



Marketing a Philosophy on S&S Homestead

By
Rural Roots and University of Idaho
Research Team:

Colette DePhelps
Executive Director, Rural Roots, Inc.

Cinda Williams
*Extension Support Scientist II
Plant, Soil and Entomological Sciences
University of Idaho*

John Foltz, Ph.D.
*Associate Dean
College of Agricultural and Life Sciences
Professor of Agricultural Economics
University of Idaho*

John Potter
*Univ. of Idaho Graduate Research Assistant
Dept. of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology*

and
Professional Writing Team:
Ariel Spaeth Agenbroad
Karen Faunce



The Northwest Direct farm case studies were developed to provide in-depth information about the direct and semi-direct marketing opportunities that exist for farmers within their regional food system and how these opportunities are captured by a diverse set of successful producers in Idaho, Oregon and Washington. Direct marketing strategies employed by the farmers featured in this series include farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs), u-pick, farm stand and on-farm sales. Semi-direct marketing strategies include sales to restaurants, caterers, retailers (grocery stores, butchers, etc.) and processors, arranged and completed by the farmer him/herself without the use of brokers or wholesalers.

In 2002 and 2003, members of the case study research team performed in-depth on-farm interviews with each of the 12 farm families in this study. Interviews were transcribed, financial information was collected, reviewed and interpreted and outlines for the case study content were developed. Professionals were hired to write the case studies. Each case study went through a series of reviews by the case study farmers, university faculty and research team members with final permission for publishing and distribution given by the farmers themselves.

The nature of profitable small acreage farming demands flexibility and the willingness to change. These case studies, therefore, reflect a "snapshot in time" of each farm. Readers should be aware that these farms have undoubtedly evolved since the initial interviews. They should also be aware that the unique nature of each farm necessitates an individualized treatment of the analysis of farm profitability and the criteria by which that is measured. The case studies contain financial information to the extent that farmers were willing to share, and reflect our intention to educate the reader, while at the same time protecting the farmers' need for confidentiality.

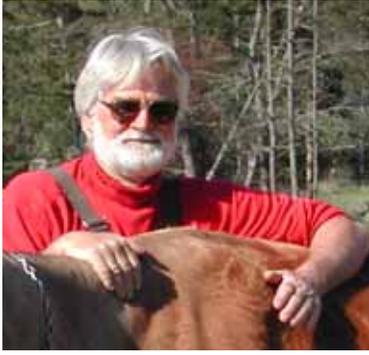
It is our intent that the case studies will be of use to:

- Current farmers who want access to a greater share of the revenue that comes from the foods they grow and raise and are interested in exploring one or more marketing options.
- New farmers who are designing their production and marketing systems, who are interested in employing one or more marketing strategies, and are establishing a business plan for their farm.
- Educators and other agricultural professionals who work with producers and others interested in direct and semi-direct marketing.
- Policy-makers who are interested in enhancing the financial stability of family farms in the region through innovative policy and government funding.

A total of 12 case studies were produced by Rural Roots, Inc. and the University of Idaho as part of the Northwest Direct project. A list of the other case studies in the series is included at the end of this document. These case studies are one component of a larger USDA Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems project called *Northwest Direct: Improving Markets for Small Farms*. For more information on this project and its outcomes, visit the project website at <http://www.nwdirect.wsu.edu/>.



Colette DePHELPS, NW Direct Case Study Research Team Leader



Marketing a Philosophy on S&S Homestead

Farm Overview & History

In 1970, Henning Sehmsdorf and Elizabeth Simpson designed a fifty-year holistic plan for their farm on Lopez Island in Washington State. Thirty five years into that plan, S&S Homestead is debt free and almost entirely self-sufficient, providing food for the family, interns and livestock, generating fertility for soil, crops and pastures, and drawing income through custom slaughter of livestock, and a community supported agriculture subscription service (CSA). Several interns each year pay for the opportunity to learn biodynamic farming from Sehmsdorf and Simpson, who are also actively involved in research and education, garnering grants from such entities as the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, and National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), pioneering farm to school programs in their area, and sharing their experiences and expertise through educational outreach both on and off-farm.

