

***FESTINA LENTI* – “MAKING HASTE SLOWLY” AT SPRINGRAIN FARM**

DEBORAH SCHUMACHER, Staff Writer

Originally printed in *The Co-op Commons* (Feb/Mar 2010)

I watched with interest the fairly rapid development of something new on State Highway 19 through Chimacum (directly across from Chimacum High School) over the course of several months—ground newly tilled, trees planted, fence barriers going up, an old farmhouse getting a new coat of paint. No sign announced the presence of SpringRain Farm, but all the signs were there.

Farmer John Bellow and his partner Roxanne Hudson arrived in the Chimacum neighborhood Labor Day weekend in 2008. In a little more than a year the two have accomplished much, including the planting of a “nursery” of perennials like raspberries, lingonberries, gooseberries and blueberries on their home two acres, the planting of 500 orchard trees on the 26 acre main farm, a mixed flock of chickens, honeybees, and the introduction of Katahdin sheep. John calls this “the process of unpacking the farm.”

The Right Place

The couple spent two years shopping for their property, casting a wide net over western Washington to finally settle on their Chimacum farm. They chose this community, they said, because of the climate, and because they found here “a nice town, nice people, and a place supportive of agriculture.” They previously farmed in Big Lake near Mt. Vernon in the 1990s; John left farming for a short time to go to graduate school, where he studied farming systems and agroforestry (and earned a Master’s and a PhD). He’s worked as a technical consultant for agricultural development programs and done research in Costa Rica and Guatemala on improving production on small farms. In fact, at the time of this interview, John was preparing to leave for a consulting job in Iraq. Roxanne, who learned all about gardening from her grandparents, is currently an Assistant Professor of Special Education at the University of Washington.

Many hands brought the farm together. Sarah Spaeth at the Jefferson Land Trust encouraged John and Roxanne to look at the property they eventually bought and worked with the couple to develop a conservation easement on the property that protects 21 acres of the main farm from ever being developed or used for any purpose other than agriculture. The LandWorks Collaborative supported the SpringRain business plan and Shorebank financed the farm. Al Latham at the Conservation District worked with John and Roxanne to create a four-acre riparian buffer habitat on either side of Chimacum Creek and enhance the 1200 feet of Chimacum Creek that crosses their property to improve the waterway for fish.

A Fairly Strategic Approach

Although most of the farming work at SpringRain is currently on John’s shoulders, Roxanne clearly brings her family’s farming background to this farm. More than history, though, Roxanne brought her grandfather Ralph Cunningham’s 60-year-old azaleas, as well as small fruit trees, blueberries, and other perennials, from his home at Mukilteo. She also brings a 60+ year-old line of broad bean seed called Tarheel Beans and a line of lima beans from her grandfather that they continue to nurture at SpringRain.

John described his “aspirations for a fairly strategic approach” to selling food produced on his farm. Growing vegetables is not on his agenda (“There’s no shortage of kale” he said) and he doesn’t plan to attend area farmers markets or offer a CSA subscription. Rather, he explains that he’s focusing on the production of perennial fruit and specialty crops to satisfy local market needs. Acknowledging the hardships of farming in the 21st century when land prices are high and most people expect food prices to be low, he plans to offer a u-pick for several varieties of berries including lingonberries, josta berries, gooseberries, strawberries, currants, Saskatoons, and “a berry that hasn’t really been named yet, a

fruiting honeysuckle from the west coast of Siberia.” He’ll also sell out-of-season fruit to The Food Co-op and take on a few restaurant accounts.

Asked if he plans to grow the farm, John says he doesn’t think they’ll get bigger any time soon. “Our operation,” he says, “has a definite trajectory...but I don’t see our land base growing. One of my goals is to grow fruit intensively and out of season—raspberries in October, for example.” For John Bellow, SpringRain Farm is primarily “a place to provide a livelihood,” but because he doesn’t want to be a farm manager, he wants to scale the farm enterprises so he can do the work himself, with seasonal help from interns. He also imagines his farm as a place where he can continue his own research—he’s currently working on a variety of winter squash from Peru that resembles, he says, a big green hubbard. Finally, he wants to provide a space for himself and others to study and learn about sustainable production systems suitable to our area.

Internships Evolve to Farm Apprenticeships

Education is an important component to the SpringRain farm plan. Observing that seasonal interns to local farms too often become farm laborers, Bellow says he’s working with Crystie Kisler at Finnriver Farm, Linda Davis at Solstice Farm, and Katherine Baril at WSU Extension to develop the Jefferson County FIELD Program that will provide interns (or, more properly, apprentices) with educational opportunities while they’re practicing what they learn on the farm.

Beyond efforts to provide a more formal structure to the internship, Bellow hopes to eventually link interns that come to our community to work on farms with related agricultural enterprises such as value-added products to stock the shelves of local markets. John suggested, for one example, a niche business to buy dried beans from local farms to make a packaged bean soup. “It’s the quality of linkages to farm services, inputs, and markets that strongly impacts the viability of many small farm businesses,” John emphasized, concluding that “if the service or product is inaccessible, the enterprise will struggle.”

Tradition Informs New Ideas

John’s “contrarian views” of farming in general point the way toward new ideas about farming in our community. A co-op or farmer’s guild was one possibility discussed at the recent WSU farm summit. And even though Bellow isn’t interested in offering a CSA from his own farm, he said he’s excited to work with other CSAs to enrich a variety of agricultural products offered directly to food buyers. “We don’t need six different CSAs,” he said. “What we need is one CSA where we’ve coordinated our activities. You can get your dairy, you can get your fruit, you can get your meat...” This approach reduces duplication of labor and resources while delivering wholesome food to the community. This effort at cooperation was in action this past summer and winter when SpringRain Farm supplied eggs from a mixed flock of 200 chickens to Red Dog Farm’s CSA.

The SpringRain Farming System

The chickens—Wyandotts, Buff Orpingtons, Barred Rocks, Black Astralorps—roost and lay in portable range houses that give John the flexibility to manage their access to pasture and protect them from predators. His small flock of Katahdin sheep will eventually provide lamb. The Katahdin, John and Roxanne explain, is a “hair sheep” that doesn’t need to be sheared. Katahdin are also genetically more resistant to disease and parasites. The SpringRain farming system will have the sheep grazing pasture, followed by chickens. The pasture won’t be overgrazed and will be fertilized by sheep and chicken. Bees fit in the system as pollinators for crops. “My long-term goals,” John said, “are to increase nutrient and resource cycling on our farm and reduce leakages from our production system as much as possible.”

SpringRain Farm combines traditional approaches to agriculture and cutting edge innovations in sustainable production while at the same time visioning into the future in new ways that can lend a big hand to renewing our food system here in east Jefferson County. With “an eye to biodiversity” (Roxanne

noted), the two have “unpacked” much over the past year-and-a-half. In early 2010 they even organized “an old-fashioned barn lowering” to tear down an old 1930s farmhouse. The materials will be used to build a new sheep barn. And the old barn that I’ve admired for many years while I’ve stood behind Chimacum Valley Vet waiting to pick up my dog will be restored and maintained as a tip-of-the-hat to the original farm.