

Barb and David Perkins are part of a new breed of family farmers.



PHOTO BY MARTHA BUSSE

Salt of the Earth

Farming is tough, but you can get by with a little creativity – and a lot of help By Kathryn Kingsbury

Moving to the country in your mid-30s to start up a certified organic vegetable farm may seem like a drastic move, but for Barb and David Perkins of the 65-acre Vermont Valley Community Farm near Black Earth, it was only natural.

David had spent the previous decade working as a fiscal and policy analyst for the state. Barb certified home childcare providers. But a country life had always been their long-term goal. David grew up on a diversified farm in Brookfield, and Barb got the ag bug in college while working on a dairy farm in Norway. After marrying and graduating from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1979 – his degree was in agronomy, hers in sociology – they moved to Jefferson County to raise cash crops for three years. Although the farm was profitable, banks said it was too small to qualify for a loan to expand. So it was back to Madison for graduate school.

Fast forward to 1993, when the Perkins heard about a new model of farming called community supported agriculture (CSA). In CSA farms, consumers pay at the beginning of the season for a share of the year's bounty. By cutting out the middleman, consumers save money and farmers are better able to manage cash flow. CSA farms tend to emphasize organic growing methods (which Vermont Valley employs), eating with the seasons, and community.

"It just clicked," recalls Barb, 46. "CSA took all of our beliefs and lumped them together." They found land and, in 1995, started their first growing season with 50 shares.

Now in its tenth season, Vermont Valley feeds 800 households through its subscription program. How have they managed that growth?

"We've improved our efficiency in terms of machines that help us do things more easily and quickly" – like a washing machine converted into a giant salad spinner – "and after 10 years of growing all these crops, you just get better at it," David, also 46, says. The Perkins have added several full-time farmhands and continually expanded their "worker-share" program, in which individuals trade work for a food share.

For the first two years Vermont Valley was in business, both Barb and David had part-time jobs off the farm to keep themselves in the black. In those days, the Perkins did most of the farm labor themselves; pretty much every piece of produce passed through their hands before it left the farm. That wouldn't be possible now, when the tomatoes needing to be picked each week number in the thousands. Barb still gets plenty of dirt under her fingernails, but "now I have to focus more on managing people," she says.

They both put in 10- to 12-hour days, six and seven days a week from May through October, as they have since the farm began. But the work year is getting longer now that Vermont Valley offers season-extending spring and fall shares for the diehard produce lover – though hours do drop off in the winter, when they concentrate on marketing.

When Barb talks to aspiring farmers, this is the advice she gives: First, know what your goal is and have a clear business plan to get there. Second, "understand that this is not another job, this is a lifestyle ... You can't punch in and out of it."

Getting clear on those two things is "very, very key – more key than having the technical knowledge of how to grow vegetables," she says.

Kathryn Kingsbury is a contributing writer to *Madison Magazine*.