S&S Homestead is farmed biodynamically, an agricultural method based on a series of lectures given by Austrian philoso-

pher Rudolf Steiner in the early twentieth century. Biodynamics seeks to actively work with the health-giving forces of nature. Henning Sehmsdorf explains, "The whole idea behind the biodynamic farm is that it's a closed organism, with a kind of individuality where you produce your own feeds and you produce your own health." Emphasis is placed on integrating crops and livestock, recycling nutrients, maintaining soil, and promoting the health and well being of crops, animals, and humans. This holistic conceptualization leads to a series of management practices that address the environmental, social and financial aspects of the farm (Steve Diver, NCAT 1999).

Henning Sehmsdorf grew up near Dresden, Germany, amid the destruction and aftermath of World War II. He lived in a household with fourteen other family members, escaping the bombings. Of his early experiences in farming, Sehmsdorf recalls, "Since I was born during the war and there was no food, we survived partly by going to neighboring farms as kids and gleaned." Later, in school, he also partici-

Henning Sehmsdorf
S & S Homestead
San Juan Islands, WA

Marketing Strategies
Community Supported
Agriculture Subscription

Custom Slaughter of Lamb,
Pork, Poultry & Beef

Milk Sales

Egg Sales

Primary Crops

Biodynamic Vegetable
Gardens & Orchard

Grass Fed Beef & Lamb

Natural Pork

Pastured Poultry & Eggs

Grain & Hay

Additional Products & Services

Biodynamic preparations

On-farm workshops
& demonstrations

Collaborative projects with
public school & university
programs

Internship program

Off-farm workshops,
presentations & lectures

Farm Consulting Service



NORTHWEST DIRECT
MARKETING
FARMER CASE STUDY

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Trout pond holds 750,000 gallons of rain water collected from barn roofs and is used for solar-driven irrigation



Sehmsdorf displays the food dehydration system.

pated in “harvesting vacations,” where groups of schoolchildren worked the fields in exchange for food. Sehmsdorf says, “I always wanted to be a farmer, and my father, who was a lawyer, pointed out that there was no way that I could be a farmer in Europe, unless I just wanted to be a farmhand. There was no way I could get a hold of any land. Land was

much too expensive. So, in a sense, doing what I’m doing now is really an old dream.”

Entwined with the dream to farm was the desire for an education. He recalls, “I came over in 1956, when I was just 19, and I came here by myself, basically because in postwar Germany there was no way I could go to school and make a living. So I worked in a meat factory for a year and learned to hate how animals were treated and meats were produced, and basically

“I always wanted to be a farmer...but it took me ten years to get there because I had to get a PhD first.”

said to myself, if I’m going to eat decently I have to do a lot of this myself, but it took me ten years to get there because I had to get a PhD first.”

Sehmsdorf earned his PhD and accepted a teaching position at the University of Washington in Seattle, and again, his thoughts turned to farming. “In 1969...I came out here and I spent the first summer driving around looking for land to grow food for the family I didn’t have. You know, I had no wife and no children yet. But I knew that somehow this was going to be connected. I couldn’t afford to buy 200 or 2000 acres, it was going to be a small piece. I suddenly found these islands,” Henning remembers.

Before the construction of dams that diverted water to larger farms east of the mountains, Lopez Island was an agricultural community with a population of 7000, and a net exporter of dairy, grain, fruit, meat and fish. When Sehmsdorf arrived the population had dwindled to 500, and “the attitude was that farming was dead.”

Henning Sehmsdorf is now the steward of 50 acres on Lopez Island (see Table 1). He bought ten in 1970, has since purchased five more and leases approximately 30 acres from neighboring landowners. For three decades they have built their farm here, and in that time they have also seen a gradual resurgence in agricultural production on the island.

“This is the only county in the State of Washington where agriculture has been increasing over the last 15-20 years. But the increase has all been in small-scale farming,” says Henning.

