Richard DeWilde and Linda Halley — Viroqua, Wisconsin

Summary of Operation

- *About 90 varieties of fruits, vegetables, herbs and root crops on 80 acres*
- *Direct marketing, community supported agriculture (CSA) operation*
- *25 Angus steers annually*
- *Pasture, hay and compost on 220 acres*

Problem Addressed

Running a successful organic farm. Richard DeWilde questioned whether to become a farmer at all, but once he decided that's what he wanted to do, he never really questioned how he'd go about it. For him, it was organic production or nothing.

Once he made that decision, DeWilde determined to grow crops organically for direct sale to individuals, although he wasn't sure whether running a small farming enterprise would pay the bills. He spent a number of lean years and long, hard days finding the answer.

Background

Harmony Valley lies just outside Viroqua, in Wisconsin's southwest corner, near LaCrosse and only about 5 miles east of the Mississippi River. It's an area with a long tradition of small dairy farming, and indeed all of Harmony Valley Farm's 290 acres were once part of dairy operations.

DeWilde established the farm in 1984, moving to Wisconsin after farming in Minnesota for 11 years. After, as he says, "St. Paul reached the place and paved it over," DeWilde leased the new farm in Harmony Valley.

DeWilde had an initial 10-acre plot on which to plant his first crops, and has since been able to certify the rest of the 70 or so acres he uses for produce. He and Linda Halley married and started farming together in 1990, then began a community supported agriculture (CSA) project that became a mainstay of their operation a few seasons later.

Long before it became popular, DeWilde dedicated himself to growing quality specialty greens, vegetables and berries organically. That was 30 years ago, and he's still on the cutting edge with his careful production methods as well as his diverse marketing strategies.

Focal Point of Operation — Vegetable production and marketing

Thanks to farming techniques that include diverse rotations, cover crops and generous amounts of compost and rock powders, DeWilde's silt loam fields are high in organic matter, humus and biological life. Although they raise dozens of crops, DeWilde and Halley claim they are best known for a season-long, high quality salad mix, saute greens and spinach. In the fall and winter, they offer specialty root crops, from potatoes to unusual varieties of turnips.

They sell produce to a 450-member CSA, at a weekly stall at the Dane County Farmers Market, and to retail grocers and wholesale distributors. They also raise Black Angus steers on pastures in a rotational grazing system, then finish them with organic grain while still on pasture.

DeWilde and Halley make 15 percent of their income from the farmers market in the state capital of Madison, about 100 miles away. They are long established at the market, which operates from the last week of April to the first week of November, and are sought out for both the variety and quality of their organic produce.

It takes a full page in the farm's newsletter to list their seasonal offerings, which include such produce as asparagus, butter beans, lettuces, strawberries, peas, three kinds of beets, many types of herbs, melons, sweet and hot peppers, sweet potatoes, many varieties of tomatoes and corn. The farm is geared to the rhythm of the Saturday market, with most harvesting done in the latter part of the week so DeWilde can load the trucks for the weekly trip to Madison.

More important financially, and helping create the bond Harmony Valley seeks with its neighbors, is the CSA project. About 650 families in the Madison area participate, and its core group — made up of some of the participants as well as community activists — helps them set policy, select crops and manage the deliveries. This regular contact keeps them in tune with what the locals want and provides other marketing opportunities, such as selling beef.

One new marketing channel came when they decided to expand into sales, mainly of root crops, to wholesale distributors. DeWilde says this end of the business is more volatile, with prices subject to dramatic fluctuations depending on competition, but says it's worth the effort to be able to extend the possibility of sales farther into the slow winter season.

They market the 25 head of beef from the dozen or more steers they raise each year directly to restaurants and by word-of-mouth at their many markets. Their beef cattle are Black Angus, and are strictly organic, fed only grasses and grains from the farm. They compost the manure from their own beef cattle as well as the dairy cattle on a neighboring farm.

Economics and Profitability

"Things work around here," DeWilde says. "That's one of the best ways I can illustrate how well we're doing." He's referring to his farm equipment, his vehicles, and his harvesting and delivery timetables.

Tom Getings/Rodale Inst.

Richard DeWilde and Linda Halley earn most of their income at the Dane County Farmers Market, one of the nation's biggest.

"We've made enough money to invest in good equipment and can afford to pay for fixing it when it breaks down, so we don't lose a lot of time or money because simple things don't function well."

