

A LINE IN THE SAND.



by CRAIG MATTSON

IT'S SPRING IN WISCONSIN. IF THERE'S ONE THING WE KNOW ABOUT SPRING HERE IT'S THAT IT CAN BE CAPRICIOUS. SURE, THE TEMPERATURES ARE HEADING UPWARD AND THE SUN GRACES US WITH ITS PRESENCE FOR MORE THAN A FEW MEASLY HOURS. BUT THAT CAN CHANGE IN AN INSTANT, WITH LITTLE WARNING. IF YOU'VE EVER FOUND YOURSELF COMPLAINING ABOUT SPRING'S OCCASIONALLY FICKLE NATURE, PAUSE FOR A MOMENT AND THINK ABOUT FARMERS LIKE KAY JENSEN AND PAUL EHRHARDT.

Like all farmers, Kay and Paul, owners of JenEhr Family Farm in Sun Prairie, confront the yearly challenges of planting and harvesting crops in the Midwest. But those challenges are compounded by the fact that Kay and Paul farm organically. They've been farming since 1997.

Kay and Paul believe in organic farming, melding their beliefs with a desire to be profitable. Like other organic farmers, they follow the rules for organic farms set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program: they farm without using pesticides or chemical fertilizers; they rotate their crops to maintain soil fertility; and they're responsible for following other produce handling rules, among other things. Despite the extra work, Kay and Paul believe in the positive impact organic agriculture has on society.

"Successful organic farmers don't do it for the rules, but because it's good for the plants, the land, and communities," Kay said.

The National Organic Program began in 1990. Its purpose was to bring a set of standards, and in turn regulations, to the growing organic agriculture movement, a movement that has grown steadily into a nearly \$39 billion a year industry. JenEhr is one of nearly 50 certified organic crop farms in the state of Wisconsin, according to USDA records.

While it's true that organic farmers charge a little more for their produce, there is a host of reasons why. Farming itself is difficult; farming organically is even more so. One of the biggest challenges, until only recently, has been the difficulty organic farmers had finding and getting crop insurance. The system for insuring agricultural crops unfairly favors commodities like corn and soybeans.

Until recently, crop insurance for organic farmers was too costly, said Harriet Behar, senior organic specialist at Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES), a non-profit organization that promotes organic and sustainable agriculture. It didn't support farms with a diverse crop selection, like many of the smaller organic farms in Wisconsin, similar to JenEhr. Besides the cost, the documentation was so complicated it was too difficult for most farmers to keep track of, Behar said. This meant that if bad weather damaged a crop, or when market prices changed dramatically, farmers who didn't have coverage lost money.



Kay said she and Paul have not been able to get crop insurance. For reasons like this, they had to figure out how to make their farm profitable, if they wanted it to be a successful business.

"I drew a line in the sand and said we're not making any money. I want to make money, real money ... not messing with the numbers," Kay said.

To that end, Kay and Paul started using hoop houses early on. Similar to greenhouses, hoop houses—Quonset-like structures covered with layers of smooth, opaque plastic—are a less expensive way to extend the growing season. Using them at JenEhr took some of the uncertainty out of farming because, Kay said, they allowed them to control the growing environment, among other things.

The hoop houses allow them to grow tomatoes, one of their specialties, both early season and late season varieties. In between, they grow a variety of other vegetables, including cucumbers. They also use them to over-winter spinach. In fact, Kay and Paul use their hoop houses almost year-round.

Despite the benefits of these farming practices, there are other challenges to running an organic farm, like price competition. Some growers will undercut prices in order to sell their produce, Kay said. Maybe they're not farming in a way that's financially sustainable, she added. But, when growers sell below the going rate, people like Kay and Paul suffer the consequences, because they have to compete against unreasonably

low prices. And there are produce buyers who will take full advantage of this, Kay said.

"They are buying a box of peppers for less than the farmer paid for the box," Kay said.

Outpost has been working with JenEhr for more than a decade. The relationship with JenEhr, as well as other farms, is about more than growing produce, said William Quinn, Outpost's produce buyer. The relationship revolves around good communication.

"The produce managers and I, along with Kay and Paul, have also invested a lot of time in figuring out ways to make the relationship work really well," William said.

A few years into their farming venture, Kay and Paul put up a third hoop house on their farm with the help of a loan from Outpost. The co-op had been purchasing produce from JenEhr for a few years before loaning them the money, William said.

The relationship with Kay and Paul was meant to be long term; Outpost has worked at it year after year. It's the right way to develop relationships with growers, William said.

"They've invested a lot of time, a lot of money, and a lot of expertise in perfecting tomatoes with the hoop houses, and they've really gotten their field crops like broccoli down," William said. "We find out what they're good at and build on it. That's certainly what we've done over the years with JenEhr."