Sehmsdorf began very small-scale. “We started out with just a chainsaw and an axe, basically.” He and his wife, Elizabeth Simpson (both professors at the University of Washington: he taught comparative literature, she taught English and American Studies), worked full time. Over the course of twenty-five years they raised two children and slowly built the infrastructure of the farm. He says, “We would just come up here on weekends and summers and we would grow most of our vegetables. In the summer we had rabbits and chickens in that quarter acre which is now our orchard. We also ran a cow and a calf as part of a neighbor’s herd, in exchange for helping him in the summer bring in several thousand bales of hay from his and our fields.”

Table 1 S & S Homestead Land Use

Land Use	Owned, acres	Leased, acres	Total acreage
Pasture	5	21	26
Grain	0	2	2
Hay	6	12	18
Vegetables	0.05	0	0.05
Flowers	0.01	0	0.01
Orchard	0.05	0	0.05
Forest	2	0	2
Buildings, pond	2	0	2
Total Acreage			50.10

In 1994, when the youngest child turned 18, Sehmsdorf left the University and the couple moved to the farm full time. In ten years they have completed the construction of their home, outbuildings, intern housing, barns, a rainwater cistern, ponds, fences and paddocks. They have established a direct market approach for their farm and its in-demand products. They have become a model of self-sufficiency. Elizabeth still teaches part time at the local high school, but Henning claims, "At this point we would not need her income anymore. In other words, the farm pays for everything. The farm provides us with food, shelter, all our needs, and we can pay for everything from transportation to health care, taxes, all from the farm income."

Direct Marketing Strategies and Profitability by Enterprise

S&S Homestead's marketing strategy is simple. Sehmsdorf explains, "We answer the phone. That's pretty much it! In other words, we don't advertise, we don't really do anything. Basically we respond to people expressing a wish to eat the food we grow here. And what we produce is beef, pork, lamb, eggs, dairy products and vegetables." (See Figure 1.)

Elizabeth Simpson adds, "What Henning is trying to do is to redefine economics, in different terms."

Sehmsdorf elaborates, "Ok. We have a fifty-year holistic management plan. That's actually true. And we review it every year and I do this with my wife and with the interns. A holistic plan means that economic goals are integrated with life values. As a matter of fact, we have defined profit as a tool, not a goal. You know, we have to have a certain amount of money to be able to operate (See tables 2 and 3), so we aim for that but we don't aim for maximization of profit. We have certain ways we measure whether we're succeeding or not. Profitability is one of them. Another one is environmental soundness. And I also like to think that we are concerned about questions of social responsibility and justice."

Though now it seems a natural extension of their farm philosophy, direct marketing was not their first approach. In fact, Sehmsdorf says, "When we first started out, when I first produced anything at all, I thought I was going to sell to commodity markets."

However, they soon realized that the cost of producing the grain was more than what he could get from the grain elevators, "I very quickly caught on to the fact that if I was going to make any money at all, it would have to be sold locally on a custom basis. And that has proven to be very, very, true," says Sehmsdorf. Direct marketing requires a certain ability to work with people, of which Sehmsdorf was well aware: "I think it takes a certain personality. You have to be interested in people and not just plants."

S&S Homestead is unique in that it not only markets its products directly, but the farm itself has become a marketable product, generating income through the internship program, educational outreach and grant funded research projects.



Cold frames protect succulent greens in winter

Vegetable CSA

Sehmsdorf began his Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription service ten years ago, after moving to the farm full time. Henning remembers, "People were coming to us saying, 'Would you sell us stuff out of your garden?... We love your produce.' And we said, 'OK.'"

Henning and Elizabeth began by developing a questionnaire listing what they were currently growing and what they thought they could produce. Then they distributed the form to all their neighbors on the island, asking them to indicate what they would be interested in buying. They received twenty responses. At first they tried to fill individual orders based on the questionnaires. Sehmsdorf explains, "We said, 'OK. We should grow x number of this and x number of that...'" and it was very complicated." They found that planning for and accommodating these specific orders was nearly impossible, especially when customers changed their minds about what they thought they wanted. He continues, "When we filled people's trays and they saw what was on another tray they would say 'Why didn't I get some of this?' and I'd say, 'Right here, it says you don't want radishes, you wanted something else...'" then they'd say 'Oh, I didn't know, I want radishes too!'"

