

# FARM WHERE YOU ARE

## A PROFILE OF NEW NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO ORGANIC FARMERS

*By Gwen O'Reilly*

**“Northern Ontario does not possess any Class 1 soils [i.e. soils suitable for crop production], but does feature areas with Class 2 to 4 soils, which can support viable agricultural production if free of severe constraints.”<sup>1</sup>**

**C**onstraints like, say, bedrock outcrops; a scant three-month growing season; significant risk of frost in June and August; an abundance of worn-out, abandoned pasture populated by large carnivorous animals; a significant lack of agricultural infrastructure; and hoards of voracious, flying, farmer-and-stock-eating insects. Did I mention the wood ticks?

Thunder Bay District is a large chunk of Northwestern Ontario that sits just north of Lake Superior, with climatic zones ranging from 2a to 3. The agricultural sector is relatively small, with a focus on dairy, beef cattle and fodder crops. The City of Thunder Bay, the largest urban centre in the area (pop. 120,000) is an 8-hour drive east of Winnipeg and an 18-hour drive northwest of Toronto. This geographic isolation (combined with marginal soils and a cool climate) has limited the expansion of agricultural activity. People became accustomed to buying expensive, well-travelled food in grocery stores.

Enter the local food movement. The geographic isolation, and hence the cost of shipping food from Toronto and Winnipeg, has become an advantage for northern food producers. The demand for both organic and local food is high here, with a captive audience. Farming operations tend to be small and mixed with increasing emphasis on organic methods, although few are certified. The number of farms in the Thunder Bay District actually increased significantly between 2001 and 2006, one of only five districts/counties in Ontario to report growth, rather than loss.<sup>1</sup> The number of farms producing both certified and uncertified organic produce is also on the rise, as are organizations who work to promote such endeavours. Land costs are low, and farmers here report higher levels of equity in their operations than elsewhere in Ontario.<sup>1</sup>

Our growing season has significantly fewer than 100 frost-free days (90 if you ask me). The affordability of land, the rugged beauty of the area



*Renata and Moe Thiboutot with their family in a field of barley.*

and untapped markets make Zone 2b look more attractive to organic farmers. It's just not a place for the faint of heart, as the owners of the farms described below will tell you.

### **Mile Hill Farm**

Mile Hill Farm was started by Renata and Moe Thiboutot in 2005 because "the kids were bored with the backyard in town." Renata says they like to eat food that is produced locally and grown with concern for the environment, and they aim to produce such food by raising organic beef, pork, vegetables, hay and grain. They are committed to treating both their animals and the soil microbes with care and respect, and are happy to be doing something that people are proud to be associated with. Best of all, the kids are never bored, though their daughter has been heard to say, "Mom, you are ruining my life with zucchini!"

Renata and Moe both grew up in Thunder Bay. When asked what motivated her to farm here, Renata says, "We love the black flies and mosquitoes and  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  in

January because it keeps everyone else away so we can enjoy our little bit of paradise." They farm 100 of their 160 acres, and rent another 160 to produce grain and hay. Their area is full of depleted hay fields, originally cleared by hand. The couple are trying to maintain some of the old farmstead's integrity by restoring these fields to production—but it has required a large investment of time, money and energy. The surplus of abandoned land creates a buffer zone; there is no need to worry about neighbours spraying chemicals.

To start, Moe and Renata spent two years reading everything they could get their hands on, and seeking out people across Ontario and Manitoba who could help them learn the principles and practices of organic farming. Renata has relied on long distance communication with the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario for practical information.

Farm equipment auctions are rarely held in the district, and the Thiboutots have to scrounge or bring in equipment from afar. One

of their biggest hurdles is finding organic livestock feed and organic seed for field crops—now shipped from Manitoba. They are slowly working towards growing all their own grain and soil inputs to create a self-sustaining loop on the farm. Renata admits that the season is short—but they have learned to work with it. She says the long winter gives you time to put your feet up between morning and evening chores. She has also learned to work with the heavy clay soil—the first August it looked like "an asphalt parking lot someone had broken up with a jackhammer." Now, come a dry spell, she can easily push her fingers into the fluffy earth.

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Renata and Moe have financed the operation themselves, expanding as they can afford it. They are gradually decreasing their reliance on off-farm income. They sell beef, pork and garden produce (mostly greens, onions and garlic) at the local farmers' market, and sell storage vegetables in bulk and sides of meat at the farm gate.

