

2023 State of the Farm

It's been three years since our last farm update in mid-February 2020. Probably, you can remember the little event at that time which pretty much changed the world. We were entering unknown territory and when the State of Vermont would not allow us to open our farm to the public in April, you could say we were a bit anxious. We researched programs for selling online and when we talked to the developer of Local Line, a very good Farm To Table website, he told us that while they usually try to recruit 30 to 50 farms in the spring, they had signed up 2400. In just a few days (and nights)



we programmed in hundreds of flowers and vegetable plants, seeds, perennials, even trees and shrubs so we could begin bringing much needed funds in for payroll, propane to heat the greenhouses and all the other expenses that go with starting up a farm in the spring. Curbside service held off the bill collectors just long enough for the farm to fully open, with some restrictions, in May. The next couple of years feel like a bit of a blur but bottom line – our farm survived thanks to the efforts of our great team and the support of a committed community.

I know I've mentioned it in past "episodes", but I think the success of Walker Farm is largely due to the ability of the occupants since 1770, to adapt and evolve. From tobacco to sheep to dairy to farm stand to garden center, it's been a long journey and now, as the present stewards of the land celebrate 50 years

on the farm from 1973 to 2023, planning for the next transition is in full swing. What will the future hold? The next generation is in place with an experienced staff who've been through many growing seasons and have demonstrated their ability to problem solve and manage the many departments of what has become a rather complex agricultural structure. Their dedication to the farm and their desire to join us in the pursuit of excellence ensures that Walker Farm will be around for a long time and continue to enjoy the symbiotic relationship with the community that has enabled us to fulfill the dreams we had 50 years ago when we built that first 9' by 12' glass greenhouse.

Of course, there will be new challenges each year. Will we continue to be able to attract local young people to experience a summer or two on the farm? Will the weather

extremes get worse with extended periods of drought interrupted by destructive five-inch rains? What new diseases and insect problems will be added to those already here as a result of climate change?



Each year we say good-bye to a few employees who we hate to see go. This year we'll be missing two who are off to start their own businesses and one who late last fall had a new baby girl! We had a total of 42 workers on the payroll in 2022 and expect that we'll need a similar crew for 2023. Luckily, the employment picture is looking better as some very talented new prospects have already signed up for the season. Our job will be to learn their interests and put their talents to work. Each new crew member brings creative ideas and unique strengths that help us improve the farm.

Last year we hired a contractor to help with an erosion and flooding problem in one of our low lying fields. Our plan this year is to continue to mitigate soil loss in problem areas by installing ditches and grassy strips to divert and slow down the water that runs through our fields after one of those multi-inch downpours. We're hoping to eventually purchase another piece of farmland to be able to rotate our plantings better and seed more soil-building cover crops. We also need to work on a better irrigation plan to supply more consistent watering that will help improve crop quality.

An incredible new flush of organic insect and disease control products have hit the market in the last few years that will aid in controlling pest problems without damaging

pollinators. A fine exclusion netting has become a popular alternative to spraying where applicable. In our greenhouses we're using trap plants, banker plants and habitat plants to raise our own good parasite and predator bugs to fight the bad guys instead of having to use pesticides. Customers may notice the small sachets in the hanging baskets that will help keep the flowers healthy all summer.



The excitement of learning to meet new challenges is what keeps a farm healthy and relevant. Our investments in infrastructure and worker retention pay dividends as we move from season to season, breaking customer visit records with new gardeners and healthy food seekers. We enjoy a creative challenge often suggested by a visitor or employee that keeps our farm lively and fun. Our garden center, organic farmstand and Christmas tree farm will adapt to our customer's needs and continue to support community non-profits with the goal of keeping Vermont number one in sustainable agriculture. It's been a wild and rewarding ride for the last 50 years. We hope you join us for the next 50!



+