

Organic Production

Feature Farm

Bawden Farm, Hammond, NY Brian and Liz Bawden

by Lisa McCrory

Brian, a 3rd generation dairy farmer from Canada, and Liz Bawden, a Naturalist-turned-dairy farmer, started their farming career together in Ontario, Canada. Brian had been farming his whole life and started his own farm when he was 20 years old. Liz grew up in a suburban part of Massachusetts, though she was always attracted to the outdoors and, as a result, took on a career as a naturalist working at nature centers and museums. They met when Liz was searching for a local farmer that could provide sheaves of grain for the TV series "Road To Avonlea" as a background prop for some scenes filmed at the Toronto museum where she worked. Brian had a field of mixed grain not yet combined, but he didn't have a binder. So they cut some grain off with a weed wacker and bound the sheaves by hand. The neighbors are still giggling over that. When their son Nathan was born 10 years ago, Liz quit her off-farm job and became the 'hired man' on the farm. They continued to farm in Canada for a few more years, but were having a challenging time making ends meet shipping milk without enough quota. The Bawdens decided to purchase a farm in the US, and in 1999 they moved to Hammond, NY, and became certified organic in August, 2000. They were aware of the work that NODPA was doing (starting in 2001) and became members immediately. Their involvement with NODPA grew when farmers starting getting organized around the stagnant pay price. Liz has been a NODPA Representative since 2004.

The following is an interview with Liz Bawden describing their farm, sharing some of the challenges that they encountered through their transition to organic and where they are today.

(NODPA News) Please describe your Farm.

(Liz Bawden) We are located 1/2 mile from the St.

Lawrence River in upstate NY: we can see Canada from the kitchen window! The home farm is only 120 acres, most of that in pasture. We rent an additional 300+ acres on several other farms. The land here is pretty marginal; it is heavy clay soil, and pretty shallow over flat rock. Most fields can only yield one cut of hay per season.

(NN) How many cows do you milk and what breeds do you have?

(LB) We have about 50 cows, and as many young stock. About half the cows are Holsteins, and the rest are mostly Brown Swiss and Swiss crosses. And just to be well-rounded, we have a couple Ayrshires and Jersey crosses too.

(NN) Who certifies your farm and where do you ship your milk?

(LB) We've been certified through NOFA-NY since 2000. We currently ship our milk to Hood.

(NN) Tell us a little bit about your transition to organic: what were the things that you had to change (Land, livestock management, livestock health, other)? What would you have done differently knowing what you know now.

(LB) The changes that were the most challenging were learning to use alternative therapies. We had more health problems during transition that at any other time in our farming lives. I remember a calf with full-blown tetanus and a heifer giving birth to an "inside out" calf and more milk fever and ketosis that we had ever had before. Most of that was not due to transitioning, but just the way things shake out some times. It was a terribly stressful time. Part of the stress was learning to have the same confidence in alternative remedies, and the support and information was much less available then. One of the changes we made that proved to be catastrophic was switching our 2-to-1 conventional mineral to free choice kelp and Redmond salt. The lack of calcium and other minerals proved to be disastrous, and we lost some good cows. Sometimes you just listen to the wrong expert; I still hear people telling transitioning farmers to do that. We kept feeding Redmond salt and kelp, both really good products, but added back the 2-to-1 mineral.

I began to experiment with homeopathics, and



Nathan and Liz Bawden, Bawden Farm

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have to thank Dr. Ed Schaeffer in PA and Dr. Hue Karreman on O'Dairy for their help in those days. I also began making some herbal tinctures and using them. To become skilled in herbal medicine is a life-long undertaking, so I just started with a few plants at a time. I make tinctures of garlic, calendula, eucalyptus and a few others.

(NN) Do you grow any annual crops such as corn, small grains, or warm season grasses?

(LB) Our organic inspector kindly refers to our soils as "challenging". We do grow corn and oats because we believe that fields need to be turned and reseeded in a reasonable rotation. It is also the dismal truth that we get about 4 good crop years out of 10. We are still thumping our heads together because of this nasty grass that takes over oat fields just as the grain is ripening, and the corn that is too immature in September to cut for silage, but is now swamped in October. Maybe someday we should kidnap Gary Zimmeror some other soils guru.....any suggestions? On the other hand, this land likes to grow grass! We make lots of baleage and dry hay.

(NN) Tell us a little bit about your grazing system? How often do you move your cows to a new pasture, how intensive is your grazing system?

(LB) We have almost 100 acres in pasture. Of that, about 15 acres is in permanent pasture (too many rock ledges and boulders to be used for anything else). We are casual rotational grazers, I guess. We have 6 large fields. Cows are rotated through them as the season dictates; usually that means every 2 or 3 days. When it is very dry or very wet, they are supplemented with hay and baleage. We rely heavily on pasture; 100% when the conditions are great. Even now in late October, we are supplementing with a lot of hay, and the math still comes out at 30% of their dry matter needs from pasture.

(NN) What would you guess your % dry intake on pasture and days grazing is during growing season, recognizing that NODPA and the other ODPAs are advocating for a minimum of 120 days and 30% of feed from pasture?

(LB) The grazing season begins here around the end of May and lasts until the killing frosts come usually near the end of October. That's roughly 5 months, or 150 days in a normal year. We know that when the milking cows are eating stored feed during the winter, they will eat 3- 4X5 round bales of hay and baleage per day. So if we have to put out even 2 bales of feed to supplement while they are on pasture, it comes in at

roughly 30%.

(NN) Livestock Health: What is your preventative health program for your herd? (such as vaccinations, housing, other management techniques in place to avoid health problems)

(LB) We run hot and cold on the subject of vaccinations. The cows are always stressed after vaccinating, and we've had some abortions due to it. So, some years we vaccinate, some years we don't. Brian is keenly aware of how disease can wipe you out; he had an outbreak of BVD Type 2 many years ago.

Our cattle housing is absolutely state of the art, circa 1950. Tie stall barn (we did install new stalls to increase the width to 4 1/2 feet) for the cows. Heifers are grouped by size in pens. Yearlings are out-wintered in a small portable coverall. We found a huge difference in the comfort of the outside cattle in the winter when we began watering them with warm water each day.

We feed lots of kelp--free choice during the dry weather outside, fed on top of the grain

the rest of the time. Calves get kelp introduced at about the same time we introduce the grain. We feed about 4 oz per head per day; anyone that seems to be stressed in any way gets more if they eat it. It seems to facilitate the immune system, and enables animals to heal themselves.

(NN) When you do have cases of illness, what do you tend to have on your farm and what do you do/use to treat?

(LB) One of the most important tools we use is injectable Vitamin C. Any conditions where you would consider an antibiotic will be greatly helped by a large dose of Vitamin C. Any animal that is under any stress gets a lot of extra kelp. I use a homemade mix of antibiotic tinctures for retained placenta, pneumonia, and other related problems (mix garlic, calendula, eucalyptus, and echinacea tinctures together). I use some homeopathic remedies. One of the most magical is the bovine calf pneumonia nosode; if you have one calf that starts to cough, give it to them all. We use arsenicum and yogurt for calf scours (we use Stonyfield organic whole milk yogurt).

(NN) Where do you see yourself 5-10 years from now?

(LB) I'm sure that we'll still be here. We would like to think that in 10 years, organic farmers can look back and feel proud that they were able to have a hand in steering their industry away from the path that conventional milk has gone. If we can maintain an industry that values its product and its producers, and values integrity above all, we will have done well.



Nathan Bawden