The system needed rethinking after the first season, Sehmsdorf recalls, "We said, 'OK. We're just going to grow stuff. And we're going to tell people they're going to get a basket of good food. And we're going to give them recipes and teach them how to cook the food.'"

It took four years to create a working, successful CSA.

"People were coming to us saying, 'Would you sell us stuff out of your garden?... We love your produce.' And we said, 'OK.'"

During this time, they developed the concept of *FLOSS*, which they use to explain what they believe their customers really want, and what they, as a farm, can provide.

FLOSS is an acronym for *Fresh, Local, Organic, Seasonal* and *Sustainable*. By implementing principles of biodynamic farming and by selling only to their neighbors on the island, Sehmsdorf can be sure that his products are adhering to the standards of *FLOSS* and keeping his customers happy.

And these customers have remained loyal for ten years. S&S Homestead's CSA service brings in about \$10,000 a year in sales and home consumption. It consists of two twenty-week seasons. The first runs from April to August, then the second begins and runs through the winter, with a break around Christmas. They sell shares for each season. Quarter, half, and whole shares were offered, and in 2003 were priced at \$135, \$270, and \$540, respectively. The fresh-picked shares are picked up at the farm on Saturday mornings. A typical order in April or May might consist of lettuces, spinach, chard, kale, mustards, peas, corn, salad mix, herbs and sprouts. During the winter months customers may receive potatoes, onions, and cool weather greens.

Today, they produce enough for about twenty CSA shares, including enough for the family and interns in a garden the size of a postage stamp. Sehmsdorf explains the economics:

"And you think about this, two and a half thousand square feet in bed space, \$10,000, and that's a 20th of an acre. Right? So that's

\$200,000 per acre. Of course, I couldn't manage a whole acre of vegetables by myself, plus the rest of the farm; but still, I don't know how that sounds to you but to me it sounds like economic viability. It works because we don't have to buy anything. Our inputs are mainly diesel, and total fuel costs last year for both farm machinery and personal transportation were \$400. No other chemicals of any kind."

Custom Slaughter of Lamb, Poultry, Beef and Pork

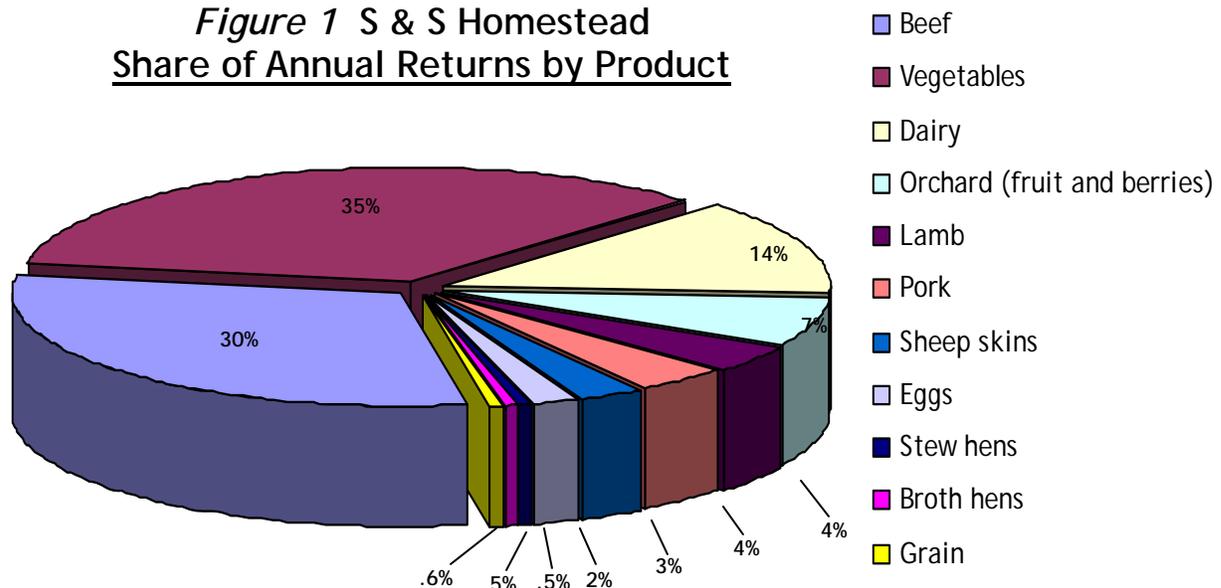
When customers began to notice the sheep, chickens, pigs and Simmental cattle Sehmsdorf was raising for the family, they naturally began to inquire about adding meat to their orders. "People would come to the farm, they'd see the animals, and somehow we would talk about meat and they would say, 'Oh, I want some of that,'" says Sehmsdorf.

