



# Saugeen River CSA

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Hello everyone!

First I want to acknowledge the support of long time CSA member Diane Ferguson for helping with editing and formatting the newsletters. Thank you!

As I write this it is March 2<sup>nd</sup> and we have finally had a decent snowfall, however, it looks like it will probably all melt by this time next week. This has surely been a yo-yo of a winter! Some people have been asking what effect this has on the farm. Every weather pattern has ramifications, some good for some things, some not so good for others. As climate change seems to be encouraging irregular and some times extreme weather, I am convinced more then ever that small, diversified farms are the most resilient. Diversity is nature's insurance that what may not be good for some will be for others – abundance has different expressions!

Something came up in February that I thought would be good to share with members. Green Being Farm near Neustadt, hosted an informal one-night symposium on Ethical Animal Husbandry. There were nine farmers, including myself, invited to participate from Grey and Bruce counties. All were organic farmers, and all relatively small scale, selling primarily directly to customers. All had both livestock and crops.

For some the focus was more on the livestock, for others, more on the crops (vegetables, fruit, and grains were represented). Most had at some point in

their life experimented with vegetarianism out of a disgust with the conventional meat industry. All were committed to caring for and raising the healthiest, happiest animals they could on their farms.

While they all agreed their animals had great lives on the farm, the whole process around getting the animals to a slaughterhouse, and what happens to them once they get there, was out of the farmer's control. The farmers were all concerned that this process was not always done in the most humane way possible. It was unanimously felt that on-farm slaughter was the most humane method, but that the regulations and logistics around it were far too challenging to make it a reality.



Each farm during the symposium, shared their philosophy and approach to raising farm animals. I thought it would be nice to share with members in a newsletter what I shared with the group about the approach to

farm animals I have at the Saugeen River CSA.

The way I see the animals on the farm is inspired by some of the concepts of Biodynamic Agriculture. The central image is: A farm is healthiest if it can be organized as a living individuality. The defining factor of this is balance: having the right kinds and numbers of animals for the farm to provide the right kind and amount of fertility for the land. This comes out of a symbiotic, mutually supportive relationship animals have with the land that provides for them. They give back, in the form of manure, and other things I'll get to in a minute, to the soil.



A big part of Biodynamic farming is exploring what is the right number and kinds of animals for a particular piece of land. The first animals we purchased were cows. We started out in 2001 with our first two. We also purchased 160 tons of manure from another farm since we didn't have enough manure from our own animals in the first couple years. As we increased our herd, we eventually became self-sufficient with manure, and have never brought any in since 2003. This is the main purpose of the cattle for the farm: to provide manure. But as we were building up the fertility in the hay and pasture fields, we needed to supplement our own hay production with

purchased hay, which isn't cheap! So we continued to breed the cattle and have the excess animals slaughtered for beef.



Having only one species of farm animal on a piece of land can seem unbalanced after a while. We added ducks and then chickens. Each year, the ducks hatch out a clutch or two of ducklings and we have often had the excess ducks butchered in the fall. But I have never seen the ducks as being raised for meat. Their main task on the farm is to sift through any standing water. They love puddles. They are filter feeders and it is in their nature to look for food in water. This serves a certain cleansing function for the farm.

The chickens perform a complimentary activity; they sift through soil and under organic debris. Although we have the chickens for eggs, they also serve the function of pecking through the ground to clean up any potential grub infestation. Chickens can be very destructive in garden beds. Because of this, my approach is not to close in the chickens, but to fence off anything that we don't want the chickens to get into. This allows the chickens to roam freely around the farmyard searching for areas to clean up. Some breeds just sit around and wait for you to feed them, but I specifically looked for a breed that would go

about looking for food to supplement what we feed them.



Next came the horses. In North America, horses aren't raised for meat as they are in some countries, but are used for work or pleasure. But they have a similar diet to cattle, so when the horses came, I had to cut way back on the number of cows there were on the farm. Thus, for a while, we had lots of beef for sale.

Now we are at four horses and four cows, and that seems to be the number of animals that the farm can support and that can supply enough manure. Horse manure, however is in no way the same as cattle. Cows are ruminants, so their manure is more thoroughly digested and organisms and enzymes are added to what they excrete that make for a much better compost to spread on the soil. A healthy mix of the horse and cow manure makes a really great compost. But it would be better if it were literally mixed....

So in come the pigs. We have experimented with a few different set-ups with pigs. The great task that pigs thrive on and thoroughly enjoy is: waste management. Throwing our vegetable scraps in for the pigs to ravage on is so much more satisfying than simply dropping it in a compost pile.

But pigs also want to dig. The boulders that pigs can excavate out of the ground show the skill and motivation they can provide for a farm.

Finally, in this last year we had the time to renovate the barnyard to include pigs in the manure mixing operation. Their enthusiasm for this job is inspiring. They do such a good job aerating and mixing the compost that it is a much nicer product and easier to clean out of the barn. Also, as an important part of a pig's life, we give them soil to directly dig in, a puddle to lie in and shade to relax in. The only future additions I can see are potentially sheep or goats to mow the lawn!



So, as you can see, my approach to animals on the farm is never about raising them just for meat. I don't like seeing an animal as a commodity. It's always about finding what is the nature of the animal to the land, and how can we allow the animals to express who they are and share in the relationship we all have with the Earth.

Happy Spring! Cory