Another way DeWilde defines success is to compare his income to those of other professionals — because he insists that's what he and Linda are. DeWilde says he has always hoped for an income earned doing something he loves that would rival what he might earn from doing something else, and he's now reached it.

On sales of more than $800,000 each year in recent years, he has achieved a profit margin of slightly more than 10 percent. "Maybe I'd make more as a lawyer," he said, "but I eat better than most lawyers, and I get to work outside."

As an additional note on the farm's fiscal health, DeWilde says he and Linda have been able to invest a considerable amount toward their retirement, and that they can afford more than adequate family health insurance. "It's a long way from wondering if you can afford a new pair of shoes," he says. "I've been at that point before in my life, but things are good now."

Environmental Benefits

To control insect pests, DeWilde provides perennial habitat in the form of refuge strips in the fields and structures such as birdhouses, bat boxes, raptor perches and wasp houses. Harmony Valley has become a magnet for wildlife and beneficial insects. He calls raptors, song birds, bats, wasps and beneficial insects his "allies" in the annual fight against pests.

DeWilde has developed an effective plan to fight weeds that doesn't mean a lot of high-priced machinery. He integrates raised beds; shallow tillage; cover crops such as rye, hairy vetch and red clover; stale-seedbed planting; and crop rotation with precision cultivation — including using a flamer. His underlying principle: Never let weeds go to seed.

DeWilde continues to seek new ways to control pests and disease. Some recent research looked at how compost-amended soil might suppress disease.

"But probably the thing I'm most proud of is a better than 1 percent increase in the organic matter in the soil of the fields I've used the most over the years," he says. "That's no small feat."

It's a result of religious applications of composted manure from nearby dairy farms and assiduous use of cover crops, and it has resulted in soil that's obviously more fertile, more workable, holds water better and has less weed pressure, he says.

Community and Quality of Life Benefits

At the height of the season, Harmony Valley employs 25 people. "That makes us the biggest employer in our township," DeWilde says.

As he sees it, he's collecting money from consumers in bigger cities like Madison and Chicago, and helping redistribute it in his own community, making it healthier and more economically secure.

And while most of his employees are seasonal, at least five will remain on the farm throughout the winter this year, helping to clean, sort and ship root crops, cleaning and re-arranging the greenhouses, and helping produce the homemade potting soil DeWilde prefers for his seedlings.

Says DeWilde: "I like to think we've had a substantial and positive effect on the life of this community. We hire local folks, we don't pump chemicals into the soil, the water or the air, and we attract people who just want to look at the place."

As for his quality of life, and that of his wife and two sons, DeWilde says they benefit from the good relations they've established with their employees — though management can sometimes be a trial. Even more gratification comes through direct and regular contact with their CSA and farmers market customers.

"I've gotten cards from some of our customers telling us we've literally changed their lives because our produce is so good and healthful," DeWilde says. "It doesn't get much better than that."

Transition Advice

Anyone intending to produce a high volume of vegetables and fruits organically needs to focus initially and consistently on improving his or her soil, DeWilde says. "You'll have an easier time controlling weeds, pests, and disease if you have healthy soil, so that should be focus of your efforts from the start," he says.

On the business side of the equation he says, "you need to be a marketer." He admits it's exhausting enough just running the farming side of his operation, but says it's vitally important to always be thinking of better ways to stay in touch with customers, learn what they want, and supply them with it.

The Future

Harmony Valley Farm is a "pretty mature" operation by now, DeWilde says. He does not foresee expanding onto more acreage or dramatically altering the combination of CSA, farmers market and wholesale distributor sales that have made the farm a success.

He and Linda expect to retire in their mid-60s, in about 15 years. By that time, both of their sons will be old enough to take over the farm if they choose, though both seem to exhibit little enthusiasm for it currently.

"They like the money I pay them for their work now," DeWilde says, "but they keep telling me they can't wait to go to college and get a 'real job.' We'll see about that."

After retirement, DeWilde says he hopes to follow the lead of one of his grandfathers, a pioneering South Dakota farmer who read Rodale publications and practiced organic techniques before anyone else in his area.

"He set aside 20 acres for himself when he retired and had the best gardens and orchards I've ever seen. He supplied the whole extended family with food for most of the year, and I'd like to do the same."

■ *David Mudd*

For more information:

Richard and Linda DeWilde
Harmony Valley Farm
Rte. 2, Box 116
Viroqua, WI 54665
(608) 483-2143
harmony@mwt.net
www.harmonyvalleyfarm.com

Editor's note: This profile, originally published in 2001, was updated in 2004.