

Farming of the past becomes way of the future

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While traveling through Southern Minnesota, whether as a local or just passing through, one can't help but notice field upon field of soybeans, corn and alfalfa.

And to the untrained eye, those different crops may share striking similarities.

However, as residents of Faribault County already know, each farmer has his or her own unique twist when it comes to planting, growing and harvesting crops.

Denny and Diane Lutteke of Wells took an uncommon approach to farming in 1982 when the couple decided to switch from conventional to organic farming.

"I stopped using all fertilizers in 1978 because it seemed like I was going nowhere," Lutteke explains. "We were always just paying the bills, paying the bills, paying the bills and I wasn't moving forward."

Four years later, he began farming using only organic practices.

"Tracy came out to the field barefoot after I'd just gotten done spraying," Lutteke recalls of his daughter's childhood. "You weren't supposed to be out in the field for 24 hours after it'd been sprayed. But here she came, running across the field so she could ride with me. That's when I thought, 'this is stupid,' so that's when we quit using chemicals altogether."

Today, Lutteke and his son, Chris Lutteke, farm more than 1,000 acres of organically certified crops, including corn, soybeans, barley, oats, alfalfa and ground cover crops, depending on the year.

New this year, Lutteke also planted 35 acres of organic

peas for Seneca. The company had contacted Lutteke and other farmers in the area to see if they would consider raising peas.

"We've raised sweet corn before, but never peas for human consumption," Lutteke admits. "They wanted 2,000 acres and I think they got 1,200 to 1,400 acres in the area."

In Lutteke's opinion, the peas produced a good yield and he would even consider doubling the crop for next year.

"One nice thing about growing the peas is that we get the crop off early and then we can grow our own cover crop for next year's corn—it's not a fertilizer outlay," he explains.

Organic farmers are technically allowed to use naturally-minded fertilizers such as phosphorus, lime or sulfur.

Lutteke, however, has chosen not to use commercial fertilizers at all. Instead, he plants a cover crop in the field to serve as a fertilizer for next year's yield.

"That's how it was done years ago. Farmers used to grow their fertilizer and now we don't do that anymore," he says.

Aside from growing the fertilizer, he also uses 800,000 to 900,000 gallons of liquid dairy manure for corn fertilizer. The liquid manure comes from the dairy cows that are also raised on the farm.

"I think there's a connection between people, animals and the land," Lutteke begins. "I don't know what it is, but it seems to work better for us."

Lutteke Organics is an entirely self-sufficient farm. The livestock, the crops and the milk are all produced on the same land.

"It's nice to have that complete circle," he says.

The primary product that comes from Lutteke Organics is whole, fluid milk. At any given time, the dairy farm is occupied by 80 dairy cows.

The milk produced either remains whole, fluid milk, or it is made into organic cheese, butter or yogurt and then sold to the public through Organic Valley.

Organic Valley is a farmer-owned co-op out of La Farge, Wisconsin. The company began in 1988 with seven farmers from southwestern Wisconsin.

Lutteke shared similar values and ideals with the original co-founders, so in 1997, he decided to send in his product for the farmers to taste. Later that year, he became the 67th producer for Organic Valley.

Today, Organic Valley works with more than 2,000 organic farmers throughout the country, making the company the largest organic co-op in the nation.

"It's a true co-op," Lutteke says. "We truly own the creamery—a part of it. We all have a share in it."

As shareholders of Organic Valley, the Lutteke's have to follow very specific rules, guidelines and regulations to ensure that the product is certified organic.

Lutteke is confident that after years of organic farming, he, Diane and Chris have the rules memorized.

"I know what has to be organic and I wouldn't cheat. Diane wouldn't cheat, none of us would cheat on it," Lutteke says. "We live by those rules and we wouldn't do anything to destroy our integrity."

The Lutteke's have remained loyal to their organic farming practices and they

want to show other organic farmers how to do the same.

"We want to teach them the basics. You don't need thousands of acres to make a living," Lutteke reflects. "We just need to look back in history and see how our forefathers did it. We didn't listen when they told us, but now we see that it did work, and it does work."

Other than serving as a guide to other farmers, Lutteke has spent his time building thousands of attachment pieces that other organic farmers can use on their cultivators.

Though cultivators are considered tools of the past, the machines—and their makeshift attachments—work very well for organic farming.

"We run GPS on our planters and cultivators. We can cultivate within an inch and a half from the row to kill these weeds," Lutteke points out.

Taking a few steps back to use farming techniques from the past involves hours of hard work, manual labor and alternative farming practices, many of which do not utilize the technological advances now used in conventional farming.

However, there has been a rise in organic farms throughout the past decade.

Lutteke's farm is only one of six certified organic farms in Faribault County, but he believes we will be seeing more of them pop up in the next few years.

"As far as being organic, it's got to start in your heart," says Lutteke, imparting a bit of his wisdom. "You don't do it for the money—we've never done it for the money. We have to feel good about what we're doing."