

Farmer Profile
Chris & Randy Treichler
Star Hollow Farm
By Michele Gauger

Since PASA began offering our Farmer Profile column a few years ago, we have tried our best to showcase our many diverse farming members across the country. This month is no different and in talking with Randy Treichler of Star Hollow Farm in Three Springs, PA (Huntingdon Co.) I realized once again how innovative and adaptable PASA farmers could be.

Randy didn't grow up on a farm, but was exposed to various aspects of agriculture as a kid by spending time at his uncle's farm in Pennsylvania. After leaving his home in the San Francisco Bay Area, he left to study agriculture at Iowa State and the University of California Davis. He earned a masters degree in International Agricultural Development at UC Davis and moved to Colombia (South America) to work for the International Center for Tropical Agriculture.

After two years abroad, Randy, his wife Chris and their two young children returned to the United States in 1991, initially to continue his agricultural studies at Cornell. "I found myself asking if a life in academia was really for me, and one day I went to the ag placement office and noticed New Morning Farm (in Hustontown, PA) was looking for apprentices," said Randy. "Chris and I had decided to locate somewhere on the east coast since she had family in southeastern Pennsylvania, so the south central area of the state was a good fit."

"I worked with Jim Crawford at New Morning Farm and it was also during the time when the Tuscarora Organic Growers Cooperative (TOG) was forming and they were looking for organic growers to participate," he continued. "Back in 1991 there were great opportunities for us because we had access to reasonably priced land, the cooperative was close-by, and in addition there were farming neighbors we could work with and learn from just a few miles away."

Eventually the right farm happened upon Randy. "Jim Crawford had asked if I could help a friend and neighbor of his move. Once I saw their farm, I couldn't get over how perfect the place was. The owners used the farm as their seasonal home and lived in New York the rest of the year. Over a long dinner conversation after the move was complete, I basically left with a handshake agreement to buy their farm," he continues.

Thus Star Hollow Farm was founded in 1992 and is now a thriving organic produce farm. The Treichler family includes Chris and three children; Jack, Anna and Sam, all of whom help with various farm duties. Randy and the kids are building a tractor shed this summer, whenever there is a break in the fieldwork.

The 85-acre woodland farm includes about 5 acres in active cultivation and an additional 15 acres in yearly rotation with cover crops (Pennsylvania Certified Organic certifies all the crop acreage). They also have a flock of 100 laying hens, and have inoculated about 100 oak and maple logs for their first crop of shiitake and oyster mushrooms, to be harvested starting next spring.

When first starting out, the Treichlers were marketing their produce via wholesale (TOG) and direct at a handful of small area farmers' markets. "We enjoyed the direct marketing aspect at the farmers' markets, but after 5-6 years, we realized things weren't working out economically for us. So in 1998 we took a hiatus from farming," according to Randy.

At this time Randy took a job working at Wilson College at the Center for Sustainable Living working to gather information on how to promote Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), their history and to create a directory of CSAs on the east coast. All of this off-farm work was beneficial and inspired the Treichlers to revamp their own CSA program, begun several years before.

Since the local farmers' markets (and this was at a time well before the market boom of the last few years) were not economically viable, they began to look at other retail venues. They knew Jim Crawford had been participating in a weekly market in the Washington DC area (about 100 miles from the farm), **and** in 2001 they began selling at the Adams Morgan Farmers' Market and relaunched their CSA program.

From April through December you can find the Treichlers at the Adams Morgan Market, but their on-line, website farmers' market and CSA sales run all year long. Each week CSA boxes (or shares) are pre-planned, while the rest of the on-line market is "a la carte" ordering. Non-CSA customers can also order a box and add other items. "This method of Internet marketing by a single small farm, is still in the 'development' phase, although as of our 5th year we have filled over 12,500 orders," said Randy.

The online store is open for shoppers only during a 24-hour period from Wednesday at 7am until Thursday at 7am. "This is because we're not reasonably certain what produce will be ready for the weekend until Tuesday sometime and it takes, all day Thursday and Friday to pick, portion, and fill orders" Randy continued.

Their CSA membership is capped at 150, but because customers are allowed to choose when they want their box, the size and contents, they never really know how many CSA shares will be ordered each week until the store closes on Thursday morning. Typically between 45 – 75 members order each week.

