeding days were hard, which was a great experience because it showed that farming is not all fun.”

The Donaldsons live in Fairbanks and have a CSA work share. They help with the day’s harvest, sort the crops into shares and deliver

them to drop-off locations in town.

Also working the beet row is Jen Becker, one of Rosie Creek Farm’s three interns for the season.

“You sort of fall into what you like to do and what you’re good at,” she says of picking beets.

Becker considers herself an apprentice farmer, and is interested in having her own organic farm. She is learning the knowledge Emers has to share and applies it every day in the field.

“I didn’t want to spend time in a classroom,” Becker says. “This way, I’m getting paid and getting an education.”

Becker, 29, is a native of Rhode Island. She came to Alaska for an opportunity to work outside and has worked with the state Department of Natural Resources.

Part of her day is spent with textbooks and a curriculum devised by Emers.

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Community Supported Ag

Community supported agriculture (CSA) was introduced to the United States from Europe in the mid-1980s.

The CSA concept originated in the 1960s in Switzerland and Japan, where consumers interested in safe food and farmers seeking stable markets for their crops joined together in economic partnerships, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Agriculture Library Web site.

Most CSA programs promote sustainability as part of their marketing strategy. Members share in the bounty, but also share the burden of farm economics, such as poor harvests caused by inclement weather, pests or disease.

“You become part of the farm cycle when you join a CSA program,” says Mimi Feuling of Bonners Ferry, Idaho. “A lot of people are exploring a new way of buying their food. It’s healthy for people to know about farming: frost comes, animals get sick.”

Feuling runs Cascade Creek Farm with her husband, Rob Fredericks. The couple produce beef, pork, chicken and eggs from a small family farm in the Kootenai River Valley.

Getting Started

Cascade Creek Farm has been in operation for eight years. It only recently began exploring CSA as an option, and still is determining how best to serve shareholders while maintaining economic stability.

Feuling says a good business plan is essential for anyone considering launching a CSA program.

“It helps you assess whether you are making money,” she says.

Cascade Creek is in the process of having its 65 acres of pastureland certified as organic, an aspect that helps draw customers who are

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Rosie Creek Farm owner Mike Emers holds a bunch of Sugarsnax carrots, a popular variety with CSA members.

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“There is a library, and then there is Mike’s brain to pick,” says Matthew Poitras, a 28-year-old intern who grew up in Montpelier, Vermont. “Hands on is great if you can remember what you did at the end of the day.”

Poitras came to Alaska looking for work after he hit the road for a trip across America.

He was “bored and unfulfilled” with media jobs he took after receiving a degree in communications from Norwich University in Northfield, Vermont.

Like Becker, he sees a future in small organic

farms as a return to a simpler time.

“It’s nice to be in touch with the community,” he says. “I enjoy the community aspect of it. I see CSA members every week.”

Learning Curve

Like his protégés, Emers wasn’t born into a farm family.

He is a trained botanist who worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, studying how oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge affects caribou.

“I’m a gardener who let things get out of hand,” he says. “I had to learn how to farm.”

Experimentation has been part of Emers’ success. Alaska’s short but intense growing season is his biggest challenge. Last year, he lost his pumpkins, winter squash and beans to frost.

“Ten thousand dollars in crops,

that hurts,” he says. “But it’s part of the gamble of farming.”

Then there are the nonpaying customers to deal with.

“One moose can come in and do \$1,000 damage in a night,” he says.

Emers stresses choosing the right variety of seeds to plant, which also is a matter of trial and error.

Two of the day’s harvest are Rosie Creek Farm staples: Red Ace beets, which “always do well,” and Sugarsnax carrots.

“People now know us for our Sugarsnax,” Emers says. “It’s the sweetness that really makes a difference.”

Emers uses fish bone meal as his main fertilizer, which is ground up at fish processing plants in Alaska. He uses drip-tape irrigation

from a well to water his crops, which are rotated regularly.

A greenhouse holds tomatoes: 320 hand-grafted plants. Melons and cucumbers grow in a “high tunnel,” an unheated greenhouse-like structure used to extend the growing season.

