

Nebraska growers extend season and diversify into cheese-making

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Kevin and Charuth Loth began their organic farming careers in northern California, where Kevin was an apprentice at the Agroecology farm at UC-Santa Cruz and Charuth was a research assistant in the Agroecology department. After graduating, Kevin worked at an organic farm in Watsonville, giving him a total of seven years experience. After their first child was born, the Loths decided to move back to Kevin's hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska, to raise their family and start their own organic farm.

Running an organic vegetable farm in Nebraska is a different business from doing it in coastal California, of course. Their frost-free season is about five months, winter temperatures can drop to 20 below, and summers are often scorching. Nevertheless, much of their training was useful to them



Photos at left: Charuth and Kevin Loth with their youngest child, top, and a November view of salad greens in one of their high tunnels, bottom.

in developing their farm. In particular, they didn't think of selling produce as something you do only during the summer. They knew that they would have to extend their season in both directions from their frost-free dates in order to make it in the Midwest. In the past nine years, the Loths have worked hard to add months to their selling season, to the point where they now have cash flow nine months of the year. Their only break from selling is from late December to late March. Their season extension strategies are based on three main components: hoophouse production, a winter/spring CSA; and an on-farm market. They also grow sunflower and pea sprouts much of the year, which Charuth writes about on page 12 of this issue.

Hoophouses

The Loths were early to adopt Eliot Coleman's system of growing cold-hardy crops in unheated hoophouses. Coleman discovered that a second layer of protection within the hoophouse - specifically, row cover tunnels held up on wire hoops - would keep many kinds of vegetables alive throughout the winter in his Zone 5 Maine climate. The limiting factor for winter growth, he found, was not temperature, but lack of sunlight in the short days of November to mid-February.

Lincoln, Nebraska, also is in Zone 5, but with the advantage of having greater light intensity during winter. As a result, the Loths have been able to produce salad crops as late as Christmas and as early as mid-March.



The Loths started an on-farm market, where they sold their produce and neighboring farms' products.

They have two 20x200-foot hoophouses that they constructed themselves. Kevin, who also works in his own construction business, is talented at fashioning tools and structures. To build his hoophouses, he borrowed a

pipe bender from a neighbor and made hoops from chain-link fence top rail he bought from a fencing company. It is a 15-gauge metal pipe that comes in 21-foot lengths. He used one and a half lengths for each bow, swedged

to fit together into a 30-foot bow. The bows are spaced every 4 feet, and connected by two purlins. A hipboard at 36 inches above ground allows the bottoms of the hoopouses to be rolled up for ventilation.

In one hoopouse, the Loths plant a half-bed of salad greens every week beginning in mid-September to supply their customers with salad mix well into fall. In the other hoopouse, they grow cold-hard crops like bok choy, radishes, spinach, mache, parsley, dill and cilantro. After a short midwinter break in production, they begin again for early spring sales.

In summer, the hoopouses are used for trellised English cucumbers, summer squash, eggplants and tomatoes. Charuth has been adding flowers in recent years, and sold as much as \$1,000 a week during peak season. Kevin was at first skeptical about growing flowers but he's now on board, Charuth says, and plans to build a third hoopouse for them this winter.

The only problem the flowers have presented is that they were still blooming in mid-September when it was time to start the fall vegetable crops. "We have a hard time killing things," Charuth said. So they decided to plant the fall crops in the field and cover them with a new kind of structure they improvised. They took two of the 30-foot hoopouse hoops and tied them together at the top with rubber inner tubing. They spread the hoops over three beds and push the pipe into the ground, then cover the whole thing with Typar row cover that is anchored with

sandbags. The mini-hoopouses withstand the wind, but are light enough for one person to move. Next year, they plan to cover the hoops with shade cloth for instant shade in the field.

Farm store

The Loths had been making about 80% of their income from the farmers' markets in Lincoln and Omaha. But sales drop off in September as football takes over the Saturdays of much of the local populace. They decided they needed to get customers out to the farm. So they converted a corn crib at the edge of their property into a farm store. They took care to make the building attractive as well as functional, using board-and-batten siding and painting it off white with dark green trim. A 9-foot sign hangs in a flower bed in front of the store, with their logo, their name, "Shadow Brook Country Market" and the motto "Earth Friendly Produce."

Inside, the store has a homey, country-kitchen atmosphere with curtains and tablecloths. Coolers and baskets are filled with fresh produce, eggs, and meats, and shelves hold jams and other processed food products.

