

Round Right Farm

Coming 'Round to the Farmer's Life

Given the sizeable distance involved, it seems pretty unlikely that a young couple who met in San Diego, California, would end up on a farm in Cranesville, West Virginia. But such is the case for Steve and Sunshine Vortigern, whose Round Right Farm now provides fresh, organic produce for hundreds of families through local farmers' markets and their own CSA, i.e., Community Supported Agriculture project.

Their adventure began when they both were graduate students at San Diego State University. Steve, a San Diego native, was pursuing advanced studies in jazz trombone. Sunshine, originally from Kentucky, was enrolled in the creative writing program, and served as Concertmaster of the SDSU Symphony Orchestra. Music, in the form of the orchestra, brought them together.

A season spent at Sunshine's father's farm in Kentucky was an eye-opener for Steve. "It was my first taste of rural living," he says. "I developed an interest in a more sustainable lifestyle." One particular aspect of rural life that intrigued Steve was the use of horses for logging and farm work. That interest led him to Backbone Food Farm, near Oakland, Md., where a season's apprenticeship convinced him that he was a farmer at heart.



The Vortigern's on their farm; Sunshine, holding Isis and Steve with Xavier in front.

Spinach growing in the greenhouse.



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"We fell in love with the area," Steve says. So the search began for a farm of their own. Eventually they found 41 acres in Cranesville through "a friend of a friend of a friend." After convincing the seller that they'd care for the land, they bought the property—a hayfield with no house—in late 2006.

"We were lucky," Steve says. "We love it out here." The couple bought a school bus, ripped out the seats, renovated the inside and moved in. In 2008, they built a small house. Its porch served as a vegetable packing shed for a couple years. They finally were able to build a real packing shed last summer and the renovated porch became a welcome addition to their one-room house. "We chose to build a small house, to have a smaller ecological footprint." They share the house with their two children – Xavier is 6 and Isis is 3. Both are home-schooled.

They began their CSA with 20 members and sold produce at the Morgantown Farmers Market. It didn't take long for Sunshine and Steve to realize they had to grow their farm quickly to succeed. Five years later, the CSA is filled to capacity at 150 members and has a waiting list. Although they now sell produce twice a week at the Oakland Farmers



Market, Morgantown continues to be their largest market. Thanks to exposure at these markets, their web site, and the ever-potent force of word-of-mouth, they've had little need for marketing. And it's hard to beat the taste of locally grown produce, picked fresh from the field.

As an uncertified organic farm, Round Right Farm grows produce without synthetic or chemical pesticides, herbicides or fertilizers. Seeds used are not genetically modified or chemically treated. Any manure used to fertilize the soil is free of antibiotics or synthetic hormones.

The CSA offers customers a convenient way to eat their veggies. After paying a fee for a 20-week season's share, members select a delivery site where they pick up a weekly assortment of vegetables, fresh from the farm. They can choose to receive their share as the Farmer's Choice—a weekly culinary surprise—or go online to the farm's web site to swap or add items via the online produce stand. As a bonus to their weekly order, the produce stand allows members to order items from other local producers, like goat cheeses from Firefly Farms, breads from New Day Bakery and local eggs. The Farm also offers honey and eventually hopes to offer grass-fed beef, berries and other farm-raised foods.

“With our CSA, the ultimate goal is to provide a grocery store experience from home, to make buying fresh, local foods as convenient as buying typical store foods,” Steve says. “We're conscious of prices and try to be competitive with chain grocery stores. Even when our prices are slightly higher, we believe we offer good value. Our food is fresher, tastes better and lasts longer.”

As the demand for Round Right Farm produce grows, Steve and Sunshine face the challenge of providing more food while maintaining quality and without overextending themselves. “It's good for farmers to have hobbies. You can go a little crazy working too hard.” To maintain some sanity, he founded and plays trombone with The Sugarfoot Stompers, a New Orleans style Dixieland Band.

“We have been quite surprised,” Steve says of the farm's success. “We feel really blessed. We're getting ready to scrap the bus. It's sort of the last vestige of when we were camping out,” he says, with a hint of nostalgia.

Surrounded by beautiful fall colors, Sunshine holds just harvested Bok Choy while standing between spinach and carrots.