

Farmer Profile

Tussock Sedge Farm

Henry & Charlotte Rosenberger

By Michelle Isham, PASA Member

For Henry Rosenberger simplicity is the key to successful farming. The former food distributor and his wife, Charlotte, bought a farm in Blooming Glen (Bucks Co.) in 1991. They lived on the property but rented the land out to another farmer. After watching his land being farmed, Rosenberger found himself interested in agriculture. So when he sold his business in 1998, instead of renting out the land he farmed it himself.

“I enjoyed watching the farming so much that I wanted to try it,” he said.

Rosenberger started out in traditional farming with corn and soybeans and quickly learned about the unique perils of agriculture. Environmental factors from wildlife to weather diminished his harvest. Additionally, Rosenberger found himself troubled by his reliance on his seed and fertilizer suppliers. “Between the ground hogs and the deer you can pretty much lose a soybean crop,” he said.

In 2005 he decided crop farming wasn't working and sold his equipment. With the encouragement of his family, he switched from crops to cattle. “That's when I fell in love with what I was doing and left the frustration behind,” Rosenberger said. Today Tussock Sedge Farm has 100 cow/calf pairs in the herd and 100 steers finishing. The farm has 500 acres of hay and pastures.

“Making 500 acres of hay and managing grass and pastures and fencing it's a big job but I love it,” he said.

Rosenberger said that prior to changing over to cattle he felt as though he was working for his seed and fertilizer suppliers. “I admire the people who can do it but I don't think it's long term sustainable because it's too heavily dependent on the seed and chemical companies,” he said.

Rosenberger said that he learned the best way to be sustainable and make money in the cattle business is to have as little equipment as possible. He purchased smaller equipment and is considering going to intensive grazing.

The Rosenbergers also sell their beef directly to customers through their website, www.tussocksedgefarm.com. Rosenberger advises other farmers to keep their operations as simple as possible.

“I looked at hay cutters and choppers and I began to realize that all that is just money out of your pocket,” he said.

Tussock Sedge Farm is about to simplify even further by changing from grain finished beef to grass finished beef, eliminating the need for grain from an outside supplier. Rosenberger was very pleased with the quality of the beef they were producing on grain, but found that consumer demand was trending toward grass-finished beef. At first, Rosenberger was skeptical that he could get the level taste and marbling he wanted from entirely grass-fed beef. After experimenting with a few heifers, he found he could.

“I guess I was the biggest doubter in terms of whether I could get the quality I want so did a test run of six heifers ... I had to convince myself,” he said.

Of the total acreage, about 440 acres of Tussock Sedge Farm are permanently preserved as open space through the Bucks County Farmland Preservation program. Putting land in the farmland preservation program means it's committed to agriculture in perpetuity. This means it will be used in some form of agriculture –from fish farms to hay – in perpetuity.

“It's a bit of sacrifice because you're not getting market value per acre but from the standpoint of peace of mind and beauty it gives a lot of satisfaction,” said Rosenberger.

Rosenberger and his wife are continuing to work toward improving their land. They have built two dams to restore 26 acres of wetlands on the property. They also have planted 450 trees and native grasses.

“The birds and the tweeters and the frogs are coming back,” said Rosenberger. “It's been four years since we last used RoundUp™. The peepers are coming back. We heard them again for first time last year.”

Rosenberger credits county and state farming programs and organizations like PASA for helping him balance farm profitability with sustainability. “I think Pennsylvania, especially PASA, has been particularly helpful to me

where you learn from people who are doing things in a sustainable way,” he said.

For more information contact Tussock Sedge Farm at 1239 Route 113 Box 59, Blooming Glen, PA 18911, email henryrosenberger@gmail.com, 215-257-4868 or visit www.tussocksedgefarm.com.

Interview with Charlotte & Henry Rosenberger

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

The greatest issue facing agriculture is the question of whether it can be sustained on the base of chemical dependency that we have placed most of the production of output today and the cost we employ getting it to market. We have been led by cheap fuel into chemical dependent production and specialized large scale production requiring 1,500 miles of transport for nearly all food consumed in the U.S. Agriculture is not sustainable done in this manner over time. The second issue I feel strongly about is the challenge of individual farmers to sell their production into a market driven by big business and subsidized by government, which destroys opportunity for the small farmer to grow here in the U.S. And it is a disincentive for small producers in developing countries affected by our (U.S.) cheap, subsidized exports entering their markets. We need to develop geographic sourced product and regionalize our food sources and reduce transit cost and reduce environmental impact.

What is unique about our farm?

Our farm is made up of several farms scattered around the village of Blooming Glen forming a green buffer, very European like; 73 acres are in forest and wetlands. All the rest of the farm is grassland paddock for rotational grazing, and hayfields. We have placed conservation easements upon 425 acres and doing wetland restoration on 26 acres. Our focus now is grass fed beef with an eighty five herd cow calf operation and a transition to all grass finished beef which we direct market. We formed a partnership with two organic farmers to rent and operate a CSA on 15 acres of our land offering 200 memberships to local residents and also sell produce at some markets. The entire farm is on “chemical withdrawal” now using all natural manure, compost and lime. It is challenging to make a profit, which is the core of sustainability, but we continue to learn and grow and feel good about what we do.

How has the operation evolved?

We began farming after careers in food warehousing and trucking (Henry) and nursing mothering and counseling (Charlotte) first in traditional crop farming with cow calf. After ten years and lots of losses it was apparent change had to happen and our children helped us focus on what was possible without hired help and reduced overhead. We sold the combine, leased the grain bins and with Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) help, through EQIP, transitioned into fenced pastures and hayfields. The past four years have taught us a lot about what don't work and what does. Feeding cows on grass is all about growing good grass mixes and learning how to make and store hay for the winter at least cost. We have learned that growing great beef can be done on grass.

Why did you join PASA?

We joined PASA because we learn from others and network to learn a lot about agriculture, which isn't taught at our Ag Schools. Some of the techniques and methods of farming have been lost in the swirl of chemical driven agriculture. We have to relearn agriculture and understand what systems are sustainable. I have found PASA to be my source of mentors and information in this capacity and was chagrined at the PASA conference on grass fed beef to find no Penn State faculty present, supportive of the program. I believe that big business interests control the focus of our Ag Education. We need PASA even more to tell the "other side of the story."