

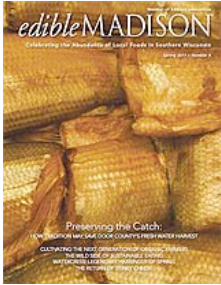


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## Cultivating the Next Generation of Organic Farmers



PHOTOS AND STORY BY MARY BERGIN

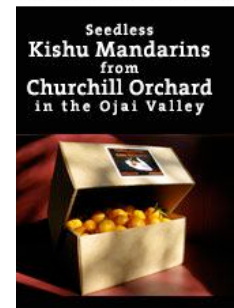
**B**are feet. That's one thing I remember about meeting Joel Kellum at his King's Hill Farm. He walked barefoot as we toured his edible forest, met his animals and inspected crates of vegetables in his hillside shed, seven miles southwest of Mineral Point.

Those feet didn't flinch as we walked across gravel, twigs and dry, brittle grasses. Confident and resilient, I thought. He's a risk taker who loves the land, a natural farmer at heart. The push is on to find and help more like him because the average farmer is 57 years old. Onehalf of all the nation's farmers are expected to retire in the next decade.

Joel and Jai, his wife, are in their mid-30s and moved to the 850-acre (300 tillable) King's Hill in late 2007 after a soured business partnership, six-figure debt and prolonged flooding on 37 of their 40 acres near Viroqua almost spelled bankruptcy. Crop sales from 20 acres of rented land and aid from the Sow the Seeds Fund (an Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy project)



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lessened the financial blow but left them discouraged.

They considered managing a nonprofit farm in California, but Jim Slama, president of FamilyFarmed.org in Chicago, caught wind of their situation. He knew of a Mineral Point farm owner in need of a land revival and made the necessary introductions. "These were great farmers, and we didn't want to lose them," Slama says of the Kellums. Workshops and networking at Slama's annual FamilyFarmed Expo encourage smart, small-scale farming among new as well as veteran stewards of the land.

Today the certified organic King's Hill Farm includes seven acres of perennials (fruits to flowers) and 15 acres of vegetables grown by the Kellums. The remaining fields of organic corn, soybeans, clover and other hay are farmed by neighbors. Joel chooses this way of life because he relishes the challenges. "Every season is different," he explains, and farming "fulfills that craving for not knowing what's going to happen next. Living plants bring some sort of fulfillment that nothing else can."

Now the Kellums mentor others who feel the fire to sustainably grow and reap what they eat, and they are not alone in this effort. Through the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES), headquartered in Spring Valley, the Kellums give advice and moral support to first-time farmers. They are matched with two small-scale (as in one- or two-acre) ventures near Verona.

They also tap into the World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) network, which brought them work interns from Spain and France in 2010. "So I added a third bedroom and built a break room," Joel Kellum explains. WWOOF host-farmers provide meals, lodging, a modest stipend and education about sustainable agriculture in exchange for daily help with farm work from May to October.

Wisconsin's other 38 WWOOF sites include Wellspring, a nonprofit learning center, organic farm, hostel and retreat center in Washington County. "It's hands-on learning—really good experience," says founder Mary Ann Ihm, who established Wellspring in 1982. "We're dedicated to education."

Others are, too, and this includes the Organic Valley cooperative of family farms, whose Generation Organic (Gen-O) initiative began five years ago. "Only 54,000 dairy farmers are left. There used to be hundreds of thousands," laments Theresa Marquez, Organic Valley's chief marketing executive, about family farming in the United States. "Are we all going to be jumping up and down, wondering where our food will come from?"

Marquez is Organic Valley's Gen-O visionary, and the program began with a handful of young people meeting once a year at the Kickapoo Country Fair in La Farge. Now hundreds of farming enthusiasts from ages 16 to 35 are in the network, and about \$60,000 per year from Organic Valley keeps the program going.

The challenges of farming are well known. It is hard physical work that typically involves significant risk, debt and isolation. Michelle Pedretti, Gen-O director at Organic Valley, says, "We focus on leadership development, how to gain access to land for farming and the capital needed to get a farm going." The young farmers also are urged to share their life stories through press interviews and their own writing.

"The current leaders in agriculture are awful—many are spokespeople for the chemical companies," Marquez says. "I'd like to see a new generation of leaders speaking for the needs of the farmers and the consumers."

Among the poster people for Organic Valley's Gen-O are Preston Green, 21, of Richland Center, whose family farms around 1,000 acres and raises around 300 head of livestock. "I have been farming all my life and intend to keep it that way," he says.

Silas Hundt, 22, of Coon Valley, grew up on a dairy and beef farm. "Farming is rarely dull, always complicated but rewarding," he says. Working outside and not having a boss are among the other advantages, from his perspective.

Generation Organic's mission, Pedretti says, is to help young farmers connect with each other "and become leaders for our co-op and organic farming." It is rare for these leaders to simply farm; some pursue a business or law degree and specialize in policy issues.

Sarah Holm and her five younger sisters are responsible for record keeping as well as physical chores at Holm Girls Dairy, an Organic Valley member-farm in Elkhorn, the family's organic dairy farm that began in 2001. They also raise free-range chickens. "If I'm not learning something about the land and animals, I'm learning about soil biology, or weather patterns, or grain markets, or the milk pricing system, or something about political policy or international relations," says Holm, 19, a University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire student.

Pedretti says Gen-O also taps into and links like-minded efforts elsewhere,

including the National Young Farmers Coalition that formed in New York in 2009 and the Wisconsin Beginning Dairy Farmers program, associated with UW-Madison's Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems. "If a person doesn't have a family connection to a farm, we try to match them with someone who can mentor," Pedretti adds.