From past experiences with their CSA program, the Treichlers were just too far out of town to make the traditional CSA idea, where customers come to the farm

to pick-up their box each week, feasible. And they learned over the years most people wanted more flexibility in when they got a box, quantity and what other items they could get. So they devised the online farmers' market and CSA to fill that niche.

Customers can also create debit accounts (a \$300 initial fee to join the CSA) where they pre-pay and then spend down their account as orders are placed in the online store. According to Randy, "Our CSA model is targeting 20-30 somethings in Washington DC that likely are in their first job away from home and have become accustomed to purchasing items via the Internet."

Not all the produce provided in the CSA and online market is produced at Star Hollow Farm. Randy says they sell products from their Co-op and about a dozen other local farms in order to provide cheeses, orchard fruits, honey and more.

"It has taken us about 14 years to become a profitable farm. We are not debt free, but neither Chris nor I are working off the farm anymore (Chris previously worked for the TOG Cooperative)," said Randy. The Treichlers are continuing to evolve in their operation by expanding their varieties of vegetables, incorporating sound forest management into their plans, working on innovative ways to battle the local deer population and making a few long-term investments such as a new reliable tractor.

According to Randy, "Sixteen years later we are still here at the farm. It is not an easy life and the pay isn't what it should be, but I am home six days a week, we work together as a family, eat very well and I like my job!"

What do you see as some of the critical issues concerning agriculture today?

Profitability. (At least on our farm!) That quick answer sort of surprises me, but I realize that while I'm not really thinking of that when I go out to work every day, it is what drives our farm, and I have to assume most other farms as well. I prefer to think about production issues -- cover crop timing and mixes, cultivating machinery, comparing varieties and finding new crops, season extension, irrigation improvements, and so on -- but in the end, it all has to be profitable to keep farmers on the farm where they can work on all these and other "sustainability" and land use issues.

What is unique about your farm?

Internet marketing. I can't think of any reason why we were predisposed to this, but somehow (actually the idea came over martinis one night) we started marketing over the internet about 5 years ago, and now it represents the majority of our sales, which are still relatively local (Washington DC), but use the internet as a medium to manage and give flexibility to our market and CSA customers.

Our internet-based CSA is unique, I think, allowing members to get custom boxes of varying size and contents, only on the weeks they want them. It's very customer-friendly, but of course represents a lot of time on our part to pack.

How has your operation evolved?

Market mix. We started out dividing our production about equally between wholesale and retail outlets, but over the years have been focusing more and more on retail, especially since our online Internet marketing has grown. On the one hand I'm a little saddened by the reduced role we play as producers for our co-op (Tuscarora Organic Growers), but on the other, we really enjoy and get a kick out of retail marketing and it seems to suit us. I'm pretty sure that it's only the success of our retail marketing that has us still in the game, particularly as we have made the decision to remain very small-scale and rely mostly on family labor.

Crop shift. One very clear change that has been occurring is the degree of wildlife pressure on our crops. Woods and critters surround our farm, and they are definitely on the increase. For years I've tried to control them -- usually not very successfully -- and have slowly been changing our crop mix to items they don't show much interest in. For example, when we started out, red beets were one of our main crops (grown for the Co-op). We even considered calling ourselves the "Beet Farm" they seemed so important. Now we've given up growing beets entirely outdoors, as the deer seem to love beet tops more than just about anything else. Now we're consciously shifting to crops the critters don't bother much with, always experimenting. This spring we planted our first Jerusalem artichokes -- about 200 plants. They started off great, until the deer found them. Now they are mown off nearly every evening. I guess they're not going to be a new "pest-proof" crop for us! Fortunately there are still some things out there. Our experiment with a third of an acre of celeriac seems to be working. After a few taste-tests, the deer and rabbits have left it alone. Thank goodness there are some crops left!

Why did you join PASA?

I attended one of the final planning meetings to create PASA back in 1991, I think up in Spring Mills or Millheim. It was obvious that there was a good energy vibe going on within the organic / alternative ag movement in PA at the time, and for anyone interested in that sort of thing, it was clearly the place to be (or organization to be involved with). It's been pretty amazing to see how PASA has grown and professionalized, and the PASA conference is one of the highlights of our year.