Not satisfied with his finite resources, Emers has applied for ag innovation grants to improve his yield and make the most of his land.

Ultimately, his success comes back to Fairbanks residents in the form of fresh produce that wasn’t shipped in from the Lower 48.

“This is not a farming state. There’s only a handful of people doing what we’re doing,” he says. “My CSA members get the best of what I have, and they know it.” ■

For more information about Rosie Creek Farm, go to www.rosiecreekfarm.com.



Ti Donaldson, 8, holds a tomato he picked for CSA shares in one of the greenhouses at Rosie Creek Farm.

CSA Programs

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looking for more control over what they eat.

“Grass-fed beef will be healthier for your heart than grain-finished beef,” Feuling says. “There are no nitrates or nitrites. We use no antibiotics or hormones.”

Besides health concerns, Feuling says, it is important for her clients to know their meat comes from animals who have been treated humanely throughout their life cycle, a practice Cascade Creek Farm is noted for.

“That’s one of the benefits of a small family farm,” Feuling says. “Each animal gets daily human contact. We get a lot of people who want to see the farm. They want to know: ‘Do butchers treat the animals with respect?’ We’ve been lucky to work with butchers who have been phenomenal in how they treat the animals.” ■



Cascade Creek Farm produces pork from free-range pastured hogs. Learn more at www.cascadecreekfarm.com.

Online Resources

Below are two Web sites with information about CSA farms and how to find a local CSA program:

- The USDA Natural Agriculture Library’s Alternative Farming Systems Information Center includes a farmers’ resource list: www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml

- Local Harvest has information about organic food and a search engine for CSA programs: www.localharvest.org/csa



Moveable Feast

Moose and other wildlife often visit Nancy Brown's mountaintop home in North Idaho, helping themselves to her vegetables and flowers.

Last year, she outwitted them.

Nancy planted tomatoes, beans, carrots and flowers in pots on a long trailer.

She hooked the trailer to a tractor and transported the mobile garden into a shed at night and pulled it out again in morning to catch the sun.

Moose still visit for a drink of water, but now they have to get their greens elsewhere. ■

Story and photo submitted by Nancy's uncle, Don Peters of Spokane, Washington.

Garden Space

Old-Fashioned Remedy

I was going to make bath salts with Epsom salt. I read on the package it was good fertilizer, so I went right out and put some around some plants, and then watered. I was really surprised. It really made them grow and the plants really bloomed.

— Nadine Eacker, Potlatch, Idaho

Epsom salt makes a good fertilizer because its primary components are magnesium and sulphur, two minerals often lacking in soil.

According to the Epsom Salt Industry Council, when used as a fertilizer, Epsom salt will:

- Help seeds germinate.
- Make plants grow bushier.
- Produce more flowers.
- Increase chlorophyll production.
- Improve phosphorus and nitrogen uptake.

Epsom Salt Tips

Houseplants: 2 tablespoons per gallon of water; feed plants monthly.

Tomatoes: 1 tablespoon per foot of plant height per plant; apply every two weeks.

Roses: 1 tablespoon per foot of plant height per plant; apply every two weeks. Scratch a half-cup into soil at base to encourage flowering canes and new cane growth. Soak unplanted bare root roses in a half-cup per gallon of water to help roots recover.

Sage: Do not apply. This herb is one of the few plants that does not benefit from Epsom salt. ■



Blades That Blaze

Extend the visual interest of your garden past summer with ornamental grass. Its eye-catching color in autumn will hold its shape come winter.

Switchgrass, or *Panicum virgatum*, is a hardy perennial native to grasslands across a large swath of North America.

Switchgrass grows to about 4 feet tall. After becoming established, it is drought tolerant, relatively disease free and requires little maintenance other than cutting back dead leaves in spring.

Several cultivars produce reddish grass blades at maturity.

The "Rotstrahlbusch" variety has an upright growth habit and is tinged with red all season. "Shenandoah" (pictured above) has a cascading form. Its green leaves turn red by mid- to late summer. Both varieties produce burgundy-colored seedheads. ■

Story and photo by Mike Federman.