Renate relies on her immediate community for employees, emergencies, child care and emotional support. The local agricultural community has provided a steady supply of farming and business guidance. The surrounding forests provide a steady supply of bears, wolves, foxes, coyotes, deer, moose and lynx. The couple usu-

ally rely on their farm dogs to keep wild ones away. But one night, Renate went out to the field alone after dark to call in Moe. Unbeknownst to her, two large wolves followed her, only a few feet from her heels. Moe could see them from the tractor, but thought they were the dogs—until they left Renata's side and circled the tractor. It turned out they were raising a litter across the road. So far, they have managed to enjoy a peaceful co-existence, although sheep farmers in the area have not been so lucky.

## Sleepy G Farm

Brendan Grant and Marcelle Paulin started Sleepy G Farm in 2006. Their farm is named for the Sleeping Giant, a well known provincial park on Lake Superior. Their farm is located outside the park boundary, near the village of Pass Lake (45 km east of Thunder Bay). On the 160-acre farm, they grow vegetables, hay, chickens, eggs and lamb and are starting a CSA this year.

A Danish homesteader started the farm in the 1940s, which was operated as a dairy farm until the 1980s. Brendan and Marcelle have found that the fields have required restoration from years of harvesting hay without re-seeding, pasturing or fertilization.

The couple's focus is vegetables, but they have incorporated livestock to build soil fertility and utilize marginal land. Offering animal products has also helped them build a customer base quickly, giving them time to gradually restore the land for vegetable production. They are pasturing poultry for eggs and meat, and using intensive grazing techniques with their sheep. They



*Zone 2b – more forest than farms.*

plan to use draught animals in their operation, and recently bought two young Milking Short-horn steers (Red and River) from Manitoba to train as oxen.

Brendan has been instrumental in the development of the Northwest Growers' Guild, an organization intended to support ecologically sustainable growers. Guild members have been developing a local form of certification using a system of peer accountability that takes into account the limitations of local organic sources.

Marcelle and Brendan have both worked on farms in B.C., but chose to settle in Northwestern Ontario because land was affordable, and because they love the forest, Lake Superior and the way of life. The challenge of late and early frosts are met by season extension including the use of a greenhouse, row tunnels, row cover and mulching. Brendan notes, "There is no such thing as tilling in April around here." Spring is short and intense: late

May and June are extremely busy due to all the tasks that have to be done in the compressed season before daylight hours and temperatures reach their optimum.

Marcelle and Brendan also find that used farming equipment is hard to find because people hang on to it forever. There are no local sources of organic feed or amendments, or rare or uncommon breeds of livestock.

Marcelle and Brendan make good use of the local abattoir in the area, but worry that it is operating at full capacity (having to book three months in advance), and may not be able to meet a future increase in demand. They also worry about wolves and other wildlife. However, wild pests are mitigated by wild beauty—every year, their fields are visited by migrating Sandhill cranes.

Like most young farmers, they have off-farm jobs to pay their mortgage and student loans, but it is far from an easy balance. Brendan's off-farm job is working



*Sleepy G display at the local farmers' market.*

as a farmer at a local historical park. Marcelle has been known to hold down three jobs at a time. He says that they work so hard between May and October that they don't see their friends and their nutrition suffers.

Recently they received a Young Entrepreneur grant from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, which will be used to purchase farm equipment. So far, sales of their products are brisk—there are no shortage of locavores at the twice-weekly farmers' market—and Brendan and Marcelle sell out within two hours of setting up. Even though they live a long way off the beaten path, farmgate sales are so strong (and their schedules so tight) that Marcelle has set up a self-serve vegetable and egg kiosk inside the front door. The CSA will help them manage some of the farmgate traffic, and save marketing time.

Marcelle and Brendan attribute the growing interest in their farm to alternative techniques, including organic prac-

tices, a mixed, low-input farm, pastured poultry, intensive grazing management and CSA. Not least of all, they are inspired by the enthusiasm of their local community, who are very happy to see an abandoned farm back in working order.

### **Boreal Edge Farm**

April and Matthew Baughman established Boreal Edge Farm in 2002. Their eighty acres sit on a south-facing slope, near the village of Nolalu and 40 km southwest of Thunder Bay. They grow more than fifty varieties of organic

vegetables. They run a 100-member CSA (the largest in Northern Ontario), sell at the farmers' market and supply four local restaurants/caterers. To bolster their CSA shares, they buy produce, eggs and bread from other local producers, and raise grass-fed beef.

