

IN THE VALLEY AT DHARMA RIDGE

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When I got to the muddy end of the road leading to Dharma Ridge Farm in February, I saw green, level Beaver Valley bottomland and the skeleton of a barn. When Zach and Haley Wailand look at these 10 acres, they see a finished barn, greenhouses, fruit trees, berry bushes and fields of organic crops that they dream about to feed their family and their community.

They started feeding us last spring as one of the earliest growers at the farmers market, with crops from the rocky soil at the top of Dharma Ridge, and more from a rented acre with three giant greenhouses on Egg & I Road. They worked hard last year and grew an impressive range of vegetables and fruits. Zach describes more than one occasion of picking well past sundown, guided by their truck's headlights.

But these fertile valley acres, cow pasture for more than 100 years, are where they hope to collect all their efforts in one place. They're experienced and realistic enough to know it will take some time and a "lot of grunting," and they're clear-eyed and focused enough to convince me they can make it happen.

Last season, besides selling at the market and the Co-op, they supplied substantial produce to Jay Payne, owner and chef at the Wild Coho Restaurant. They speak warmly of Jay's strong support, which has continued through the winter with purchases of cold-weather crops such as Brussels sprouts, parsnips, watercress and eggs.

Even though Haley observed that "farming is more practical than romantic," there is a homegrown organic romance story here. Haley and Zach met nine years ago while both were working for longtime local organic grower John Gunning. They shared a background of farming experience, a love of the hard labor of farming, and a fierce commitment to good land stewardship. Now they also share their love with 2-year-old son Asa and 5-year-old daughter Farryn. Farryn already enjoys her part in the farm workforce, picking strawberries for the market and the Co-op last summer.

Zach and Haley are working to be smart farmers and smart business people. It's especially challenging in these first years, when they're trying to get all of the systems in place. They are looking carefully at what equipment is critical and cost-effective to purchase now, how much of which crops to grow in which fields and when, how to use microclimates, and where their time goes. This season, to help with harvesting, they're planning "Harvest Days," a chance for people to come and work in trade for produce.

Which crops to grow in which fields, and when, is an interesting study in microclimates. Last year, growing higher up on the ridge, Zach was able to get into the fields to plant in early March. This year, on their new, low-lying site, he estimates it won't be until mid-April, with the wet winter and high water table. But he also thinks they could have crops

coming on in December and January, extending their season into winter. Eating locally and seasonally intrigues them. Haley has been falling a small experiment in Canada, “the 100-mile diet,” with folks trying to eat year-round on what is produced within 100 miles of where they live. No bananas, oranges or avocados, but a surprisingly varied menu.

Haley is eloquent about the rewards for all the hard work: “This lets us be together with our kids and provide good food for the community. It’s a way of making change in the world. It’s humble, it’s manageable, it makes us feel good. To do something you love and be able to make a living at it—that makes a soul-satisfied human being.”

It’s not easy to make a living from a small farm. It took family help for the Wailands to be able to afford these acres. And during the winter, Zach works construction to keep some cash flowing in. These dedicated, energetic folks are passionate about raising good food. The challenge for them is to do their best, smartest farming.

The challenge for us, individually, and collectively, is to find many ways to support local farmers so that they can prosper as they nourish our bodies and souls with organic food. Then, when we look at this plot of ground, we can visualize an interconnected community web of us supporting farmers, who are in turn sustaining us with the fruits—and vegetables—of their labors.

Come help harvest in trade for fresh produce! Dharma Ridge Farm in Chimacum is looking for work traders to help on Harvest Days. Come work on the farm in trade for organic produce! Begins in May/June. Call the farm at 732-0178.