ONE STEP AT A TIME

A small-scale organic operation offered this beginning farmer a leg up to full-time farming.

BY DEBORAH R. HUSO | PHOTOS BY DAVE TONGE

Peg Sheaffer never planned to be a farmer. While in school at the University of Wisconsin, she majored in history and Spanish. But for fun, she took a few classes in sustainable agriculture. “There’s a pretty strong interest in local food in Madison,” she remarks. That’s almost an understatement. Madison is home to the Dane County Farmers’ Market, the largest producers-only farmers market in the U.S.

Despite the fact Sheaffer had no family connection or significant background in agriculture, she began to develop a strong interest in food production and worked on two organic vegetable farms. It was on one of those farms that Sheaffer met her husband, Matt.

She decided she wanted to make a go of it as a farmer. Twelve years ago, she started her own operation, Sandhill Organics, in East Troy, Wis., while Matt continued to work for another farmer in conventional row-crop production.

“At the beginning, we funded the farm with a meager amount of money we had saved,” Peg explains. “We didn’t think we could get a conventional loan. So I sent a letter to family and friends asking for money and offering them the opportunity to become founding members of the farm.”

Peg says she and Matt were overwhelmed by the response. They raised $15,000—enough to buy a small tractor, simple cultivating and seeding tools, and hand tools. “It was very basic,” Peg recalls. “We bought an old truck, too. Everything was used.”

But it was enough to get the farm off the ground in a region where organic production is common, as are markets for direct sale to consumers. In Peg’s case, organic farming was all she knew, as the two farms where she had worked were both certified organic, as was the 2-acre farm the Sheaffers rented to get started.

Organic production has become an increasingly profitable market for small-scale operations, many of them started by women like Peg. Lisa Krivics, director of the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) Rural Women’s Project, points out nearly
30% of the nation’s farms are women-owned, and 14% of U.S. principle operators on farms are women. “But statistics can get muddled by the USDA,” she adds. “Women have always worked in agriculture.”

Krivist says organic niche markets are ideal for those wanting to get into farming on a small scale. “A lot of people are coming into farming as second careers or because they want to change the food system,” she notes. Still others are looking for alternative, value-added markets where they can direct-sell to provide additional income to their conventional farm operation.

“This is a ripe time to get started in organic farming, because there are so many great resources,” Krivist says. “Congress has made beginning farmers a priority in the new Farm Bill.” She is quick to add, “There isn’t one path to starting an organic farm, and you don’t need to go to a land-grant university for four years to get into agriculture.”

Peg says she thinks a lot of people steer away from organic farming because they’re intimidated by the recordkeeping requirements for maintaining organic certification. “That is a huge part of it,” she admits, noting that producers have to describe how they manage pests and disease, as well as what they are doing to improve water quality and soil fertility. “But the recordkeeping has actually helped us make the farm better,” she adds. Since the Sheaffers record all their procedures for planting, weed and pest control, and harvesting, they can easily look back at previous months and years to see what worked and what didn’t when planning for future enterprises.

The Sheaffers say they learned by doing, borrowing techniques from farms where they had worked previously. They were fortunate starting out because the first two farms they rented were already certified organic. The Sheaffers own the farm they operate today, near Brodhead, Wis. The land was conventionally farmed, so the Sheaffers were required to undertake a three-year transition process to get the farm certified organic under the USDA-accredited Midwest Organic Services Association.

Today, the Sheaffers operate two 45-acre farms, one at their home in Brodhead, the other 90 miles away at a sustainable development, Prairie Crossing, in Grayslake, Ill. The couple had previously rented the land there but missed their home state. They also discovered there were certain crops that didn’t do as well in the thicker, poorly drained soil around Chicago, so they moved back to Wisconsin.

New business partners Jeff and Jen Miller operate the Illinois farm.
The two farms form what is known now as Sandhill Family Farms. The Broadhead farm, with its sandier soil, produces tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, potatoes, melons, winter squash, pumpkins, cucumbers and zucchini. The farm also has 12 acres of pasture for a flock of St. Croix sheep. Meanwhile, the Grayslake farm produces beets, carrots, turnips, garlic, radishes, salad greens, broccoli, cabbage, kale, spinach, chard, leeks, rutabaga, turnips and green beans. The Millers also manage 300 laying hens.

Sandhill Family Farms markets its products and those of other producers through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). The CSA offers its customers five different shares—vegetable, fruit, eggs, dairy and meat. Shareholders, who pay in advance of the season, can either pick up their products at the Grayslake farm or from various pickup sites around the Chicago area.

The farms’ CSA shares are unique because they are offered to customers each season, in spring, summer and fall. So, customers can purchase shares for a specific season, rather than for the entire delivery season, which runs from May 1 through the week before Thanksgiving.

The costs for the shares vary. The summer dairy share, which includes butter, cheese and yogurt, is $145 for nine deliveries. The summer vegetable share is $550 for 17 weeks of deliveries. The vegetable share provides a grocery bag-sized offering of produce to each share member weekly. The fruit share is managed the same way. The dairy and egg shares are offered every other week. Currently, 430 families participate in the vegetable share. Some 550 families participate in the CSA across all share types.

The farm has grown substantially during the past 12 years due, in part, to a $12,000 Frontera Farmer Foundation grant the Sheaffers received in their fifth year of operation. They used the money to build a hoop house. They’ve also benefited from a few USDA-based microloans, including one for $25,000 they used to purchase a refrigerated truck. Peg says the loans’ interest rate of only 1.5% was a big help starting out.

Tips for Getting Into An Organic Niche Market

- Understand the certifications and the process. To get started, visit 1.usa.gov/1qcPnZY.
- Understand you may not need certification if you’re selling directly to customers. Be transparent about how you raise your crops or livestock.
- Consider the land you’ll be farming carefully. Check out www.ams.usda.gov/AMSw1.0/nop for USDA standards for organic farms.
- Apprentice under or work with another farmer to make sure you understand what it means to be an organic grower. Find internship opportunities in your state at attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/internships.
- Consider an agritourism component for even more value-added income. Contact your local Extension office for ideas, guidelines and assistance in starting an agritourism operation.