



The *New* American Farmer

Elizabeth Henderson, Peacework Organic Farm

Newark, New York

Summary of Operation

- 70 crops (vegetables, herbs, flowers, melons and small fruit) raised organically on 18 acres
- Community supported agriculture (CSA) farm with 280 member families.

Problem Addressed

Need for a new farm location. In 1998, nearly 20 years after leaving a university professorship to farm, Elizabeth Henderson had to begin anew. For years, Henderson had farmed as a partner at Rose Valley Farm, a diversified, organic operation. Then the personal and professional partnership under which Henderson had been farming at Rose Valley Farm dissolved.

Background

“I had been making my living by teaching at a university,” Henderson recalls. “Instead, I wanted to live in a way that was in concert with my beliefs about the environment and community.” At age 36, Henderson retired from the university and started to farm.

Henderson spent eight years homesteading at Unadilla Farm in Gill, Mass., a period she describes as an apprenticeship in learning how to grow vegetables. She and her partners grew a range of garden crops on about four acres of raised beds, keeping many for their own use but also marketing to restaurants, food co-ops, farmers markets and directly to neighbors.

In 1989, Rose Valley and a Rochester-based nonprofit, Politics of Food, formed the Genesee Valley Organic CSA. They started with 29 shares, and, over a decade, expanded to 160 shares. At that time, Henderson’s partnership ended. The CSA enterprise remained committed to Henderson. This time, she brought her market — indeed, a whole community — to her new location.

People often describe CSA in economic terms — members pay a set amount in advance for a weekly share of the harvest during the growing season, many of them working on the farm in various ways. But Henderson places equally high value on the relationships CSA fosters between farmers and the people who eat the food they produce. She also puts a premium on the connections CSA forges among the farmer, the community and the land. Thus her life running a CSA farm supports her values, among them: cooperation, justice, appreciation of beauty, reverence for life and humility about the “place of human beings in the scheme of nature.”

“For me, farming for a community of people whom I know well is very satisfying,” she says. “It’s not like shipping crates off somewhere, where I never see the customers. I know everyone, and I know most of their children.”

The CSA community pulled together to help Henderson and her new partner, Greg Palmer, create a working farm that reflects their vision. During the 1998 growing season, the CSA purchased vegetables from four other organic farms in the greater Rochester area, while members helped transform 15 acres of sod into vegetable beds, built a new greenhouse and cold frame, and renovated an old barn and

packing shed. Members contributed what they knew best, from architects helping design the greenhouse to an electrician laying wiring.

Peacework Farm rents 18 acres from Crowfield Farm, a 600-acre bison and hay operation that has been chemical-free since 1983, allowing Peacework to get organic certification immediately. They also were able to rent a barn and packing shed, that, with work, were made appropriate for vegetable production.

Moreover, Crowfield owners Doug and Becky Kraai have a long history of environmental stewardship. In partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, they had planted trees and built ponds to enhance wildlife habitat. All in all, Henderson says, “it seemed a very friendly place to farm.”

Focal Point of Operation — Community Supported Agriculture

Peacework Farm grows about 70 crops, including a wide variety of vegetables, herbs, flowers, melons and small fruit, all according to certified organic practices. About 95 percent of the harvest goes to the CSA enterprise.

Since Henderson and Palmer were converting hayfields on light, loamy soil into vegetable cultivation, they decided to make permanent beds, leaving strips of sod between the beds for the tractors to drive on. The tractor wheels are five feet apart and all the beds are five feet wide.

Palmer and Henderson share responsibility for overall planning and management, but each has his or her own primary responsibilities. Palmer handles the non-CSA markets, keeps the books and maintains the equipment. Henderson tills and cultivates, does most of the greenhouse planting work, and since she lives at the farm, tends to pick

up most of the loose ends. Ammie Chickering, Palmer’s wife, is in charge of washing, packing and quality control and, with Henderson, does greenhouse planting. On mornings when members come to the farm to fulfill their work requirements, the farmers work with them.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of their CSA enterprise is the active, meaningful involvement of its members. “I



Nancy Kasper

Elizabeth Henderson has written two books about organic farming.

think farmers ask much too little of the people who buy their food,” Henderson says. “They don’t ask them to pay enough or to contribute in other ways.”

Not all CSA farms have a work requirement, but it’s a cornerstone of Genesee Valley’s success. During a season, members work three four-hour shifts at the farm and two 2.5-hour shifts in distribution. Because the farm is about an hour’s drive from Rochester, where most members live, members work to both harvest crops and coordinate distribution.

