

Farmer Profile
Charlie & Barbara Gerlach
Berry Fields Farm
By Michele Gauger

“It all started with a desire to eat healthy food,” according to Barbara Gerlach of Berry Fields Farm located in New Albany, Pennsylvania (Bradford County). Barbara and her husband, Charlie had relatively no farming experience, except for a few raised beds in their garden at their previous home in the York area.

But about 6 years ago, the Gerlachs decided to sell their business (Charlie is an architect and Barbara a design/build estimator) and move to Bradford County, to a piece of land they had purchased about 30 years ago as a hunting area. “We became increasingly aware of how the quality of food we were eating may affect our long term health. So we wanted to begin farming what we could for ourselves,” Barbara continued.

At Berry Field Farms, the Gerlachs at first only grew produce and fruits for their own use. However they soon realized how much capital it takes to produce food and income just for themselves. They soon discovered to be a self-sufficient farm, they needed quality compost for their gardens, and so they decided to purchase a few beef cows. But on their mainly wooded land, they needed pasture areas cleared, so they also bought a few goats to help clear a few areas on the farm. “We soon discovered we enjoyed raising grass fed meats, so we expanded to also include poultry and pigs,” said Barbara.

They decided to set a goal for the farm to be financially sustainable and in order to do this they have added a new feature to the farm each of the 6 years they have been there. The Gerlachs recently began offering farm vacations and also meals at their farm. These ventures have been a great way to teach guests about sustainable living, while also diversifying revenue sources for the farm.

Debbie Reeder, a frequent guest at the Gerlachs’ on-farm dinners, said “I first met the Gerlachs at a farmers’ market in Eagles Mere and go to their farm frequently for the dinners and fresh produce. I’d recommend it to anyone.”

“We’ve had guests from all over the world, including a family from Japan this past summer,” says Barbara. “We really enjoy opening our farm to guests and also serving farm-fresh meals to brunch and dinner guests. It is a real treat for our customers to come and see us harvesting greens that will be their salad that evening,” she continued.

To learn more about Berry Fields Farm, their farm vacation packages or farm dinners contact Charles and Barbara Gerlach, 570-924-3019, gerlach@epix.net or www.berryfieldsfarm.net.

What do you see as some of the critical issues concerning agriculture today?

Agriculture encompasses a wide spectrum of businesses involved in food production. Each of those businesses has their own critical issue to face, but in general the issue that affects everyone is the low quality of foods produced by conventional corporate farms. How can we influence the corporate and political structure of all nations to value nutrition, flavor, diversity, the environment, health and sustainability over their financial gain? If we can't, how can we influence the consumer to value quality food over other choice?

Personally, as small-scale producers, our most critical issues concern our own knowledge and time management. Because we must be both producers, business and marketing managers, our skills and time must be so diversified that we begin to feel overwhelmed. The simple answer would appear to be to hire some help, but our own financial analysis has shown that the income we now receive could not be enhanced enough by additional labor and labor related costs. The only benefit would be less work for us, but no financial gain. How can farmers get the help they need to survive and grow within an economic framework of labor related costs that make it very difficult?

What is unique about your farm?

Location...we are two miles off a paved road, on the top of the mountain, in a very remote area of the state. We have a view of about 40 miles from our guesthouse and dining room. The high elevation, short growing season, long distances to markets and supplies, and sloped terrain have added many challenges.

Diversity...we produce a small amount of many food products; grass-fed beef, all natural pork and goat meat, organic eggs, chicken, duck, turkey, and goose; garden fruit and vegetable produce; orchard fruits; organic baked goods such as cakes, pies, cookies, and sour dough breads; value added jarred items such as jams, jellies and fruit butters.

Marketing...we market everything direct through six avenues – a farmers' market, a farm store on our property, an e-mail list notifying regular customers about items available, our vacation rental guests, our dining room and our blueberry festival.

Educational opportunities...we have a guesthouse on the farm that sleeps 10 adults. Our guests come from all corners of our country and from many foreign countries. During their stays we have many opportunities to speak about sustainable living. We find most of them extremely receptive and we are thrilled to have the opportunity to influence just a small segment of the world's population.

How has your operation evolved over the years?

Our operation has evolved as our goals have changed. Our first goal was to produce as many of our own foods as possible. We were concerned about how conventionally produced foods might be affecting our future health. As we become more and more involved with food production and the related costs such as seed, equipment, fencing, etc. we expanded our goals toward financial sustainability.

With no obvious markets for our products in our remote area, we knew we would need to be creative. We didn't have the time or the resources to transport our products to any existing farmers' markets so we organized a market in a nearby resort town (Eagles Mere) and used that exposure to lure residents hungry for organic, fresh produce and naturally raised meats to our farm. Some customers were willing to come just for the opportunity to purchase garden produce and fruits that were freshly picked just for them, but we knew we needed to add more to make them want to return.

Our first addition was a store that featured our products as well as other organic and sustainable items such as raw milk cheeses, wild Alaskan salmon, maple syrup, honey and many more. Next we began baking organic sour dough breads and desserts with all organic ingredients including our own farm fruits.

When we began to question what to do with leftovers, we decided to add a small dining room and feature any excess items on the menu. We now offer Saturday evening dinners and Sunday morning brunches by reservation only. We worked with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture through each step of our transition to make sure we were in compliance with all of their regulations. The installation of the commercial kitchen was much less expensive or difficult than we anticipated and we now have the added option to produce value added products to sell in our store year round.

Whatever we produce at our farm – vegetables, fruits, meats, breads, desserts, jarred items, or meals – we know it must be very high quality to make our customers travel so far out of their way. When we started we thought no one would come – but they do! Our motto “It is your responsibility to choose healthy foods, it is our responsibility to provide healthy foods for you to choose.”

Why did you join PASA?

With no farming background or experience, we had a lot to learn. Our first PASA field day exposed us to more than knowledge, as we learned the established sustainable agriculture community was very supportive. We joined soon after the field day and after attending our first PASA conference, we were hooked.