

Organic Production

Feature Farm

Applecheek Farm

By Lisa McCrory

John and Judy Clark are the owners and operators of Applecheek Farm, located in Hyde Park, Vermont. A magical and picturesque place filled with meadows, trails, hills, pond, ravines, and spectacular views of the surrounding mountain ranges – Applecheek Farm is located off the Garfield Road in Hyde Park, VT. They have a registered Holstein herd milking 65 cows and have been dairy farming since 1965. Two hundred acres of their 327 acre farm are woods – the rest is open for rotational grazing and growing hay (both dry and ensiled). To help in the operation of the farm, the Clarks have one full-time hired man, part-time workers, their two sons, as well as exchange students that come from all over the world.

About 12 years ago, John, Judy and their two sons John and Jason decided to diversify and open the farm's doors to Agri-tourism. By diversifying their farm, they were able to involve their boys in the growing farm and keep their dairy herd at a size that they enjoy. Along with their dairy operation, they operate a small maple sugaring business and provide lots of fun, educational activities for visiting groups including sleigh and wagon rides with two Belgian horses, tractor wagon rides, cart rides with a miniature horse or llama, llama treks, farm/maple tours and school field trips. They have a small retail shop on the farm, where, at the present time, they sell emu products (meat, therapeutic and cosmetic oil products, leather, feathers and eggs), maple syrup, felted llama hand made items, birch candle holders, Applecheek Farm t-shirts, sweat shirts and canvas bags, and more.

Three years ago, they opened a large hall (capacity up to 100 people) and small meeting room with a kitchenette which they have been able to rent

out to the community. Their son Jason, owner and operator of JDC's Just Delicious Catering, uses the commercial kitchen in this hall providing the meals for many events on the farm and in the local community. He cooks primarily with organic and/or locally grown foods, using as much of the produce as he can from Applecheek Farm itself. This is the location for the 2004 NODPA Field Days (August 20 & 21, 2004), so come and see this beautiful farm first hand!

The Clarks became certified organic in January of



The Clark Family, left to right, John Jr., Rocio, Sophia, John Sr., Judy, and Jason.

2000 and ship to Horizon Organic. Prior to transitioning, many of their management approaches to health and overall animal husbandry were compliant with the National Organic Standards; they were already grazing their livestock and using alternative (approved) therapies in dealing with a lot of herd health issues. Judy started studying homeopathy in the mid 1990's to care for her family and it quickly carried

over to their cows and other miscellaneous animals. The natural approach to caring for everyone just felt better and by 1999 they were consulting with a nearby homeopathic Veterinarian for herd health checks and other large animal health needs.

Prior to transitioning, John was a little nervous about how well his crops would yield without the occasional conventional fertilizers. Even though a lot of the animal health approaches were alternatively minded, John routinely dry treated his animals and worried that he might have more cases of mastitis at freshening if he stopped this practice. Happily, the Clarks have found that their feed volume has been better than expected and the cases of mastitis at freshening did not change when he stopped his routine use of the dry cow mastitis tubes.

On top of uncertain crop yields and mastitis was the uncertainty of the organic market, but they have been happy with this as well. The market for organic milk products continue to be strong and as a result more farms are transitioning to organic each year in Vermont (This year we expect to have another 20

(Continued on page 10)

(Continued from Pneumonia, page 9)

producers shipping organic milk in Vermont!).

One thing they did experience during their first year of organic production was a higher cull rate. Taking some of the conventional tools away from the herd brought with it some herd health issues with some of the older cows used to having that crutch. As a result, they experienced more Ketosis and DA's (Displaced Abomasum) and had to get rid of a few extra cows. Soils, John has learned, is the key to good animal health, so he is paying attention to that more than ever.

John is currently participating in a NESARE granted Soils course and is working closely with his farmer mentor, Jack Lazor and his Extension Agronomist, Heather Darby, on a few areas on his farm. He would like to increase the organic matter in his soils and would like to look at other systems for handling his manure. With Jack and Heather's help, John will be creating a land management plan that will, over time, increase



the organic matter in his soil and provide a higher quality more balanced feed for his livestock.

Currently, both boys are working part time on the farm with the goal of taking over the farm in about three years, as John & Judy prepare to transition out of the business and retire. They have subdivided the property so that their children can build their home on the farm and John, his wife Rocio, and their daughter Sophia have started building their home this spring. The Clarks are presently working with Intervale consultants and resources on a grant provided by the Vermont Farm Viability Enhancement Program overseen by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. With these monies and outside consultants, the Clark family will be completing a business plan, studying the possibility of producing their own value-added product, and looking at the best way possible to move forward as the children are transitioned into the business