

Growing New Farms

The People Inside Food To Bank On

Shonie Schlotzhauer, Sustainable Connections

"We couldn't believe what an incredible opportunity this was!" said Billy Tate of Moondance Farm, telling me about the article in the *Co-op Community News* last year that exposed him to the Food To Bank On (FTBO) program. "Our farm wouldn't be nearly this far along without FTBO—at least not yet."

Billy Tate and Nicole Brown moved to Whatcom County four years ago, looking for a community and land to put roots into. After a countywide search, they bought a home with a 10-acre spread of fields, wetlands, and woods just off the Valley Highway. Their dedicated attention shows in the expansive, tidy garden of permanent raised beds, the newly erected steel-frame greenhouse, nearly an acre of newly cultivated ground, thousands of eager seedlings, barrels of experimental compost teas—and in their vivacious 2-½-year-old



daughter.

I tagged along during a recent visit from their FTBO mentor farmer, Steve Powers of Big Sky Garden just up the road in Van Zandt. Steve has played an integral role in FTBO since the program began, as a Farm Fund committee member, as an instructor for the program's training component, and as a mentor farmer. He brings more than 15 years of organic farming expertise to the program, as well as a very generous willingness to share his knowledge. Look for Big Sky Garden products at the Community Food Co-op.

Steve, Karen, and their two kids arrived just in time for a break from the drizzle. I followed Billy and Steve around the farm, eavesdropping on their conversation about weeds, fertility, pests, transplanting, tools, and weather. Mentoring in action—and it confirmed my belief in the enormous value of FTBO's mentorship program. "Although our specific farming practice is different, I have gained invaluable information from Steve already," Billy testified.

The specifics certainly do look a bit different at Moondance Farm than at most other small farms around



Steve and Karen Powers and their children (left), and Billy Tate and Nicole Brown with daughter (right).

here. They focus on vegan organic principles: "the practice of not using any animal waste or by-products as soil amendments." Instead of the manure, blood, feather, and bone meal that most organic farmers depend on to add fertility to their soil, Billy and Nicole will use intensive crop rotation, green manure, plant-based compost and compost tea, seed and kelp meal, and mineral additions. It's a direction that will take extra research, experimentation, and work, but "from an ethical standpoint, we believe it is a sound practice.... It also logically makes more sense to incorporate the full nutritional value of the green crop into our soil, as opposed to the waste manure after much of the nutritious content has been absorbed into the animal that foraged the green crop."

Vegan organic production is a little-known field in this country, requiring Billy and Nicole to look further afield

Party with a Purpose
Thursday, June 1, 5:30-7:30 pm
Squalicum Boathouse at
Zuanich Point Park

Whatcom Volunteer Center
2006 Human Race
Saturday, June 10, 10 am
Maritime Heritage Park

For more information,
call 671-7389, email tim@slumdoctor.org, or see www.slumdoctor.org.

for support and advice. "As new farmers...we believe it is essential for us to focus exclusively in the vegan organic direction, so that, as our farm grows, we have mastered the concepts and are able to apply them on a larger production scale. We hope as we learn that we are able to offer an educational forum for others to learn."

Besides their weekly deliveries to the Deming Food Bank, Moondance Farm will have a stall at some of the smaller farmers markets, sell specialty crops to local restaurants, and begin to develop relationships with individuals and other retailers as they carve out the niche that's right for them. Look for them on the Whatcom County Farm Map.

For more information about FTBO or to make a donation, call 647-6902 or visit www.sustainableconnections.org. And don't forget to donate at the register!

Photos by Shonie Schlotzhauer