

EFFICIENCY ON THE FARM

By Mary Alice Johnson and Marika Nagasaka

Marika and I (Mary Alice) manage our ten-acre (4-ha) farm in Sooke, Vancouver Island, BC. Four acres (1.6 ha) are under intensive vegetable, herb, fruit and flower cultivation. We sell at two farmers' markets and to seven restaurants, and have our own box program, and have a small seed company. It is a very busy farm.

We are constantly looking for ways to grow, harvest and market more efficiently. We usually take on two new apprentices a year. Our long-term staff members often shake their heads while watching how slowly new folks move, harvest and get a job done. It takes a while to pick up the little tricks that make a job go quickly and efficiently. Here are a few of our observations and recommendations:

- Learn to use tools effectively and find the right tools for the job and for the scale of your farm. The most obvious is using a wheelbarrow to move a lot of materials or tools rather than walking back and forth. Also, use a hoe to make quick work of small weeds rather than hand weeding everything. Try a wheel hoe to see if it is worth the money.
- Take all the tools you need to the job site. It is better to have too many tools than too few, and then have to make a trip back to the tool shed.

Mary Alice Johnson and Marika Nagasaka have ten acres (4 ha) in Sooke, BC, of which they farm about four intensively. Marika has been farming with Mary Alice for three full seasons and is now much more than an apprentice. Andromeda Cowley and Tracy Sutherland joined the farm last winter. Produce is sold at farmers' markets and to restaurants in Sooke and Victoria. They also have a small box program, and sell seed through www.fullcircleseeds.com and at Seedy Saturdays.

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- Put your tools away after using them. Make sure it is obvious where each tool goes. Hang buckets with labels for smaller tools. Spray-paint larger tools with red paint against the wall where they hang and then it will be obvious if you left the tool out in the field. Allow time at the end of the day to clean the tools and put them away before you become too tired.
- Break a task down into its component parts, and complete each one before moving on to the next one. For example, when seeding kale, decide if it makes more sense to make a trench for all the rows within a bed, add compost and then seed them, or to make one row at a time, add compost and seed as you go. Likely, the first method will be faster.
- Set up routines on the farm so that you don't duplicate work. When harvesting many different crops for market, follow a system that lets everyone know what they are responsible for harvesting. On blackboards, we identify which crops need to be harvested and in what quantities. Before they go to the field, harvesters put their initials next to the crops they will pick. When the job is done, they cross it off.
- Establish who does what. Perform these jobs at the same time each day so that there are no surprises.
- Designate a specific duty day when, for example, all irrigation line connections and emitters are tested; fencing is inspected; lists are made of weedy beds needing attention; compost temperatures are recorded; etc.
- Keep an eye and an ear out for problems, such as



Marika has worked out an efficient system for cleaning greens.

irrigation leaks and pest outbreaks. If you see a problem, either fix it yourself or inform the person responsible for dealing with that aspect of the farm.

- Learn to move quickly about the farm in a well thought-out pattern. Plan your day so that you minimize your movement around the farm. This will also reduce stress. In the morning, I usually make up a list of the tasks I want to do that day and I encourage each of my apprentices to do the same.

- Have a real sense of the farm and what needs to be done in the various sectors. We take a walk about the farm once a week to note what is happening in each sector of the farm. This allows us to take a set of tools up to that area and do one big job and several small ones in a morning, rather than one job here and another over there. Set priorities for your various tasks.

- Although giving a high priority to certain tasks is good, it is important to keep the whole farm in mind. For example, it is better to hoe many areas quickly, rather than hand weed one meticulously. My mother in law called this “giving it a lick and a promise.” A lot of your ability to judge this comes with experience, knowing just how much weed competition or drought a crop tolerates, or just how late you can plant corn or parsnips and still get a crop.

- When preparing beds, plan a year ahead. It took me a number of years to realize that I needed to plan this year for the fertility, pH, or weed requirements for next year’s crops. I till in seaweed and lime this year for next year’s beets rather than wait until spring. I plan my tillage ahead as far as possible to get a sterile bed ready for carrots. Before seeding crops, I want at least three weeks to allow for annual weeds to emerge and then be destroyed with a flamer or sharp collinear hoe.

- Learn to use both hands. Minimize your movements by picking more than one tomato, more than one leaf, more than one carrot in each hand before you move your hands to put them into the harvest basket. Learn how to pick pea pods with one hand.

- Learn how each kind of plant ripens—it’s usually from the ground up with the lower fruits ready first. Knowing this will make it easier to find the ripe fruits.

- Train your friends, family and customers to phone you *before* you are out in the fields. Set up a time to take phone calls and let everyone know to call you at those times. Let them know when your workday usually ends. Train them to help, rather than watch, if they come to visit early and you are still working.

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- Give a three-ring binder to people coming to work on the farm, containing the full planting instructions for every crop with details on planting times; seeding depth; row spacing; pH preferences; soil type and watering preferences; place in the crop rotation; companion plants; transplanting methods; hardening-off procedures; harvesting details; etc. These records are on our computer so they can be modified.

- Give every person in the field a walkie-talkie in a waterproof zip bag so communication between everyone is possible without wasting time finding people.

- Use time-saving equipment (if

On KlipSpringer Farm, which is named after a South African deer, Lawrie and Margaret Henrey farm 4.75 acres (1.9 ha). The farm is located in Gibsons, BC, a 40-minute ferry ride from West Vancouver. The main crops are strawberries, raspberries, peas, beans, greens, garlic, leeks, shallots, peppers, squash and herbs. The planted areas include two small greenhouses (one heated and one cold); a drip-irrigated area of under an acre with row crops, berries, and fruit trees, all protected from deer by 7-ft/2.1-m plastic fencing; and an acre of flowers, shrubs, ornamental grasses and trees. The farm supplies a few crops to two local organic stores and the organic section of a local supermarket, as well as custom-picked orders for regular customers.

The Henreys work almost full-time during the main growing season, assisted by one full-time worker, one part-time worker (one day a week) and an occasional worker. The latter two assist mainly with transplanting, weeding and harvesting.

economical) to speed up the work, such as power wheelbarrows to bring compost, take weeds to compost heaps, remove rocks, etc. For example, KlipSpringer Farm uses power wheelbarrows.¹ The wheelbarrows can carry 800 lbs (360 kg) and they have been used for many years without any problems. They have manual tip, electric and pull start, easily variable speeds and removable wooden sides for transporting long or wide items.

1. From www.countryhomeproducts.com.

- Start thinking about the routines you do on the farm in terms of seconds, rather than hours. If you don't extrapolate, there doesn't seem to be a big difference between picking two apples a second to three apples a second. But over eight hours it's a huge difference. To stay focused I always remind myself that I have to set my pace properly. It really hurts when the person next to you seems to be picking cherries just a little bit faster than you, yet at the end of the day he makes \$120 and you make \$85. That's a big difference—those lit-

tle cherries add up fast.

- Create order in the garden. In nature, there are no straight lines and plants don't care if they are in straight lines or not. But people benefit from order. Straight lines, clear paths and distinct boundaries help us see what we need to do. We like our Victoria planting line which we bought from Lee Valley. It was expensive but it's a pleasure to use.

- If you figure out a new technique for doing a task more efficiently, let others know about it.

This article was written by Mary Alice Johnson and Marika Nagasaka of ALM Organic Farm with the help of Joel Skrepnek, Lawrie and Margaret Henrey of KlipSpringer Farm, Carolyn Herriot of Garden Path Nursery, and Bruce Miller of Across the Creek Organics.



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