

The Delapointe Farm

By Yvon St. Jean, Laurence Tisdall and Jennifer Pittet

Praxede and Daniel Lapointe own a 530 acre farm near Bury in the Eastern Townships. They got into dairy production after Daniel completed a B.Sc. in agronomy at Laval University and bought his father's farm. Of their 530 acres, 330 are cultivated to feed their Holstein herd of 125. In 1979 Daniel became ill from treating grain seeds with fungicide. After spending a year recovering he decided on a new approach to farming which involved foregoing the use of chemicals and was consequently launched into what is known as organic farming.

Under this farm management system, the fields now receive only well composted manure. The composting helps to maintain a soil pH of about 6.5 whereas fresh manure or synthetic fertilizer tend to acidify the soil. Since the inception of the program there has been no need to add lime. Green manure is also used, and Daniel says it should be cut and allowed to dry before being turned into the top 15 cm. of soil. If the plant material is incorporated before this is done, the effect will be similar to that which results when fresh manure is added. He also says that "Biological activity is greatest in the top layer of soil and that turning the residues in deeper will therefore not necessarily encourage quick decomposition.

Leguminous plants such as clover and peas are seeded with wheat and barley. Twenty five pounds of peas can fix 250 pounds of nitrogen per acre. According to Daniel, not more than 10 to 25 pounds of peas/acre should be seeded or the maturity of the grain can be delayed.

As is generally the case with organic farmers, weed control is their major problem. As a method of control, they harrow 3 times at 5-7 day intervals. Daniel states that the first pass will encourage germination of 50% of the seeds, the second pass destroys this 50% and encourages growth of 50% of the remaining seeds and the same thing applies for the third pass. Timing is important; ploughing in the spring did not work on this farm as it encouraged the growth of mustard. The Delapointe's attitude is to be tolerant of a certain number of weeds and accept the benefits they can provide along with the disadvantages. Some will reach deep into the soil for nutrients and transport them to the soil surface. Daniel says that he had a good crop of alfalfa despite a fair amount of mustard by mowing the mustard when the alfalfa was short.

The Lapointe's are unique in that they market their own milk. In 1986 a cheese factory was built on the farm and now all the milk production is turned into raw milk cheddar

cheese. The official permit for this type of production, quite an unusual thing to have happen in this country, was obtained on JULY 22nd 1987.

Daniel suggests that this could be because organically produced raw milk cheese is in great demand whereas the market for the normal cheddar is largely saturated. In any case, direct marketing takes advantage of the fact that the profit is greater at the end of the food production line than at the beginning. Daniel explained to us that the cheese must be allowed to mature for at least two months in order to obtain a sufficiently low bacterial count. The federal and provincial inspectors are very strict about this and collect samples periodically. According to Bill Clamps, longtime cheesemaker, Delapointe's product is of very high quality.

The Delapointes recycle the milk-whey, which results from their cheese production. All of this whey (a fair amount considering that it takes 10 lbs of milk to make 1 lb. of cheese) is sprayed over the fields at 100 litres per acre. It is believed to increase the worm population 10 fold.

The basic aim of Praxede and Daniel is to attempt to run the farm in a way which will least upset natural cycles or better still encourage these cycles to perform better.

According to this family, of great importance in making the transition towards ecological farming is the support received from other farmers (Les Agriculteurs Ecologistes de l'Estrie in their case), consumer friends with a concern about food quality, and research support of high quality such as that of Vermont University, Rodale Research Center and groups such as REAP.

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