The Loths buy from local growers to supplement their own products. They carry many unusual and hormone-free meats that aren't available at grocery stores, including buffalo, free-range chickens, rabbit, lamb, goat, ostrich, turkey and pork.

The store is open five days a week, and Charuth usually works there. This summer, the store really took off, and became the

equivalent of a third farmers' market in weekly revenue. Sundays are particularly busy. The suburbs have been moving toward them since they moved to their farm nine years ago and they are now literally surrounded by neighbors who want to buy their vegetables. The farm store also has a kitchen that was certified by the health department this year, and the Loths plan to make salad dressings, pesto and salsas. They have also held a few workshops in their store and look forward to doing more now that they have a processing kitchen.

Charuth is also enthusiastic about making cheese - she has a small herd of dairy goats - and is trying to get a grant to build a cheese facility, which is much more complicated than the processing kitchen they just got certified. They have also raised beef cattle, and enjoyed it. But they decided they need stronger fencing - especially given the suburban nature of their farm - before they continue their livestock business. Overall, they are pleased with the growth of the farm store. "Eventually, when we're too old and worn out to do farmers markets - they are exhausting - we'll be set up to sell off the farm," Charuth said.

Fall/spring CSA

The two farmers' markets are open from mid-May until late October. But with their hoopouse production and winter vegetables, the Loths are still going strong on the production end both before and after the market season. As market winds down every fall, they start distributing brochures to

their customers, inviting them to join their fall and spring subscription programs. The fall program costs \$25 biweekly and runs from November 1 to December 21. Customers in Lincoln can pick up at the farm store, and distribution in Omaha is at a bookstore/coffee shop near the farmers' market. Rather than tell their members what to buy, they give them coupons that they can use any way they want during the subscription season.

"They can go over or under \$20 each week, as long as they use them by the end," Charuth said. "If we have a big fiasco, and have no salad greens, for example, they can hold their coupons for the next week."

Besides salad mix and sprouts, the CSA also supplies winter storage crops that were started in July, including potatoes, squash, sweet potatoes, carrots, beets, Jerusalem artichokes and turnips. Charuth says the hardest part of the winter CSA is getting those fall crops started during the often scorching days of summer, but they plant and irrigate liberally and generally are successful. This year was especially challenging because grasshopper pressure was severe, and then they had a flock of about 70 wild turkeys arrive in their field and eat their lettuce in September. "It was an amazing sight," Charuth said. The spring subscription, which runs from March 31 to mid-May, is weekly and valued at \$15 a week. The offerings at that time of year tend to be salad and greens produced in the hoop house, plus the sunflower and pea sprouts that Charuth says are "our most consistent crops."

Farmers' markets

Even with all their season extension, their main-season farmers' markets continue to be important for them. At each market, there is only one other certified-organic grower, and the Loths' customers really want to buy organic. A few years ago, they had such long lines at market that customers started complaining they were waiting 20 minutes to get served.

"To not lose customers, we needed more employees," Charuth said. Now they have four people work at each of the markets, including Kevin's mother, who runs the stand at the Lincoln market. Kevin and Charuth alternate between the two markets because their customers demand it. "When Tucker was born, I stayed close to home and only went to Omaha three

times," Charuth said. "Customers constantly asked Kevin when they were going to see me again. They really like seeing both of us; it's important to them to know their farmers."

They have debated whether to continue their organic certification, and they polled their customers about it. About 50 percent said they would follow them whether certified or not, but the other half said that organic certification was important to them. So the Loths feel they need to retain their certification at this point.

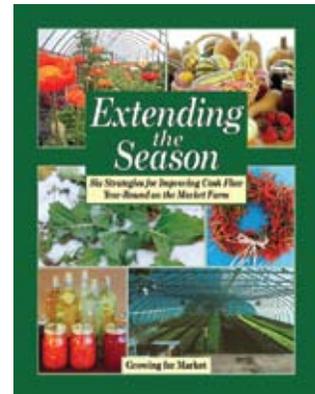
The many dimensions of Shadow Brook Farm provide a perfect example of how diversity is crucial to success. Every year, some disaster or another takes out a crop, but the Loths have their revenue spread across so many crops and markets that they ride out the bumps. Between farming and parenting three active sons, ages 9, 7 and 2, their lives are busy and challenging. And they love it.

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