Even though there was now a market for their meat, the logistics of filling that demand were problematic. When feeding the family, Sehmsdorf would do the butchering himself, and it could take him hours to butcher their yearly steer. Processing enough meat to satisfy his customers required a different approach.

He spearheaded a project at the local land trust to establish a USDA certified mobile slaughter unit on the island and surrounding areas, now run by the Island Grown Farmers' Co-op, which also manages a processing facility near Bellingham where the meat is packaged. The unit now processes \$400,000 worth

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**Figure 1 S & S Homestead
Share of Annual Returns by Product**





Sheep graze marginal areas not suitable for haying

of product yearly, including Sehmsdorf's animals.

In 2004, Sehmsdorf had the mobile processing unit slaughter 7 head of cattle, at a cost of \$35 a head to kill. He explains, "The way I do it is that I sell the meat at \$2 per pound to my customers, and then the customer pays for the processing. Because it's really custom slaughter, so they're buying the animal but what they pay is determined by the hanging weight. And the average is 750 lbs hanging weight."

Growing all his own feeds, managing the livestock biodynamically and selling the animals directly give Sehmsdorf an economic advantage over traditional feedlot operations. Per cow, yearly expenses total \$25, and only because he must hire a neighbor to bale hay. Sehmsdorf says, "That's my total out of pocket expense. Everything else is provided by the farm, right? 'Course, it involves my labor, not included, but \$25, per cow. And each animal will net me \$1500. So that's over \$10,000 that I get for these animals. Now no one can tell me that's not good economics!"

The Whole Farm as a Marketable Product

S&S Homestead's distinctive, well-ordered brand of self-sufficiency naturally draws curiosity. "I tell you, it's a steady stream of people coming here. And I know what this says: that they are hungry. They are culturally, physically, and spiritually hungry for a better life," Sehmsdorf reflects. An important tenet of the farm's philosophy involves education and outreach. Sehmsdorf is the first to admit, "We consider ourselves an education farm, not a profit based production farm." Through an internship program, on and off-farm education and grant funded research projects, Sehmsdorf is able to satisfy those who desire to learn from his experience. These programs earn their keep, by bringing in tangible in-

come or valuable research and information. Education is the cornerstone of the farm, and the area in which Sehmsdorf would most like to direct more of the farm's resources and energy in the future.

Intern Program

Over the past ten years, S&S Homestead has been host to two dozen interns and apprentices from around the globe through their registered non-profit organization, *S&S Center for Sustainable Agriculture*. Potential students find the program through the internet or cooperating universities. Internships are available for three to six months, and apprenticeships can last up to two years. Interns pay \$400 a month room and board, live in quality accommodations and are well fed by farm products. Although Henning states, "We're

not making any money off the interns, I mean, they don't increase our production that much...but the contribution that interns make is that they leave behind substantial collections of data. So that's the real return, I would say."

Intern reports have provided the farm with valuable studies on everything from soil nutrients and livestock production to water systems, resource management and pasture health. Interns can bring opportunities for new enterprises as well by contributing their fresh ideas, labor and energy to any number of projects.