“It’s really important to learn how to design volunteer work so that people can give what they really want to give,” Henderson explains. Organization and advance planning are key. From a season-long work schedule, to detailed instructions about what to wear and bring, to directions for harvesting vegetables, Henderson makes sure shareholders are prepared to be successful contributors to the farm.

“Members consider the farm work a benefit,” Henderson says. “Their end-of-season evaluations are unanimously positive about only two things: the quality of the food and the farm work.”

The CSA farm’s core group handles another set of crucial tasks: accounting, distribution, scheduling, outreach, newsletter production and new member recruitment.

Economics and Profitability

Henderson, Palmer and Chickering have structured Peacework Farm so its revenue covers all farm expenses including labor without incurring debt. Henderson is pleased that they never borrow money, either.

The farmers designed the size of the CSA operation to generate enough income for Henderson, Palmer and Chickering to live in a manner Henderson describes as leaving a “small ecological footprint.” Not only do they easily cover farm expenses, but they have health insurance and are starting a pension fund.

“We negotiate our budget each year with the CSA core group, which is very committed to paying us a living wage,” she says. Three years ago, Henderson put \$35,000 into the farm and has since received \$42,000 back. “That is a decent return on my investment,” she says.

The CSA enterprise has 164 full shares and

67 partial shares, but because two or three families sometimes split a share, about 300 families are members. Developing the CSA farm budget is a process of balancing the numbers with philosophy. On one hand, the CSA membership is committed to providing the farmers with a just wage. On the other hand, the core group and the farmers want to make sure the CSA farm is accessible to people of all income levels. To make this possible, they offer a sliding scale for membership fees.

Environmental Benefits

Peacework's rotations feature summer and winter cover crops, depending, of course, on the timing and crop Henderson intends to plant the following year. The rotations and cover crops are designed to prevent erosion, maintain and build soil quality and control pest pressures. If they plan an early-spring planting, they plant a cover crop of oats. With crops planted later, they underseed with rye or a rye/vetch mix.

After harvesting a spring crop, Henderson and Palmer typically plant a buckwheat cover crop, incorporate that and then sow an oat cover crop for the winter. Henderson favors rye and vetch before brassicas. "I find it's all the fertilizer those crops need. We mow the cover crop in June, spade the bed, and let it set for three weeks and then spade again. It makes a beautiful seed bed."

Since they have an ample supply of large round bales of hay, Henderson and Palmer also use them as mulch — simply unrolling them over a bed — to get beds read for early use in the spring. This approach is particularly effective with garlic.

Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Henderson has been an energetic — some might say aggressive — advocate for organic farming and CSA for almost two decades, and a second profile could be entirely devoted to her efforts to promote local, sus-

tainable food systems. Through her books — she co-authored *The Real Dirt* and *Sharing the Harvest* — conference appearances, and grassroots organizing and advocacy, she has influenced scores of farmers, other agricultural professionals and policy makers at the local, state and national level.

Henderson's CSA farm is open to all, regardless of income. In the 2004 growing season, shares ranged from \$13 a week to \$19 per week, depending on a member's

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ability to pay. "The people who are paying \$19 know they are balancing out the people who are paying \$13," Henderson says.

The CSA sponsors a scholarship fund that helps further reduce share prices to assist lower income people. The fund is supported in part from sales of "A Foodbook for a Sustainable Harvest," a guide to the foods CSA members receive, including storage information and recipes. Rochester churches also have made generous contributions to the fund.

Finally, Henderson's CSA work has demonstrated to the larger farming community that a small-scale, organic farm — with cooperation and support from its neighbors — can succeed.

"I want my farm to serve as a demonstration to my farming neighbors, many of them very conservative people, that ecological farming is a practical possibility," Henderson wrote in *Sharing the Harvest*. "The conventional farmers I know consider my organic CSA to be a sort of special case, but at the same time, they recognize it as a creative approach to marketing and admire my ability to get the cooperation of consumers. That is a great advance over how it was viewed 10 years ago."

Transition Advice

Henderson observes that a surprising number of farmers find themselves facing sudden changes to their farming situations.

"The training I've had in holistic resource management and having a three-part goal — personal and spiritual, environmental, and economic — was very helpful," she says. "Because I had already done so much work on my goals, when I had to move, it guided me in the choices I had to make."

The Future

Henderson, Palmer and Chickering hope to find a young person to join them and become the junior partner so Henderson can cut back her time farming to do more writing. "I'm 61, and this is pretty aerobic," she says. "I want to cut back, but I want to be sure the farm continues."

■ *Beth Holtzman*

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Editor's note: This profile, originally published in 2001, was updated in 2004.