As parents of two young children, April and Matthew felt the only way they could ensure that their family's food was healthy and safe was to grow it themselves. They have followed an organic approach since they started gardening in 1998. They build soil fertility with cover crops, compost, kelp and alfalfa meal, and rotate crops to deal with pests and pathogens. Matthew started a Northern Ontario Heritage Fund internship in 2007, where he learned how to grow vegetables on a small commercial scale and started their first CSA with five members.

April says Matthew started farming here because he didn't know any better—he'd lived here all his life! Like the other young farmers, their biggest challenge has been reclaiming abandoned farmland—abandoned so long that the fields had started to return to forest. Over eight years,

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### **References**

1. Thunder Bay District Agricultural Economic Impact Study. October, 2009. Harry Cummings and Associates Inc. Thunder Bay Federation of Agriculture.

Marcelle Paulin and Brendan Grant – Sleepy G Farm, RR#1, Pass Lake ON P0T 2M0; [sleepyfarm@gmail.com](mailto:sleepyfarm@gmail.com)

Renata and Moe Thiboutot – Mile Hill Farm, Box 637, Kakabeka Falls ON P0T 1X0; [www.milehillfarms.ca](http://www.milehillfarms.ca)

April and Matthew Baughman – Boreal Edge Farm, RR#1, Marttinen Lane, Nolalu ON P0T 2K0; [www.borealedgefarm.googlepages.com](http://www.borealedgefarm.googlepages.com)



### Pregnancy

- Feed ruminants kelp to provide trace minerals and improve fertility. For example, one farm gives a flock of 200 goats one cup of kelp a day. Higher amounts might cause the milk to test positive for iodine. Mixing one or two tablespoons of brewers' yeast in with the kelp helps the rumen bacteria.
- It is said that if sheep are fed grain consistently by 9 a.m. during the pregnancy, they will lamb in the daytime.

- Fresh and dried raspberry leaves are uterine tonics and can be given before the does and ewes are bred. If ample amounts are available, they can be fed as hay in late pregnancy to tone the uterine muscles, or a tablespoon of dried leaves can be put on top of the grain daily two to three weeks before kidding or lambing, and after birthing.
- Feed pregnant does and ewes blackberry and raspberry leaves, branches of Douglas fir and Western hemlock.
- Give pregnant and lactating goats and cows access to fresh or wilted nettles and fresh leaves and flowers of dandelions.
- Give red cedar to animals that are deficient in copper (this treatment is not specific to pregnancy). However, large amounts of red cedar are not given in early pregnancy because of a neurotoxin in the plant. Also, red cedar makes the milk pitchy flavoured, and lodgepole or jack pine may cause abortions.
- Provide fresh air, sunshine and exercise to help animals give birth. For example, throw hay or bundles of weeds on the snow so that they have to plough through the snow for them. During the summer, some farmers cut willow, fireweed, pea vines, dandelions, black Siamese-twinberry (*Lonicera involucrata*) and wild raspberry, and dry these in bundles. During the winter, when animals are pregnant, a bundle is fed each week.

*The entire study was published in the Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine in 2007. It can be found at [www.organicagcentre.ca/ResearchDatabase/res\\_ethnoveterinary\\_ruminants.asp](http://www.organicagcentre.ca/ResearchDatabase/res_ethnoveterinary_ruminants.asp).*

*Photo credits: Janet Wallace*

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they have cleared enough land to farm the loamy soil. They have also built a large packing and loading shed with a walk-in cooler, and erected a half-mile-long, eight-foot high deer fence.

Most organic amendments are ordered from western Canada, and Matthew says it has been a struggle to even find a good source of local manure. Because there is not a lot of vegetable farming here, let alone organic growers, he says they "have many customers,

but few peers." Initially, they went through a lot of trial and error, now, they keep in touch with CSAs across North America via the internet and conferences.

April and Matthew farm full time—the CSA generates about eighty percent of the farm's revenue "and is almost a hundred percent of the reason [they] love growing." They have some communal picking days for members, and donate a couple of CSA shares to local women's shelters, and unclaimed shares to food banks. Like the other farmers interviewed,

they make good use of students and volunteers whenever possible, and employ local people.

Rocks, water, trees, wildlife, a vibrant market and a seven-month "vacation" between growing seasons. Who wouldn't want to farm here? Shhh. It'll be our secret!

*Gwen O'Reilly gardens and chickens in the Kamistiquia River valley of Northwestern Ontario and has been known to cry when Zone 2b claims yet another fruit tree.*

*Photo credits: Gwen O'Reilly*