

Organic Production

Feature Farm

Spring Wood Organic Dairy Farms Roman and Lucy Stoltzfoos and family

By Nora Owens

Roman and Lucy Stoltzfoos farm on 200 acres in Lancaster County, PA and their most important crop is their children. "It may not be the easiest way to make a living," admits Roman, "but it's the best way for me to teach my children how to work, and for them to learn where their food comes from and what it takes to produce it." Roman says he loves being able to work along side his wife, and adds, "it is priceless to be able to work with my children." Together with 9 of their 11 children, they own and operate Spring Wood Organic Farm, a 3rd generation, 200-acre Mennonite family dairy farm in Kinzer Pennsylvania, just 50 miles west of Philadelphia. Their oldest son, Dwight, and his wife Brenda, are living in South Carolina and Dwight is busy constructing houses, while their daughter, Hilda is working in a birthing clinic on a mission station in Paraguay and will be returning this month.

Roman grew up on the farm, then a conventional dairy farm managed by his father. In 1982, following 3½ years of mission work on a farm in Virginia, Roman and Lucy took over the family farm. They transitioned to an organic operation in 1987; converted to a full grazing system in 1993 and began shipping organic milk in 1995. Today, Roman and his sons, Delmar, 20, and Clifford, 15, manage the herd of 100 Holstein x Jersey milking cows. Milking takes less than an hour, two times a day, in their 22-unit New Zealand style swing parlor. A big proponent of grassed based dairying, Roman produces all of the hay, grass and baleage for the dairy herd, and uses intensive grazing practices. In addition to the 200 acres at the home farm, Stoltzfoos rents 250 acres within 100 miles where he harvests hay and baleage, and transports it back to the farm. His experience with rye grass hasn't been good, noting that rye grass varieties he has used only seem to do well in the



spring and fall, but don't do well under dry conditions. However, he's been trying a new variety of Fescue grass, produced by Pennington and not yet available on the market, and is very impressed. According to Roman, "It is good in drought and holds up well under wet conditions, too; whereas rye grass tends to be fragile in the winter when there's a lot of moisture." The dairy herd is out on pasture, year-round with baleage provided outside all winter. A small amount of grain, 5 lbs. of corn and 3 lbs. of oats per cow, is fed out daily, and with slightly less used at the height of the grazing season. It is never fed alone, al-

ways as part of a total mixed ration (TMR), combined with hay and straw.

The Stoltzfoos' herd is particularly hearty, much of which Roman attributes to both his efforts to move to a Holstein and Jersey cross and keeping his cows outside year round, "Holsteins haven't been

as successful at coping with the rigors of a grazing program. This cross has a better positive energy balance, with fewer cases of mastitis, and great legs and feet." The cows are kept on pasture all year except in extreme cold weather when they have access to an open shed at night during the coldest months.

Excellent herd health and reproduction results are also credited to breed and management. Roman recognizes that cows need to reproduce annually and to have healthy udders, and to achieve these goals he feeds a high forage diet; does not push production and ensures that the cows are well exercised and receive regular health checks. Roman uses artificial insemination and cleans up with the bull with 85% of his herd calving each year; he rarely needs to help when a cow freshens, and he has had only 1 case of milk fever in many years. Roman hasn't had a hoof trimmer at Spring Wood Farm in over two years and has had a very low rate of Strawberry Wart in recent years. With a smile on his face, Roman reported that his veterinarian said he'd go out of business if he had to depend on the Stoltzfoos' for income. Roman is quick to note that everything is not always rosy. The 2005 summer heat and drought brought a number of problems including much stressed cows who had a higher than usual rate of mastitis and a somatic cell count that crept up for a time.

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At Spring Wood Organic Farm, the Stoltzfoos' practice a modified seasonal dairying plan. They breed only between June and the early fall, and freshen between March 1st and the end of June. At the time of writing this article (February), they are milking about 48 cows. "By following this breeding schedule, we are able to take full advantage of rich spring grass when the cows freshen and have the greatest nutritional needs," reports Roman.

When asked what has made the biggest difference to the family farm, Roman was quick to say that diversifying the farm's enterprises has made a big difference. The Stoltzfoos' are raising about 10,000 organic turkeys that they sell to wholesalers. Joshua Stoltzfoos, 14, is in charge of the day-to-day turkey operations, with his brother Clifford in charge of grinding the feed. Further diversification includes the recently converted house on their property, which they have turned into a vacation rental and have named 'The Little Stone Cottage'. The whole family was involved in this major remodeling project. You can view this beautiful cottage, and book a stay there, by going to www.vrbo.com and looking at property number 73588.

The Stoltzfoos' recognize the importance of being an organic farm, from both a healthy lifestyle and financial perspective. They raise almost all of their own food; Lucy is in charge of the garden, and they have a variety of livestock, all raised organically. The health of

the livestock, the soil and the humans is very important to this family. From a financial perspective, Roman points out that it is a good business decision, citing his December milk check as a good example, when he received \$30.41 per cwt. He ships milk through Lancaster Organic Farmers Cooperative, or LOFCO, a cooperative he helped start about 3 years ago, and in which he remains actively involved as a board member. "Starting the cooperative took a lot of work but it has paid off," says Roman Stoltzfoos, "we felt the need to be independent from the other milk cooperatives and processors who have vested interests in their own organizations, where we are only focused on the best interests of the farmer members."

When asked about the future of the farm, Roman said that it isn't something that worries him. With six sons and 5 daughters, a number of whom are actively involved on the farm, he is quite optimistic about the family remaining in farming.

In conclusion, Roman spoke of the state of the organic food industry: "it will be important to keep the price of milk up, which is challenging because the USDA has not been very understanding of organics." He expressed concern that organic standards are being watered down and will lead to a loss of consumers' respect and confidence. Additionally, if significant pasture intake is not required of organic ruminants that will lead to a decrease in the quality of the products especially milk, and distort the original purpose of organic production.