Educational Outreach

Educational outreach occurs on and off-farm. On farm, an intern has spearheaded a program in horticultural therapy, providing special needs children with alternative education opportunities. The goal for the program is to access educational funding and become a self-supporting permanent program (See Figure 2.)

Another program involves growing produce for local schools through a farm-to-school project. The unique element of this program is the involvement of students.

"The kids come out here and help me grow the stuff, and then the product goes to the school cafeteria, where the students wash and prep the greens for the salad bar," Sehmsdorf explains. "And I teach a class, a high school class called Ecological Food Production, where the kids do the growing and they keep track of field data, growth rates and any disease." This year, for the first time, the class is supported by a SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) grant worth \$7,500 to build a deer fence, a hoop house for winter vegetables, and pay partial support for an intern as well as for a technical advisor, Dr. Carol Miles, a WSU plant systems specialist who, together with the students, carried out heirloom bean trials on the farm. A high school senior, Tasha Wilson, is

Table 2
S & S Homestead Fixed costs

Machinery	
Sickle bar mower	\$1,622.00
John Deere tractor	\$6,000.00
Computer	\$500.00
Used mower	\$475.00
Hay trailer	\$400.00
Truck	\$2,250.00
Brush mower	\$1,695.00
Hay rake	\$1,250.00
<u>Total</u>	<u>\$14,192.00</u>
<u>Annual cost</u>	<u>\$2,128.80</u>
Fencing	
Fencing fixed	\$6,345.00
Fencing, portable	\$692.00
<u>Total</u>	<u>\$7,037.00</u>
<u>Annual cost</u>	<u>\$1,055.55</u>
Buildings	
Feed room	\$1,218.00
Pole Barn	\$6,425.00
Barn (56' x 24') & cutting room	\$13,500.00
Greenhouse	\$3,116.00
Pole Barn retrofit Loft	\$7,839.00
<u>Total</u>	<u>\$32,098.00</u>
<u>Annual cost</u>	<u>\$4,814.70</u>
Water System	
Water Recycling System (42)	\$690.00
Pump and Tank (25)	\$200.00
<u>Total</u>	<u>\$890.00</u>
<u>Annual cost</u>	<u>\$133.50</u>
<u>Total fixed costs</u>	<u>\$8,132.55</u>

Table 3
Variable Costs By Management Area

<u>Item</u>	<u>Amount</u>
Cattle	
Mowing after cows (fuel)	\$128.00
Processing (hire)	\$1,048.00
Pork	
Weaner pigs	\$165.00
Feed (soy meal)	\$24.00
Slaughter fee	\$75.00
Grain	
Field prep (tiller rent)	\$90.00
Harvest (hire)	\$100.00
Garden	
Soil amendments	\$50.00
Supplies (misc.)	\$200.00
Seeds	\$150.00
Eggs	
Chicks	\$30.00
Greenhouse	
Supplies (misc.)	\$200.00
Lamb	
Slaughter fee	\$100.00
Tanning fee, skins	\$112.00
Shipping	\$25.00
Hay	
Cutting (fuel)	\$32.00
Raking (fuel)	\$32.00
Baling (hire)	\$360.00
Harvest (fuel)	\$58.00
Misc. Farm Expenses	
Insurance	\$400.00
Supplies	\$2,000.00
Taxes	\$1,000.00
Utilities	\$980.00
Accounting	\$340.00
Advertisements	\$15.00
<u>Total variable costs</u>	<u>\$7,714.00</u>



Every biodynamic farm has to have a dairy cow to provide milk, meat and life-giving manure.

using the trial data as the basis of her senior project required for graduation. Sehmsdorf hopes that the success of this project will lead to a permanent school curriculum in environmental and nutritional health.

Henning Sehmsdorf has only recently realized the profitability of sharing his expertise with an audience. He had sought money for educational outreach in the past, but when the King County Small Farm Expo invited him to give a presentation on the economics of homestead food self-sufficiency, he said, "You know, I've always done this pro-bono, but do you have a fee structure? And they say, we'll pay you \$250 plus expenses...and they're going to pay me! I'm amazed, but hey, I never asked before, and they do have funds for this." In three weeks, Sehmsdorf made \$1000 in fees speaking at various small farm workshops in the area.

