

Sustainability on the S & S Homestead

“It is productivity that rights the balance, and brings us home.”

Wendell Berry

The S & S Homestead is a fifteen-acre farm on Lopez Island where farmers, Henning Sehmsdorf and Elizabeth Simpson, produce seedlings, fruits, hay, barley, vegetables, wool, milk, custom-cut beef, eggs, flowers and herbs.

There are many features that set this farm apart from most other farms. The first and foremost reasons are that they are dedicated to ecological sustainability, feeding only their community, and educating a new “crop” of farmers. This farm is not about making money. Enough money is made to accomplish these primary goals. So any attempt to measure the *economics* (Greek for “household management”) of this farm needs to use different types of balance sheets than those commonly employed to determine the success or failure of an enterprise.

In order to create a farm that embodies the three goals stated above, Sehmsdorf and Simpson rely not on marketing techniques such as “branding,” niche markets, and advertising, but on personal values and community relationships. They also rely on a fifty-year plan. As Dr. Sehmsdorf pointed out, on more than one occasion, he only has eighteen years left to accomplish the goals set out in their farm plan.

There are a number of ways that the S & S Homestead seeks ecological sustainability. First, they raise their own soil fertility inputs. Their pastures are grazed by moving the chickens, sheep and cattle often, so that they do not overgraze and their droppings fertilize the land. This also keeps the animals out of their own waste to lower disease levels. They have no veterinary or feed bills.

They also compost the manure of their milk cow, chickens, sheep, and pigs and to use on their garden. I use the term “garden” because the vegetable production part of this farm is only 2,000 square feet. They do use some off-farm inputs to add specific nutrients to the garden, such as liquid fish fertilizer, rock phosphate, and bone meal.

While this farm, like many small community farms, is not certified organic, they do not use any synthetic herbicides, fertilizers, or pesticides and, in fact, they are even more “organic” than the USDA allows. They do not use *any* herbicides or pesticides. Instead, they rely on the health of their soil, diversity of crops and other agronomic practices to prevent diseases and pests.

And a final note on ecological sustainability: they raise all of their own animal feed, their food, and in some cases, even their own building materials. They have used sustainably harvested timbers on their property to build a pole barn loft and a straw-bale house, which also used their





own straw. By raising their own animal feed, food, soil fertility inputs and building materials, their overhead is, by any accounts, incredibly low.

Another goal of the farm is to feed their community. They are not interested in creating niche markets off-island, such as other island farms are doing by servicing up-scale Seattle restaurants. They want everyone to be able to afford their food, so they make creative arrangements with island residents by bartering services or through long-term payment plans.

And lastly, one important goal of the farm is the education of future farmers and academicians that are interested in understanding sustainable agriculture through hands-on education. While they have taken on interns for years, they now have a new role by partnering with Washington State University Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources. Dr. Sehmsdorf is an Adjunct Professor with WSU and in the summer of 2002 the farm has four interns, with two being international visiting scholars from Sweden and India.

Rather than just work on the farm as a source of free labor, Dr. Sehmsdorf provides research projects for the interns during their five-month internships. They generally do farm chores during the morning and then they work on their research in the afternoons. Often this research has them searching the Internet and writing reports in their living quarters.

The S & S Homestead provides a good example of a small farm adapting to changes that have been occurring since around the mid-twentieth century and, in some cases before that: consolidation of agribusinesses, food insecurity, poor health from processed food, waning land stewardship, dependency upon other areas of the world for food, and food illiteracy.

The goals for the farm come from the deep-seated values of the farmers. One of the main reasons the farm has enough income to operate is that they do not feel the need to constantly have more and better stuff. They have no TV (which means less messages exhorting them to consume) and they usually ride thirty-three year old bicycles when they need to go to Lopez Village, rather than needing to drive a new SUV. In this way, and many other ways, all North American households can learn about sustainability from the S & S Homestead Farm, even if they never lift a hoe.



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