



Golden Russet: Portrait of a farm success

By CHRISTY LYNN

ADDISON COUNTY — Golden Russet Farm sits amidst a wide stretch of land overlooking Lake Champlain and the Adirondacks to the west. It is stunning farmland in the northwestern corner of Shoreham, one corner of the county that has probably looked relatively similar for the last hundred years.

Judy and Will Stevens, Golden Russet owners, are celebrating their 35th year as local organic farmers, having first started their business on a Monkton farm in 1981. They moved the farm to the Shoreham property in 1984 and have been producing fresh vegetables and plants there ever since.

Their produce has been largely sold through direct wholesale to places like the Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, and City Market and Healthy Living in Burlington. However, they also supply fresh vegetables and herbs to the Shoreham Inn, American Flatbread and Vergennes Laundry.

The Stevenses and their seasonal staff had been vending at the Burlington and then the Middlebury farmers' markets until about two years ago when the couple decided to cut back and focus on their CSA (community supported agriculture) and direct wholesale partners rather than spend the time and resources at the farmers' markets.

CSA shareholders through Golden Russet can expect a unique variety of fresh and organic vegetables, herbs and flowers each week as they come to the farm to collect their bounty. There are options to pick your own with certain veggies like tomatoes and cucumbers and an opportunity to make choices about the specific varieties that fit your weekly needs (kale or spinach or chard or arugula, for example).

Each year varies slightly in capacity, but Judy Stevens said that they are typically able to offer CSA shares to about 35 families a year. The summer CSA package begins in mid-June and runs

through September. Golden Russet also offers a fall share just for October and November with pick-ups every other week rather than every week.

While shareholders can expect many of the classic summer and fall vegetables ranging from tomatoes and lettuce to cucumbers, beans and onions, Golden Russet also focuses heavily on what Judy calls "storage crops" like potatoes, rutabagas, cabbage, carrots and other root vegetables.

"It came out of what we were really capable of doing, with small kids and a busy schedule," Judy said. "But we've grown into it and have a great routine for caring for and storing vegetables to sell deep into the winter." This year Golden Russet was able to ship vegetables to the local markets and restaurants through the middle of February.

In addition to the traditional CSA program, Golden Russet partners with the NOFA Senior Farm Share program for income-eligible seniors run through an American Legion Auxiliary board in Brandon. The program is funded through the USDA and provides fresh local vegetables from farms like Golden Russet to more than 60 seniors each year.

Golden Russet also works with HOPE (Helping Overcome Poverty's Effects), the anti-poverty agency in Middlebury, to provide minimally blemished vegetables to the local food shelf. In 2014 Golden Russet donated more than 8,000 pounds of fresh vegetables to HOPE's food shelf.

Looking back over the years, Judy Stevens said she and Will have seen a fair amount of change, many of it encouraging for a local organic farmer.

"For one, there has been a huge increase in the number of people who are interested in eating organically," she said. "When the farm was just getting going in the early 1980s there were certainly people here and there who paid a lot of attention to organic, but around the late '80s it started to really catch on and gain a lot of public and media attention. It's been rapid growth ever since."

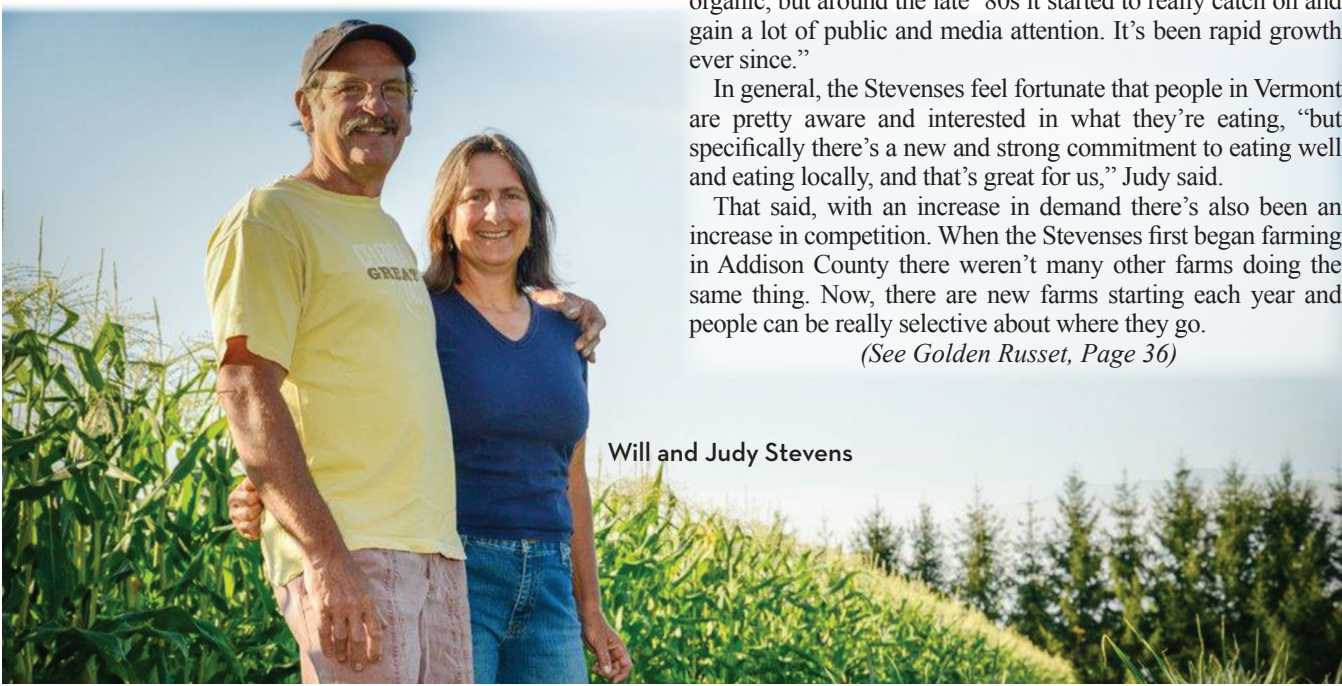
In general, the Stevenses feel fortunate that people in Vermont are pretty aware and interested in what they're eating, "but specifically there's a new and strong commitment to eating well and eating locally, and that's great for us," Judy said.

That said, with an increase in demand there's also been an increase in competition. When the Stevenses first began farming in Addison County there weren't many other farms doing the same thing. Now, there are new farms starting each year and people can be really selective about where they go.

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Will and Judy Stevens