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WORKING TO PROMOTE ORGANIC FARMING AND GARDENING IN NEW JERSEY AND PENNSYLVANIA

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Farmer Profile:

Ted Stephens of Stephens Farm

By Andy Beloff

"Organic produce should be affordable to the average person," says owner Ted Stephens of Stephens Farm in Sussex, New Jersey. "This way, everyone can enjoy it." Ted lives this idea as he travels to New York City twice a week to sell the "fruits of his labor" at a New York City-owned greenmarket in downtown Brooklyn. Ted especially enjoys his encounters with local neighborhood residents there, with their appreciative attitudes and respectful eye for good, organically grown produce. Since March 1994, both local residents and workers alike in this bustling section of the city have been able to purchase fresh organic produce grown on Ted's 45 NOFA-NJ certified organic acres of farmland. Ted originally began his journeys into New York City in 1989, setting up shop at the farmers' market in New York's Union Square section. Ted has also sold his produce at various farmers' markets throughout New Jersey.

Walking with Ted as he makes his rounds through the Stephens' farmstead on a warm and humid June afternoon, I feel a great deal of admiration for the effort it takes to maintain this acreage as beautiful, productive farmland. Despite the long hours of hard work and demands on their time, Ted and his wife of seven years, Annemarie, charge along on what seems like unlimited energy. Not only must they take care of the farm and harvest their produce, but they also find the time to raise four future farmers in the process - Nathaniel (six months old), Jennifer (almost two), Josh (three), and Caitlan (five), along with two cats (Red and Midnight), and their dog Buster.

Although teachers by trade, Ted's Mom and Dad had a strong respect for farm life and a desire to see their family grow up on a farm. Realizing their dream, Ted's family purchased what is now known as Stephens Farm, when Ted was 12. Not wasting any time, a flock of sheep was purchased and promptly delivered the very next day. As Ted grew up and became an active member of the local 4-H Club, his Dad co-signed a loan which allowed Ted to purchase some sorely needed farm equipment for baling and growing hay. Also supporting Ted in this venture was his extension agent, who became his mentor through the Farmers Home Administration's Youth Loan Program.

The total acreage of Ted's farm is 125 acres. This includes 60 acres that he is currently leasing back from the government at \$10 an acre. Ted's other landlords are the State of New Jersey and his mom! With the Appalachian Trail running straight

through his land, the government, through the Appalachian Trail Commission, administers a program which guarantees preservation of the trail, while permitting the original landowner to continue using the soil for farming. A creek nearby assists with irrigation.

To get where he is today, Ted made many sacrifices along the way,



Stephens Farm, Sussex, NJ

Originally making more than a comfortable living after over 20 years of baling hay, growing feed corn, raising and shearing sheep, and other jobs at local farms in the area, Ted traded it all in shortly after getting married. Following Caitlan's birth, Ted realized that he wanted to be around to see his children grow up, not away at someone else's farm, only seeing his kids a few minutes before they went to bed. This meant staying home and sacrificing many of the lucrative opportunities available in the business, but Ted has no regrets.

In a big break earlier this year, Ted was approached by the Northeastern Vegetarian Association, about a CSA they wanted to establish for their members. The remaining 20 organic acres consist of hay fields and pasture lands. With the season just getting started, and the promise of a bountiful harvest lying ahead, Ted looks forward to seeing all the tomatoes, peppers, bok choy, carrots, beets, green beans, eggplant, broccoli, cauliflower, herbs, winter and summer squash, potatoes, and assorted greens he planted just a short time ago, blossom into productive crops. Of particular pride to Ted are his pest and weed-free purple broccoli. His other prize crop is mesclun, currently selling for more than \$10 a pound. For hybrid seed germination and hothouse tomatoes, Ted has two greenhouses. Growing soil on the farm consists of clay loam (the majority of land), gravel river bottom, black dirt, grey soil, and shale.

For fertilizers, Ted uses chicken and rabbit manure. As Ted tells it, about six or seven years ago, he "hooked up"

with a rabbit farm in West Milford that uses rabbits for germ-free research. The pellets are vacuumed up and this weed-free, great natural fertilizer is delivered to Ted's farm every other week to work its miracles. "Any problems?" Ted had a resident pheasant for a while who was eating some of the vegetables, along with a cutworm problem but both problems were resolved.

Besides the CSA, Ted runs a small farm stand on the premises. Currently located in a shed doubling as the CSA

doesn't pan out, Ted still plans on getting some cows, heifers, goats and pigs back on the farm, "just like in the old days." Besides, he "always got along better with animals than people." Ted hopes to have some fun on the farm this fall, offering haunted hayrides and pick-your-own pumpkins to locals and tourists alike.

The Stephens' two eldest children followed us around during our conversation and tour of the farm. Caitlan professed a liking for carrots and broccoli, while Josh, enthusiastically crushing a lump of dirt in his hands, voted for cucumbers. As for carrying on in the family occupation, Josh is all set to take over for his dad. Caitlan's interests however, veer toward teaching - like her grandparents.


Andy Beloff lives in Pennington, NJ with his wife Cynthia and their dog, Martha. He works for the financial service's firm of Merrill Lynch & Co. where he edits and publishes several newsletters. Andy is a CSA member at the Watershed Farm and volunteers for their newsletter "Cornucopia." Hobbies include reading, traveling, writing, desktop publishing, and currently learning a lot about organic farming.



pickup area, Ted hopes to set up a refrigerated truck body for CSA pickups and clean out the old barn for an expanded farm stand. For greater visibility, Ted commissioned a local sign maker to create two new large signs to hang out by the road. These are expected to arrive shortly. Ted is also involved with NOFA-NJ's tomato marketing cooperative.

Asked how he got interested in organic farming, Ted related that well before he was officially certified as an organic farmer, he was growing organic feed corn on his farm. To educate himself on the ways of organic farming, he watched and observed other farmers, used a little common sense, and read a specialty farming magazine called New Farm Magazine by Rodale Press. Although totally committed to organic farming and its principles, Ted feels "there's a lot we can learn from conventional farmers." Their suggestions and answers to his problems over the years have proven very helpful. By being productive and open-minded to farmers of all types, Ted continues to reach out, listening to their concerns and educating conventional farmers on the many benefits and advantages of farming organically. Ted explains, "Conventional farming is a way of life for many of these farmers, rather than a conscious desire to farm conventionally."

With a desire to resume milking operations, Ted has held preliminary discussions with a Wisconsin dairy and produce coop, who would like to bring in 250 to 300 cows to expand business in this area. Even if this opportunity



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