



featured

Star Valley family produces commercial

With an elevation of 6,200 feet and a guaranteed frost-free summer of only 40 days, Star Valley, Wyoming, is not where one would typically search for homegrown vegetables.

You'd miss a delicious experience if you didn't.

Ryan Foxley and his wife, Elizabeth, manage Crow Creek Farm nestled in the middle of beautiful Star Valley. The couple have three sons, Rowan, 9, Aidan, 7, and Brendan, 4.

They started the business in 1996 to grow and sell vegetables in western Wyoming.

The 10-acre farm, using horsepower and natural growing techniques, produces a very high-value crop on a few acres. It supplies several grocery stores, restaurants, and an occasional caterer in the Star Valley and Jackson Hole areas, plus it provides produce to 55 local families in a community-supported agricultural program. Excess vegetables are marketed through the Jackson Hole Farmers Market.

Ryan and Elizabeth look at the farm as more of a lifestyle than a business. Growing and producing food naturally is a great way to live and raise a family, they say.

The couple were raised in Star Valley and returned after Ryan graduated from the University of Wyoming. A professional musician, Ryan taught music and orchestra for Lincoln County School District 2 while farming on the side.

After six years of teaching, it came to a point he had to give something up; there was far more market demand than the farm was producing at the time, and Ryan was turning down opportunities to play music professionally.

From front, Brendan, Aidan, Rowan, and Elizabeth and Ryan Foxley.

landowners

vegetables using sustainable practices

Ryan quit teaching and began farming and playing music professionally full time. His primary instruments are the fiddle, mandolin, and guitar, and he plays at everything from weddings and funerals to campfire gatherings and dinner parties.

He says the music provides a nice contrast to his work on the farm, which has a simple business plan. Products are grown in a sustainable manner without pesticides, herbicides, or petroleum-based fertilizers. The major ingredient for success is keeping input and overhead costs low and selling a high-value product to a direct market.

Lettuce is the primary crop, but they also grow carrots, beets, bok choy (Chinese cabbage), mustard, peas, potatoes, squash, tomatoes, beans, garlic, and a few specialty items for restaurants such as Italian greens.

Of the 10 acres, 2.5 acres are pasture, and the rest is used for vegetables. There are 14 half-acre plots. Half of the plots are in fallow or cover crops each year.

The clay soil was not the best for growing vegetables when the couple began farming, but Crow Creek Farm became very productive after several years of extensively incorporating organic matter into the soil. The farm uses compost it makes and cover crops for green manure to improve the soil.

The team of Suffolk Punch draft horses does everything from plowing, planting, harvesting, and moving the portable greenhouses. They also stay busy in winter with snow removal. Using the team lowers costs, plus the horse manure and bedding is put in a compost pile, which is the organic material and fertilizer base for the farm.

They raise feeder pigs for meat and to help make compost. All of the bedding material and crop waste is loaded into a pigpen, and the pigs' natural rooting



The Foxleys use horses to keep costs low. The horse manure and bedding are composted.

instinct helps composting by turning over the material and allowing air to enter the piles.

The Foxleys use poultry for meat, eggs, and insect control and also raise goats for milk and cheese.

As agriculture in the world is trending larger and larger for more production, Crow Creek Farm is doing the opposite for higher quality food and better land management, Ryan says.

Raising vegetables in Star Valley is not easy, and the Foxleys use innovative techniques for production since they are guaranteed only 30 to 40 frost-free days.

The farm has several non-heated greenhouses, some of which are portable, to maximize use. The portable greenhouses allow two crops to grow concurrently by starting cold-season vegetables, such as lettuce and bok choy, earlier in the spring.



Row covers provide protection from frost and extend the growing season. Lettuce, carrots, beets, mustard, peas, potatoes, squash and tomatoes are only a few of the vegetables grown.

The greenhouses are then moved over heat-loving species, like beans and tomatoes, to start them earlier in the year and to enhance growth during the summer.

After the warm-season crops have been harvested in the fall, the greenhouses are moved over cool-season crops that were previously started to protect them from an early winter.

Another strategy is using row covers inside and outside greenhouses. One year, using double-row covers as an extra layer of insulation in an unheated greenhouse, the Foxleys were still selling salad mixes to grocery stores the middle of January. The row covers are also used in the spring for earlier planting times.

The farm is delivering spring vegetables by the first week of June.

"Picking the right plant and the timing of planting is essential to success," Ryan says.

A drip line placed down the rows delivers water directly to the vegetables and away from weeds.

"On a place like this, the weeding is never finished," Ryan says, and smiles. Ryan and Elizabeth use a horse-drawn cultivator between the rows and hand weed with special hoes within the crop.

"It is a great lifestyle, but you cannot be afraid of a lot of hard work to make this a success," says Elizabeth, who routinely works 40 or more hours during the busy months in addition to caring for her family.

The most unique strategy they use is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). The local community is the basis of support for an agriculture producer. Shareholders purchase their membership the first of the year and receive a weekly delivery of fresh vegetables during the growing season.

The couple established one share as what an average family of four would consume in one week.

Membership entitles shareholders to a portion of everything the farm grows. This accomplishes several things for the CSA. The farm already has its products sold so the Foxleys know what to plant and when they will harvest. They also know what the price will be and how much of that product they will need. It makes planning much easier – they have a goal for a harvest date and so know their planting date.

The shareholder acts as the bank for the producer so working capital is not needed to make the crop. The community shareholder takes on part of the risk of the agricultural producer and in turn gets a locally produced product grown sustainably, plus they are helping agriculture stay in the Star Valley community and providing open space and quality of life. If the couple were not able to direct market their products, there would be no way to sustain what they do.

The couple, who say they live a simple life, earn a living off music and the farm, selling CSA shares for approximately five months each year.

Practicing stewardship of the land is the most important part of sustainable agriculture at



The Foxleys grow vegetables on 14 half-acre plots. Seven of the plots are in fallow or cover crops each year.

Crow Creek Farm. Produce is labeled “naturally handcrafted,” Elizabeth says.

The federal organic certification label does not appeal to the Foxleys. “Knowing my customers and having a personal relationship with them is the highest level of certification for me,” she notes.

Their methods have created much public interest, and the Foxleys have had many tours to showcase their accomplishments. Ryan says he enjoys the opportunities to explain his perspective on sustainable farming, what is best for the environment and the community, and, most important, what tastes best.

No special license is needed to start such a venture, and those interested can turn to help at the state and federal level. There is much information on the Web (type Community Supported Agriculture into the search engine), including the U.S. Department of Agriculture site “Alternative Farming Systems Information Center” at www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/.

The Foxleys left Star Valley in 2004 to manage an organic acreage farm in Washington. They returned in less than a year, saying they found that running a family farm is more gratifying. “We are fulfilling the dream of the American farmer,” Elizabeth says.

The Wyoming Business Council (WBC) provides marketing assistance for producers and can assist in setting up a CSA. For more information on WBC agribusiness programs, contact Cindy Garretson-Weibel, agribusiness director, Wyoming Business Council, 214 W. 15th St., Cheyenne, WY 82002. She can be reached at (307) 777-6589 or cindy.weibel@wybusiness.org.

Hudson Hill is a University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service educator for Lincoln, Sublette, and Teton counties. He can be reached at (307) 885-3132 or hrrhill@uwyo.edu.

