

Organic Production

Feature Farm

**Kimball Brook Farm
Cheryl and JD Devos
North Ferrisburg, VT**

Cheryl and JD Devos are one of VT's largest organic dairy farms, milking a total of 225 dairy cows year round and farming 965 acres in North Ferrisburg, VT. Their farm has been in JD's family since 1968 and has been under Cheryl and JD's ownership and management since 1997.

Almost 300 acres is used for pasture for the cows and heifers, they grow about 120 acres of corn silage, 380 acres is in hay production and 100 acres is wooded land. They rent about 425 acres and own 540 acres, which includes two farms; one for the dairy herd and a second providing pasture and housing for the heifers and dry cows.

Many of the cows on Kimball Brook Farm are descendants of cows brought from Monroe, NY where JD's grandfather started a farm in the early 1950's. Most of the cows are grade Holsteins; 10% of the herd is Jersey/Holstein crosses and 5% are Jerseys. The crosses and Jersey cows have come into the herd starting when Cheryl and JD transitioned their herd to organic production in 2004. To avoid possible calving difficulties with their first calf heifers, they decided to breed to Jersey bulls for easier calving. They use a bull when the heifers are out on pasture and AI in the wintertime.

Their transition to organic was well planned and took 3 years, as much of their land needed to transition for the full 3 years. Initially, their reasons for getting certified organic was purely financial as the price for conventional milk was very low and they were getting fed up not being able to pay some of their bills. In the Fall of 2003, Cheryl attended a workshop offered by NOFA-VT on transitioning to organic dairy production. It was after that meeting, that Cheryl knew that they should go organic. She then had to convince her husband and together they put together a business plan and

presented it to the bank for approval prior to spring planting. Cheryl and JD started shipping milk to Horizon Organic in May 2005.

Production per cow is 18,000. They have used DHIA for the past 8 years as a tool to monitor individual SCC, help with culling decisions and are hoping to add some additional record keeping and monitoring to determine effectiveness of their herd health treatments, such as metritis and its relationship to ongoing reproductive health post treatment.

Last year they had enough surplus cattle that they were able to sell 25 milking cows and heifers. In the past, they have sold at least 10 dairy animals each year. They feel that they are keeping their cows longer now and

can see the potential generating additional income selling surplus organic dairy stock.

Housing for Cows, Calves and Heifers

The cows are housed in a freestall barn and have access to pasture during the daytime from May to November. Dry cows and heifers 6 months of age and over have freestall housing at a second farm adjacent to the home farm. During the grazing season (May – November) these groups of animals are on pasture 24 hours a

day. Heifers 3-6 months of age are kept in a bedded pack located at the dry cow/heifer

barn and calves from birth to weaning are raised in individual pens. Calves are weaned when they run out of room in the individual pens, which can be anywhere from 3-5 months. When calves are getting ready to wean, dividers are taken away, turning the pens into double occupancy pens, which allows the calves to socialize and go through the weaning process with a pal. This also prepares them for the dynamics of living in a larger group when they transition to the bedded pack.

Grazing System

Over the last 4 years, Cheryl and JD have been working with NRCS and the VT Agency of Agriculture in developing fencing, laneways, water systems and an effective grazing plan on their two farms. The programs that they have signed up for (CREP and EQIP) provided them with a 70% – 90% cost share, making their endeavor much more affordable. In ex-

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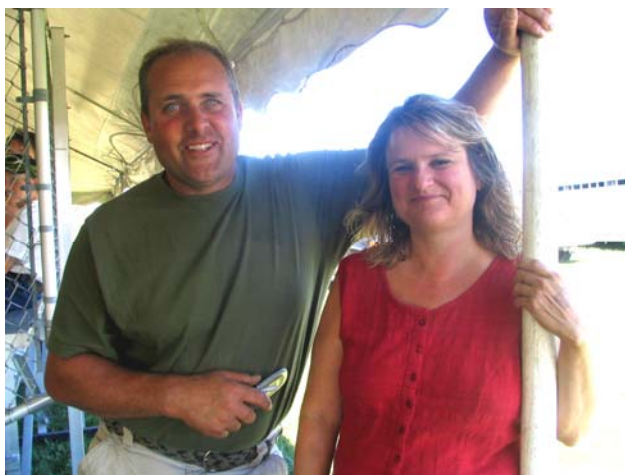


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change for the cost share assistance, they agreed to fence out 50 feet on either side of a large brook that travels through their property as well as taking out some pastures prone to flooding and planting trees in some of the wetter areas.

The fencing was completed for the dairy cows on the home farm first and then they developed the pasture infrastructure for the heifers and dry cows on the adjacent farm. They have high tensile perimeter wire with single strand divider fences and water tubs in each pasture.

When they were in their third year of grazing, they felt like they were really getting the hang of their pasture system and stopped supplementing their heifers with round bales. Now the older heifers survive on pasture alone from May to November; they are kept out with a bull and are rotated onto new pasture at least once a week.

Heifers 6-12 months of age are just learning how to graze so are placed in paddocks where they have the ability to come back to the barn twice a day and get



Photo by Robin Reid

grain. This gives them the opportunity to see these heifers regularly and make sure that they are growing well and learning how to graze.

