

## Grow Northwest Magazine

# Q&A: Talking turkey and more with Osprey Hill Farm

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Geoff and Anna Martin, owners and operators of Osprey Hill Farm in Acme, grow and raise a variety of produce and poultry, and offer a CSA program. From chicken, duck, turkey and lamb, to fruits and vegetables of all kinds, the Martins have developed a loyal following, known for their quality, care and hard work. We recently talked turkey and more with Anna Martin.>>>



Geoff and Anna Martin look over their flock of turkeys at their farm in Acme. PHOTO BY BRENT COLE

***Grow Northwest: Tell us about your family and farm. How and when did you get started?***

**Anna Martin:** There are five in our crew. Two adults and three of the hardest working kids I know. Geoff and I both graduated with science degrees from Seattle Pacific University and to our parents chagrin, we took to the road like a bunch of gypsies. We camped out on Mt. Hood in a tipi and fell in love with the idea of simplicity. As other rookies before us have blundered, we too interpreted the life of a farmer as one of ease and simplicity... and so it began. It didn't hurt that we love to be outdoors and garden, too. That was 10 years ago.

***Grow: What do you grow and produce?***

**AM:** Today we own our own farm and model the concepts of permaculture in a production setting. We value the natural buffering ability of diversity and so we grow a wide variety of products like chicken, duck, turkey and lamb on pasture; chicken and

duck eggs; a self-grafted, mixed orchard of heirloom fruit; a vineyard; unusual berries; and an annual garden full of all kinds of fresh veggies.

***Grow: What are your favorite things about farm life?***

**AM:** Farm life is always interesting. When we think we've got it figured out, along comes something new. There is never, ever a dull moment. I feel pretty lucky sitting alone and quiet with my hands in the spring soil while listening to the echoed, cascading clicks roll out of the raven as he calls in a mate. It is the most chilling, pre-historic sound and I treasure the annual performance.

***Grow: Least favorite?***

**AM:** Farm life is also a crash course in basic survival. Sink or swim—get it? I once learned that when the Skagit Valley was being settled, the leading cause of death among women was insanity. I realize that I've got far more luxuries than those brave women, but I can understand how the insurmountable tasks at hand can bury you to a point where resurfacing seems unlikely. Luckily, I do resurface daily.

***Grow: When did you start raising turkeys? Have your number of birds grown over the years?***

**AM:** My curiosity was piqued six years ago when I saw a hatchery listing for heritage turkeys. I ordered eight different varieties for a grand total of 85. Why not start big, huh? I had no clue how to raise a turkey and it turns out nobody else I asked did either. I couldn't find any books on the subject more recent than the 1950's and the only other "knowledge bomb" from seasoned locals was that turkeys were dumber than rocks.

I decided to use the experience I had raising chicken and apply that towards the new poults. It turns out that turkeys belong to the pheasant family and the chicken and turkey have about as much in common as the cat and dog—a little bit, but not much. That first year, many of the turkey poults died of starvation while staring at their food (remember that reference to a rock?). The hatchery was kind enough to replace my order so that I could try again. Through many struggles and heartbreaks we finished the season with 50 birds.

Defeat didn't sit well with me and I was determined to understand these birds. I clocked a ridiculous number of hours observing them and we've since come to a place of mutual understanding. I've learned that turkeys are not dumb, they only act that way when we try to treat them like a chicken.

Since that first year, we've held pretty steady at raising 65 heritage turkeys per season. With our chicken, lamb, and veggie production, we don't have enough room on the farm to accommodate any more of these totally righteous birds and they really do deserve ample room to run and play.

***Grow: How is the 2010 turkey season going? Do you have any turkeys available?***

**AM:** Our turkeys are sold out for the 2010 season—and I grow anxious as each day passes since the coyotes are putting pressure on our sold-out flock. We've lost a handful of birds in the last two weeks, but I've learned to build a buffer into our reservation list so I think we'll just barely fill our orders.

***Grow: Do you find more and more people seeking a local turkey for the Thanksgiving holiday?***

**AM:** The first year I brought turkeys to market I worked hard to sell them. I put a lot of time into research so that I could explain to people why they should pay three or four times more than they would at the grocery store.

In contrast, this year we sold out in about four weeks. Demand for local turkeys and food in general is increasing and consumers are excited to be a part of the local food movement. I am deeply grateful for the support of our customers because together we do make a difference—we are working mutually to build a system of self-reliance within our community and this is incredibly powerful.

***Grow: What turkey breeds do you raise?***

**AM:** After a little experience with all the heritage breeds, we've settled on the Bourbon Red as our favorite. Some of the heritage breeds are very showy but don't make good meat birds. The Bourbon Red has a nice body structure, good temperament, excellent foragers, the feathers are light in color and they don't stain the skin during butchering, and the meat is moist and flavorful.

***Grow: Can you explain the difference between the traditional and heritage breeds? Why do you think the heritage breed is becoming popular?***

**AM:** The standard or "broad breasted turkey" is a result of many generations of selective breeding. Humans breed selectively, too (in that we choose our mate because they have qualities that we like) so this is not a creepy science project in theory. Breeders of the broad breasted turkey, however, selected for qualities like growth rate, breast size, economical feed conversion, ability to live in confinement and so on at the expense of qualities like health and well-being.

Today, the standard breed turkey raised in confinement experiences sudden heart attacks, high blood pressure, bowed and deformed legs associated with rapid weight gain, and weakened immunity. Since the standard turkey is being used exclusively in commercial production, all other breeds declined to a level of near-extinction. That was a pretty profound realization to me since the standard turkey seemed to lead such a fragile existence.

In 2001, Slow Food USA initiated an effort to reintroduce Heritage Turkeys to the American consumer. By 2004, this effort was showing remarkable success at the farmer

level and now, in the year 2010, the consumer demand has taken a strong hold. It only makes sense when you consider the firm, dark meat of a heritage turkey or taste the rich, succulent flavor. It just doesn't compare to it's chalky, washed out, brine-injected counterpart. I may be partial... 😊

***Grow: When do you recommend people reserve their turkey next year?***

**AM:** To reserve your next holiday turkey with Osprey Hill Farm contact us as early as Sept. 1st.

***Grow: Your favorite foods?***

**AM:** I love good food, especially when I can tell that a lot of care and attention went into the preparation. My favorite meals always include the freshest ingredients prepared in a simple way in order to showcase unique flavor, texture, aroma, and colors. In the fall, I crave crunchy watercress, juicy pomegranates, a well-aged balsamic, light and flaky corn bread with silky smooth butter, dark chocolate, lightly toasted seeds, warming savory soups, and perfectly browned roast chicken.

***Osprey Hill Farm has a regular booth at the Bellingham Farmers Market on Saturdays. Their website is [www.ospreyhillfarm.com](http://www.ospreyhillfarm.com) and can be contacted at [info@ospreyhillfarm.com](mailto:info@ospreyhillfarm.com).***

**Interview by Becca Schwarz Cole / Photo by Brent Cole**