

Walker Farm Garden Center is a lively spot on an otherwise sleepy road in East Dummerston, Vermont. There you'll find not only an outdoor field, but a network of greenhouses that house an amazing diversity of vegetables and perennial plants grown without the aid of chemical fertilizers. But what makes Walker Farm truly special is its full-fledged embrace of alternative techniques for pest control, in addition to being a certified organic operation.



*Photo courtesy of Walker Farm*

Walker Farm's owner Jack Manix moved onto his maternal grandfather's farm for the summer of 1973, shortly after marrying his college sweetheart, Karen. A suburbanite from Connecticut, Manix had virtually no exposure to farm life prior to the move, but quickly fell in love with the hard labor and the rewards of the land. He and his wife learned animal husbandry and bee keeping, as well as gardening. It was in this latter chore that Manix discovered his true calling. He decided to stay on and take over the farm.

Applying the philosophy of his "hippie youth" he began to experiment with organic growing, comparing rows treated with natural compost to those treated with synthetic fertilizers and immediately saw the benefit of organic practices. His mission was simple.

"I wanted to leave the farm in better shape than the way we found it when we started," says Manix.

Manix has been growing organically ever since that first experiment, attaining official certification in 1993. His organic gardening also inspired him to transition his grandfather's "small-scale subsistence" farm to an organic vegetable enterprise that expanded over the years.

Presently, Walker Farm grows vegetables on 30 acres and has 19 greenhouses that offer 1200 kinds of annual and perennial flowers and hundreds of varieties of vegetables. Indeed, the farm specializes in variety, offering some 75 types of heirloom tomatoes and 20 breeds of modern tomatoes. Certain stock plant flowers are grown year-round in a heated greenhouse. A couple of unheated tunnels will sometimes be used to grow spinach and arugula (which can survive cold weather if properly covered) into March.

Walker Farm also has a fully-functioning retail operation that sells plants and produce, all surrounded by beautiful display gardens. However, the most profound aspect of the farm is its innovative use of Integrated Pest Management.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM), is an alternative system of controlling insects on the farm by employing common sense practices as opposed to synthetic chemical sprays. Conventional pesticides have been consistently linked to breast cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in scientific studies. Farmers who frequently use 2,4-D, one of the most common herbicides in the world, are six times more likely to have non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Children appear to be particularly prone to the disease and sensitive to the carcinogenic effects of pesticides.

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To keep pests under control, IPM relies on natural techniques such as keeping the soil healthy (weak plants and soil are more likely to be attacked by pests), introducing natural predators of the pests and carefully observing changes in the fields or greenhouses.

At Walker Farm, these methods are used extensively. Manix uses a technique called bio-rational, the introduction of insects that feed on other insects in an agricultural ecosystem. For instance, Walker Farm uses a predatory mite that consumes the two-spotted mite, which is a pest that would otherwise degrade their fields. They get the predatory mite by special mail order from IPM labs in New York State. They also use insects already on the farm, like a natural predatory wasp, which parasitizes the eggs of a whitefly. During the years when these wasps are naturally low in numbers, Manix will order more of them.

Additionally, Walker Farm sets up pheromone traps that lure moths known for laying eggs in corn. Manix or his staff will then count the number of moths caught in the trap. If it exceeds a certain amount, they will know to spray a bacterial control. They can also measure out how much to spray based on the number of bugs. This follows the basic IPM philosophy of only spraying something when necessary and doing it minimally. Manix and his employees will also carefully scout with magnifying glasses the leaves of plants for larvae and eggs, which they remove to preempt an infestation.

“After a few years, I know when pests are due,” Manix says, noting that years of careful supervision for pests can supply a farmer with a certain instinct for it.

Manix also puts up “scary eyes” in his fields, which are two blackened balloon-like structures that act as effective deterrents to crows, ravens, magpies and other birds that might consider scavenging the crops.

Finally, Walker Farm has been an active partner with University of Vermont Extension, helping to share information with other growers.

“Jack has hosted on-farm research on sweet potato varieties, and frequently gives presentations at both Vermont and New England vegetable and berry grower educational meetings,” says Vern Grubinger, a UVM Extension professor.

Most Walker Farm produce is available at their on-site store; however, Manix also contracts with local restaurants and local schools through NOFA-Vermont’s Vermont FEED program, and participates in the Senior Share program offering CSA shares to some 20 seniors in the vicinity. ↪



*Photo courtesy of Walker Farm*

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