The milk cows are moved to new pasture daily but they do not graze at night because they find it too challenging to move the cows in the darkness of early morning. The cows are fed a TMR to complement the pasture, which consists of corn silage, haylage and grain.

Developing a rotational grazing system has made a large difference to their pastures and their herd health. Cows, since going out on pasture are healthier, and have muscle tone, contributing to overall health and longevity. They also see a lot of clover coming in their pastures where there wasn't any before, rely less on stored feeds and enjoy seeing

some of their younger dairy cows running back to the barn at a gallop when it is milking time.

Livestock Health, Prevention and Remedies

Cheryl and JD have been very happy with their milk quality, which averages 130,000 SCC. To maintain high quality milk, they use a quarter-milker on the high count cows. The milk from the quarter milkers gets pasteurized and fed to calves. For udder prep, they use an iodine dip for pre and post dipping and make sure that the udders are *very* clean.

All animals are fed kelp, which is mixed into their grain or in the TMR as a preventative treatment and nutritional supplement.

When the dry cows are close to calving, they are moved to a freshening pen in the heifer barn until they calve. They make sure that the calf nurses or gets fed colostrum from the cow right away. The cow stays with the calf for 3-5 days and they don't milk out the cow at all, letting the calf do the work. This gives them a chance to watch the cow, make sure she is eating well, make sure she has cleaned and give the cow any attention she may need. If the calf is not drinking, they will milk the cow and either give the calf the milk with a bottle or tube. A lot of cow and calf problems have been prevented since they have implemented this routine.

At birth, all heifers get a Poly Serum (blood serum vaccination) and are dipped with iodine. At weaning, they are given a shot of Bovishield and then given a booster (1-2 months apart) before going outside to the freestall at 6 months of age. All calves 6 months and older receive another shot of Bovishield and pink eye vaccina-

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tions in the spring before going out to pasture.

Once the cow is moved to the dairy barn, she is fed a total mixed ration (TMR) and they are no longer able to monitor her intake. To keep an eye on the fresh cows, they take their temperature at milking time until there is a consistent normal temperature. If there is an abnormal temperature, they call their vet right away.

Treatments

For metritis, they infuse the cow with hydrogen peroxide; 120 cc's infused every 2 days. Their vet comes to check on the cow once a week until she is well. This treatment is so successful that their vet is using it with conventional clients too.

For a retained placenta, they use a calcium electrolyte within 8-10 hours after calving. They had been using aloe and garlic, but this was not working for them.

They treat pneumonia with aloe, garlic, and Poly Serum (75 cc's for a calf, 100 cc's for a cow) which works well if the pneumonia is caught early. As a last resort, they will turn to antibiotics and take the animal out of the herd (this is rare).

For calf scours, they use a Crystal Creek product called Bright Star, electrolytes, aloe & garlic, and yogurt. The biggest preventative for calf scours is to make sure the calves get colostrums right after birth as these calves are more likely to survive a calf scour episode later in life.

Mastitis cases are rare, but when one crops up, they use Crypto-Whey from Crystal Creek, Udder Comfort to massage into the udder and for a really hard quarter, they will put aloe in the quarter.

Resources, Mentors, Books

JD and Cheryl try to go to at least one or two workshops a year to stay on the learning curve. Books that they turn to when they need to look up a case or determine an effective treatment is Dr Karreman's book *Treating Dairy Cows Naturally* and Dr Detloff's book *Alternative Treatments for Ruminant Animals*. They feel their veterinarian, Kent Anderson, is a great support; he encourages high forage rations and has been actively learning about organically approved treatments and management practices. The practice Kent Anderson works for, (Valley Wide Veterinary Practice) is going to start stocking a lot of Dr Karreman's products at the office and on the truck.

Challenges

Cheryl and JD struggle with maintaining the herd size that they need to address their debt load and having enough pasture for their dairy cows to comfortably meet the recommended 30% dry matter standard. If it was

their choice, they would be milking fewer cows, but that is not something that they can do right now due to debt service. Recently a neighboring piece of land came up for sale, which would have added another 50 acres of pasture to their farm, but they were outbid.

The price of milk is not keeping up with the price of grain, fuel and other fixed prices; cost of sawdust alone has increased by 50% in one year alone. Cheryl and JD agree that a 20% increase in pay price needs to happen.

2.5 Years Into It

After over 2.5 years of shipping organic milk Cheryl says that being organic is not about the money anymore; 'It changes your whole head about things', she says. The majority of their groceries are organic now, and they think a lot more about the impact of their decisions and its affect on the environment. Cheryl has even switched political parties (we will leave the readers guessing which way the pendulum swung on that one). ♦

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1. Concerned About Skyrocketing Fuel & Energy Costs?
Yes/No
2. Concerned About Ground Water Protection on Your Farm? Yes/No
3. Are you managing livestock or poultry and generating more than a few cubic yards of soiled bedding and manure daily? Yes/No
4. Are you a vertically integrated farm with cheese making or value added processing taking place on farm? Yes/No
5. Do you have greenhouse operations on your farm? Yes/No
6. Are you currently composting? Yes/No
7. Would You Like a Source of Free Heat For Your Farm? Yes/No
8. Would You Like an Additional Revenue Base for Your Farm? Yes/No

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