

# Feature Farm — //

## Moore Farms Rob & Pam Moore, Nichols, NY

### Tell us about your farm.

We farm approximately 350 acres of heavy clay soils along the Pennsylvania border of central New York with 250 acres of improved perennial pastures and 100 acres of rented hayfields. Our seasonal herd of about 55 crossbred cows freshen from mid-April to May, and are usually dried off in late December. We raise about 14 heifers each year, which allows plenty of discretionary culling while still growing the herd.

The dairy is designed to be run by a single operator milking up to 80 head in a swing 10 milking parlor housed in a solar barn. All cattle feed is grown on the farm and custom harvested, enabling us to manage with little more equipment than an aging 65 HP tractor. We also raise certified organic pigs and chickens, and direct market a variety of products, which keeps us both fully employed on the farm. An energetic cattle-herding border collie, and three well-meaning "guard dogs" round out our work crew.

*Last year we had no vet bill .*



*Rob & Pam Moore, Carly Arnold (short term intern)*

As Rob became more intensive in his use of grass, he phased out a lot of medical interventions, like mastitis treatments. During this period, neighbor Kevin Engelbert was developing organic cropping and dairying practices on his farm and the close friendship influenced both farms. Corn and alfalfa growing ceased in 1990, when Rob's dad and uncle retired, and the farm essentially lost its cropping, equipment and mechanical expertise. Committing the entire farm to pasture and hay eliminated most chemical use, ended plowing on our highly erodible hill top soils, and enabled Rob to focus on the cows and milking.

In 1991, after a severe drought, crop failure, burn out, and bottoming-out of the registered cattle market, Rob sold the fancy milking herd and started a fence business. Five years building high tensile horse fences, raising other people's heifers, and reading about New Zealand style grass dairying convinced Rob to get back into milking--

without the long hours, machinery-dependence and materials-handling struggles of the old farm. By 1996 his management approach was nearly organic, the only changes needed for certification being fly control alternatives and stopping the now rare dose of antibiotics. He bought 50 Holstein and Jersey cross heifers from a nearby grass dairy, purchased and certified 125 acres of the farm, and by 1998 was milking in a new parlor and shipping organic milk.

### How did you get started in farming?

Rob grew up on the dairy, which his father and uncle took over from their father. Over the last 150 years his family owned and operated farms on most of the surrounding land too. Today he's the only one still farming. We have three children between us--a math teacher, an accountant and a carpenter--who live nearby and occasionally lend a hand. Since none of them are presently interested in milking cows we're taking on an apprentice.

### Tell us about your transition to organic.

Rob purchased the Moore Farms registered herd in 1980 and managed with an emphasis on improving genetics, cow comfort and milk production. In 1986, after hearing NRCS agent Darrell Emmick promote the virtues of self-harvested quality forage, Rob began rotationally grazing. Herd health expenses dropped, and the grain bill was cut in half (with no decrease in milk production).

### What are your basic farm guiding philosophies and management strategies?

Nature is the guiding principal in Rob's low input approach to dairying, which includes year round pasturing/outwintering, high quality perennial forages, seasonal milk production without feeding grain, custom hay harvesting, breeding with bulls, no barns, no employees and time for other pursuits in winter.

We no longer produce large volumes of milk, nor do we have the expenses, health problems and headaches that went along with it. When milk production drops we milk only once a day. We're totally grass-based and feed our cows only pasture, hay and grass baleage. When there isn't sufficient grazing, we haul baleage out to the fields, feeding it in ring feeders and sometimes unrolling the bales for feed and dry bedding. Winter chores after dry off take about an hour/day.

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**Describe your herd health strategies.**

We promote and maintain cattle health and vigorous immune systems through low stress handling, outdoor living and birthing, crossbreeding with bulls, providing nourishing forage grown on clean biologically active soils, allowing cows to raise calves, and using cattle genetically and socially adapted to our farm and management. We stopped vaccinating altogether in 1999. Last year we had no vet bill.

The original herd of Holsteins and Jersey crosses were bred to Dutch Belts (for reproduction), Normande (for good temperament, milk and meat characteristics), Milking Shorthorn, Brown Swiss, Ayrshire and Jersey for other genetic traits of value in our system. We've moved to a more dual-purpose cow that holds her body condition better through winters outside, grazes well, calves with ease in early spring, is healthy, calm in the parlor, and delicious to eat.

**Talk about raising your calves with their moms and how that works.**

Under most circumstances cows give birth, bond with and begin nursing their calves without our getting involved. They're out on pasture and we observe them from a distance (through binoculars) and up close at milking time (we skip the first milking or two after birth). Vigilance ensuring calves nurse and get their colostrum shortly after birth is critical, can be time-consuming, and sometimes requires helping the calf nurse or bottle-feeding colostrum. Last year we lost no calves. Allowing calves to drink as much milk as they want gives them a strong start in life. We estimate ours average 2 gallons/day and their vitality more than compensates for any "loss" in milk income.



*Moore's youngstock*

When we began raising calves on cows, bringing the cows in to be milked could take a long time (because all the calves would start nursing and the cows stopped moving). After a couple years we solved that problem with a herding dog. Cows are very protective when there are calves with the herd, and we've never had a predator problem even though there

are bear, coyote and dogs in our area. Our border collie had to learn not to get as close when herding a cow with her calf.

We allow young calves to come through the milking parlor with their mothers. Temple Grandin says if cattle are frightened the first time they experience something new (like the parlor) they will re-experience that that fear

in subsequent encounters. This may help explain why milking fresh heifers isn't as stressful as it used to be, and why milking in general is relatively uneventful.

Another reason we like raising calves on cows is it allows us to rotationally graze very young calves with three strand high tensile and single strand polytape fencing. The calves can easily get through those fences, but they don't want to if mom's inside.

Weaning is not a fun time, but thankfully it doesn't drag on for too long. We've tried different methods of separating cows and three month old calves, while allowing them to see one another. In the past we've used two strand polytape which the most determined calves could breach to reunite with their mothers. At milking time we separated off those calves and herded them back to the calf area (a sequence occasionally repeated for 2 or 3 days). Last year Rob fenced the calf yard with polynetting and there were no escapes.