



Falconer's Farms DOING IT THEIR WAY BY JANET DAVIES

Jenny Keith and Peter Hill run Falconer Farm their way, and their way is organic. To a casual observer the fields look a tad wild. Wildflowers run riot, but herbs thrive there too, plus wild fruits and vegetables, and there's a definite method to their maybe madness. Jenny and Peter's biggest accomplishment to date is turning a conventional apple orchard into a bona fide organic operation. In 2002 the couple hosted an organic orchards workshop with Paul Bousfield of Milton telling how he had transformed an orchard, planted by his grandfather in 1908, into a fully certified organic operation. People had said it was impossible, but he explained how major advances in organic disease control, creating healthy soil, battling pests and the power of pruning had resulted in success. Many people were inspired that day, including Jenny and Peter who were already three years into their own orchard transformation.

The apple orchard at Falconer Farm was doing quite nicely when they took over the farm in 1998, but they were determined to move away from heavy spraying and try it their way. At first the trees coasted along on the residue of years of spraying, but then they were on their own with only organic methods and the couple's determination to help them along. The trees struggled, and so did Jenny. Six years later the orchard is carrying a bumper crop, and she is making big plans for all sorts of apple products. "We'll have our little store open this fall," she says, "And we'll sell apples, of course, but also apple butter, apple chutney, apple sauce, dried apples. We're going to be full of apples!"

"First of all we just stopped spraying," she says. "Then to encourage natural composting, we didn't cut the grass around the trees very often, and applied mineral dust which puts great energy into the soil. We helped the soil look after itself." Visiting growers comment on how fertile the land is at Falconer Farm, located on County Road 11 not far from Joan and Ken Marisette's thriving organic operation. With replenished soil, good pruning and constant vigilance against pests and disease, Jenny's trees rode out their tough transition and are fruiting wonderfully in 2004.

Jenny's family runs a nursery and her background includes horticulture and art as well as masonry and carpentry. Falconer Farm is an unconventional farm, indeed, in fact Jenny refers to it as an art-and-agriculture project, but she is dedicated to making it a viable, sustainable business. Like many County growers, she is exploring environment-friendly ways to grow saleable produce and add value to her crops and herbs. At her booth at the farmers market she sells green apple chutney and organic berry jams, and urges market browsers to snack on her super-healthy homemade crackers of buckwheat and spelt, spread thickly with farm-fresh jam.

The couple gets occasional help on the farm from "woofers." Woofers? WOOF stands for Willing Workers on Organic Farms, an organization that matches wanna-be organic farmers to established operations where they can go to learn and grow - literally. Jenny says she still gets offers from farmers to help her spray and cultivate properly. "People are offering genuine help," she says, noting her parents experience the same reaction at their freestyle but flourishing nursery business. "I guess some people thought we wouldn't last. But we've been here seven years and are going strong. We're making it work." Farmers have many faces, and Jenny's comes with a smile and a big bunch of optimism that her way really can work.