



Member of the Month

JUNE 2011

CEDARVILLE FARM



The Finger family in their greenhouse; Wes, Emily, Kim, Mike & Sarah

Mike Finger found his inspiration for farming at The Evergreen State College. After hearing an inspiring lecture by Woody Deryckx and absorbing Wendell Berry's "The Unsettling of America," Mike surprised his peers in the biology department by proclaiming, "I'm going to be a farmer." Twenty-two years later, Mike runs Cedarville Farm, with the help of his wife Kim and their three children, Wes, Emily & Sarah. It's a 7-acre diversified organic farm in Whatcom County serving a 200-person CSA, a local market and a smattering of restaurants and retailers. Mike has no regrets about turning in Petri dishes for seed trays, "the years have ripped right on by."

Tell us about your place.

I own five gravelly acres and lease seven beautiful acres. We have minimal water, a house well, but good soil—Puyallup sandy loam. I can be in the ground every month of the year if I haven't had rain, which makes it great for early season and winter production. But after a month of no rain and 70 degree weather, I'm running around like you wouldn't believe. The ground doesn't hold its fertility too well – when I go visit other farms, I'm just like, "WOW look how big that cauliflower is!" Don't get me wrong, I grow great cauliflower – but it's never going to be enormous. Between the silt loam and the seven sandy, it's not a bad mix, and we are learning how to rotate through both of those pieces pretty well. It's the most beautiful little farm there ever could be.



Interns at Cedarville Farm, weeding leeks on a particularly muddy day.

And where did this sandy farm come from?

We apprenticed with Tom & Cheryl at Cloud Mountain. When we finished the apprenticeship, Tom called and said, "Do you remember that raspberry farm I told you about? It's for rent and there is a house available." So we bought the house and five acres—that's the only land we own. The majority of the land we work is across the street and we feel lucky that the owners like what we're doing and continue to lease the land to us.

How do you feel about leasing?

Well, it produces anxiety, and has kept me from making the kind of improvements I might if I owned the land. I tended to spend my money on things I can take with me. It

hasn't kept me from growing a good business and good produce, but if I owned, I would probably invest more in permanent structures and that kind of thing. We looked at other places, tried to buy a couple times, but found the prices were too high or the soil was wrong.

Got any wicked cool farm hacks?

Ha! All artists are thieves; I've pretty much stolen everything I know from others. I'm certainly hard working, but I don't think of myself as particularly creative. I built my own vacuum seeder for the green house, it has interchangeable plates, and it's worked pretty well for us. I'm not a huge inventor, but that is one part of this work that I've always enjoyed. I'll never forget what Nash Huber said to me, "The first thing a farmer should learn how to do is weld." I'm embarrassed to tell him I still haven't learned, but I've gotten really good with plywood!

Whatcom county is not, exactly, organic central.

Well for me, organic was an assumption from the get go, and one that I've never questioned. But I do have misgivings about what has happened to it politically. When I was younger I had a pretty severe feeling about pesticides effects on the environment and people; anyone who used pesticides was just short of Voldemort. But as I've gotten older, I've realized there are just some crops in some climates that are incredibly difficult and they may need some kind of technology to help them along. That being said, I stand by the principles that I learned from Elliot Coleman—feed the soil, nurture environment and mimic natural processes. I never thought that substituting organic sprays for conventional sprays was in the spirit of the thing. What I find most troubling nowadays is that the discussion of farming is so divided. I think the goal should be to discuss one type of farming rather than "conventional farming" versus "organic farming."—Ideally, we would drop these terms and talk about environmental agriculture and just good farming. Farming that is sustainable and environmental could involve synthetic materials, when made mindfully.

What methods do y'all use?

Flaming for weed control, a lot of transplanting as a weed control strategy, we are doing more and more cover cropping. Elliot Coleman certainly has been an inspiration; we do a lot of the things he talks about. And certainly he was the push for trying winter production. We do a lot of intercropping. As an intensive market garden we try to use the space as well as we can. We have permanent high tunnels and light duty tunnels that can be taken down, moved and put back up again. But beyond that we're still a funny collection of hand, hoes and a motley crew of tractors.

Twenty years in, what are your words of wisdom for young farmers?

It always irks me and amuses me that young farmers always seem eager to buy. They are fixated on finding the land and buying it, but they likely don't know what good farm land is and then you tend to buy for the wrong reasons. We leased too long, but I definitely think beginning farmers don't need to buy. It's prudent to lease in the beginning, there's lots to learn. I have yet to find a motivated new farmer who can't find a reasonable situation.

You're a little humble about your accomplishments, Mike.

There's always more I wish we could do. I make concessions – I truck in fertilizer, I'm

piped into the petroleum economy. I've always loved work. The life of a mind, sitting on your ass in a university, I just love to move, I want to be moving around. I just hope we can get good enough at this that we can have a really well trained staff so that I can be out there and teaching them. I'm excited to keep trying. Maybe by the time I'm 72 I'll be able to tell you I'm content.

And finally, why are you a member of Tilth Producers?

Well, because it's an excellent group that represents the needs of organic farmers in Washington State. It was Tilth conferences that got us excited about a number of things, like early interest in CSA and pastured poultry. There are no more wonderful people than organic farmers.

Cedarville Farm is located at 3081 Goshen Road in Bellingham, Washington. Learn more at: www.cedarvillefarm.com

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