Some of these internships include pay in cattle. "In three years, a young farmer might be able to walk away with their own herd," she says. "They still may not have the land but at least have a good start. Our efforts just keep evolving." Pedretti acknowledges that growing produce and selling the harvest through CSA sales is a more common entry point for young people who want to farm.

That's the way it's working for Gini Knight of the Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition. The MACSAC community program manager began farming solo in 2010, after working for years at Troy Community Gardens in Madison. This year Knight is applying for organic certification of a one-acre farm upon which she grows 40-plus types of vegetables. The parcel, near Marshall, is part of a retired couple's hobby farm. "They raise chickens and are interested in seeing the land used in community food production," says Knight, 31. "I'm trying to do this with no debt by renting the land" and using a CSA sales format. Sixteen CSA members will share in her farm's risks and harvest during this growing season.

Knight's biggest motivator: "Through farming, I see where my food is going, and that's important to me." And her biggest challenge: "the need to prioritize funding and projects." Working with, and against, the whims of nature sometimes complicate the best-laid plans.

Jake and Kim Jakubowski of Westridge Produce, between Madison and Viroqua, understand this. Two years ago they erected a 32x96-foot unheated greenhouse to stretch their CSA season from mid-April to Thanksgiving week. The structure also came in handy during the heavy spring and summer rains of 2010. "We put five rows of tomatoes in it," Kim says, "so we had a lot to sell all summer when others didn't because of blight."

The couple, ages 30 and 31, are high school sweethearts who married as teens, are the parents of two children (Autumn, 7, and James, 4) and began farming in 2002. "From the beginning, we had a small garden and were vendors at the Waukesha Farmers' Market," Kim says. Jacob's love of farming goes back to boyhood, when he'd help neighbors near his family's Mukwonago home. When the Jakubowskis moved to their present home—about 25 miles from the closest town—it was to help farm a friend's land. Jake also worked on dairy farms and, like his father, is a plumber. Kim, until 2010, worked winters at Meister's cheese factory in Muscoda.

Their land has been certified organic for four years, and the harvest is sold at the Viroqua farmers market and as CSA shares from Madison to Muscoda. This year they'll double their acreage by renting 4 acres and increase CSA offerings from 50 to 100 shares.

## EXPANDING SUPPORT FOR YOUNG FARMERS

For the first time in its 20-year history, the 2011 MOSES Organic Farming Conference included workshops and social events for "young organic stewards," those ages 18-25 who express an interest in farming.

Topics included how to begin farming and how to acquire land. More than 30 young people from throughout the Midwest applied for scholarships to attend, which was an excellent first-year response. The attendees included people raised on farms and those seeking their first farming experience. "We've always been a welcoming place for new farmers and family-friendly," asserts Eric Hatling, outreach coordinator at MOSES. "Those who began with us as toddlers now are teenagers."

A \$30,000 grant from the Blooming Prairie Foundation has helped MOSES and UW-River Falls add an organic agriculture emphasis to the crop and soil science curriculum. The four modules of instruction— from soil biology and fertility to organic vegetable production— are a pilot for making sustainable agriculture a new emphasis in university programming.

One of the things that sets MOSES apart is that, rather than implement a program and hope they got it right, they listen to what young people say they need before jumping in. One of these listening opportunities led to applying for a \$280,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program to establish an organic university at the 100-acre Gardens of Eagan in Farmington, Minn.

All these initiatives are assets, but no grant or mentoring eliminates all the uncertainties of farming. For the Kellums, too much rain in mid- 2010 meant a lost potato crop and "the first time in 13 years that I didn't plant a winter squash crop." As in any other walk of life, success comes from understanding what's truly important, accepting what's out of your control and knowing how to roll with adversity.

"From May 29 to July 4 [2010], I didn't get a tractor into a field," Joel Kellum says, "but we came up with over 500 pounds of mushrooms and doubled our animal flock," gathering up to 90 dozen duck and chicken eggs per week.

He's obviously not a fan of pity parties. "There's no room for that," he insists. "When your car breaks down and you have to replace the clutch, I'm at least glad it happens in the driveway."



The Kellum Family, King's Hill Farm

## RESOURCES FOR YOUNG FARMERS:

**Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (CRAFT):**

[www.learnrowconnect.org/farmer](http://www.learnrowconnect.org/farmer), 815-389-8455

**FamilyFarmed.org:**

[www.familyfarmed.org](http://www.familyfarmed.org), 708-763-9920

**FH King Student Farm at UW-Madison:**

[www.fhkingstudentfarm.com](http://www.fhkingstudentfarm.com)

**Generation Organic:**

[www.farmers.coop/generation-organic](http://www.farmers.coop/generation-organic), 888-809-9297

**Michael Fields Agricultural Institute:**

[www.michaelfieldsagainst.org](http://www.michaelfieldsagainst.org), 262-642-3303

**Midwest Organic and Sustainable  
Education Service (MOSES):**

[www.mosesorganic.org](http://www.mosesorganic.org), 888-551-4769

**National Young Farmers Coalition:**

[www.youngfarmers.org](http://www.youngfarmers.org)

**USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development  
Program:**

[www.nifa.usda.gov](http://www.nifa.usda.gov), 800-333-4636

**UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agriculture Systems  
(CIAS) and the Wisconsin Schools for Beginning Farmers:**

[www.cias.wisc.edu](http://www.cias.wisc.edu), 608-262-5200

**UW-River Falls agriculture curriculum:**

[www2.uwrf.edu/pes](http://www2.uwrf.edu/pes), 715-425-3989

**World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF):**

[www.woofusa.org](http://www.woofusa.org), 949-715-9500

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