

Organic Production

Feature Farm

B-A-Blessing Farm

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We--John & Tammy Stoltzfus and our four home-schooled children--started farming in 1989 in Huntingdon Co. PA. It was a joint-venture situation where the landlord provided the grain and the milk check was split 45/55. After living there for 3 years, the barn burned as a result of arson and we lost about a fourth of our milking herd due to the fire.

Shortly thereafter, close friends of ours moved north to Potter Co. and in helping them to get settled in at the new farm, we began to check out the area for ourselves and liked what we saw. After numerous trips north and much prayer, God literally provided a farm for us in Allegany Co. NY. We moved there in June of 1995.

Farming and milking cows has always seemed to be a struggle for us financially. One thing that has made it hard is that the mortgage on the farm was set up as a commercial loan (which means a higher rate of interest) and the bank would only go with a 15 year note. We have also had to deal with stray voltage and bad well water and have since dug a new well which has brought improvement.

Because finances were so tight, we were unable to purchase commercial fertilizers or sprays. At the time it seemed like a disaster, but then we began to consider the organic market and it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. In 1999, we began shipping organic milk.

Although our former milk handler claimed we couldn't do it because of high SCC problems, we have found that the longer we are organic, the lower the cell count has become. Dr. Ed Schaeffer has a product called Mastoblast which has helped with the cell count. However, John has found that raw garlic is very successful in treating mastitis. We give an infected cow 3 pill guns full, twice a day for 3 days or until the mastitis clears up.

In June 2001, our family encountered a devastating tragedy. Tammy and our only daughter, Janet, who was 17 at the time, were walking along the side



Left to right, Joel, Jerry, Tammy, Jonathan, John Stoltzfus

of the road below the farm when a car came around the corner and lost control. It slammed into the back of both, killing Janet instantly and injuring Tammy.

It is only by the grace of God that our family has been able to pick up the shattered pieces of our life

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and keep on going. Having a very supportive church family was also a wonderful help. Grief is very draining on a person's ability to work and every day for a long time it was all we could do to just get the very basics done as far as farming is concerned. After 2 1/2 years, it feels like

some healing has finally begun to take place.

One of the things we have learned since going organic is that calves get a much better start in life if you leave them on their mothers for at least 3 weeks. The only disadvantage to it, is a very noisy barn when you take them away from their mothers.

Another thing that we are trying to get away from is feeding a lot of grain as we have to purchase all of it. We feel it is much better for the cows overall health if they do not eat a lot of grain.

Currently, the hay we are feeding is dry round bales and balage. John's goal is to have a herd average of 17,000 to 18,000 pounds of milk with a butterfat of 4.0 and protein at 3.2, while feeding 2 - 5 pounds of cornmeal and an all balage mixture of oatlage and mixed grasses with clover.

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Our milking herd started out as an all Holstein herd but we are now crossbreeding Holsteins and Normande. There are also a couple of Brown Swiss mixed in the herd. We have a total of 79 cows plus 42 head of young stock and bred heifers. It seems to be an ongoing challenge to get cows bred so that there are 5-6 freshening every month. During the winter there is a period of time when there are no fresh cows. This causes the bookkeeper (Tammy) to have some tense moments when it comes to paying the bills.

As much as possible, John keeps the cows on rotational grazing lots with the animals going onto a new lot every 12 hours or oftener. We have water available in about half of the lots and plan to make it available to more lots each year.

We have also started to compost manure and have found that is fairly simple to turn it over with the tractor bucket about every 3 weeks.

Although the 2 oldest boys, Jonathan & Joel, have an off the farm job working for a local contractor, they still help out with the work at home. Jerry has become his Dad's right hand man. Last spring all 3 boys purchased beef cows and their herd has grown to 26 animals so far. Jonathan has also purchased an inline wrapper and does a lot of custom wrapping for other farmers in the area.