Grant Funded Research

Sehmsdorf is always looking for new ways to collaborate with academics, to explore current research, and to find funding. He and Elizabeth are open and articulate when it comes to describing their farm and aspirations, and have successfully pursued grant monies to fund various farm projects.

In 2001-2002, S&S Homestead received a \$2000 grant from SARE to demonstrate the feasibility of low-tech and low-cost barley production in a 2-acre field where the cattle winter, to prevent groundwater pollution from nutrient run-off, while at the same time strengthening farm self-sufficiency in animal feeds.

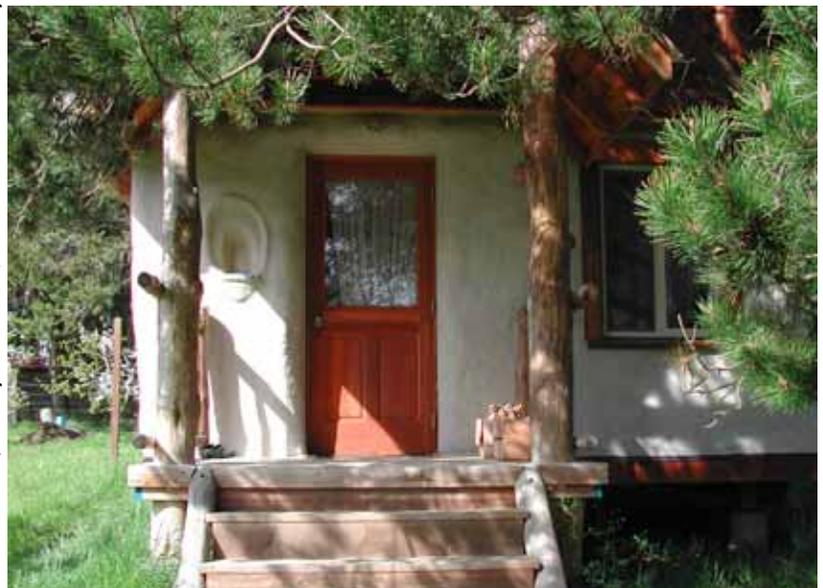
With seeds provided by Kevin Murphy, a graduate student of Washington State University wheat

breeder Steven Jones, S&S Homestead is currently experimenting with growing and preserving the valuable genetics of heirloom wheat while growing enough grain to satisfy the food needs of the farm household.

In 2004-2005, a third SARE grant (\$7,500) is supporting replicated field trials comparing farm-produced biodynamic soil stimulants with lime applications to balance soil pH, increase available N, P, K, micronutrients and soil organic matter in small-scale forage and hay production.

The same year Sehmsdorf received a \$6,000 grant in cost-share funds from NRCS (National Conservation and Resource Service) to research and develop a solar-powered irrigation system that collects rain water off the barn roofs, stores the water in a 750,000 gallon pond from where it is returned to irrigate the orchard and vegetable production sites during the typical summer drought, thus minimizing demand on limited groundwater resources, while at the same time benefiting plant health through irrigation with soft rainwater instead of hard groundwater. The grant also includes funds to build covered composting sites, protect pond water from fecal pollution by the cattle, and plant shelterbelts to prevent soil erosion.

While these grants are typically small, they benefit both the production side of the farm and its educational outreach programs by focusing energy on finding solutions to specific problems and by bringing research expertise from the land grant university to the farm. During the last few years S&S Homestead has benefited enormously from collaboration with university and extension agents and researchers bringing their know-how in engineering, soil science, microbiology, plant and forage systems, and agricultural economics. It has also been possible to write modest support for interns into these grants, so that students pursuing graduate degrees in various fields have opportunities to integrate their research interests with on-farm training. This year, the farm is hosting three interns pursuing advanced degrees in soil science, nutritional science and agricultural economics.



Intern house built from farm timber, straw, clay, sand and cow manure

Henning Sehmsdorf's Advice to New Farmers

On Producing Locally

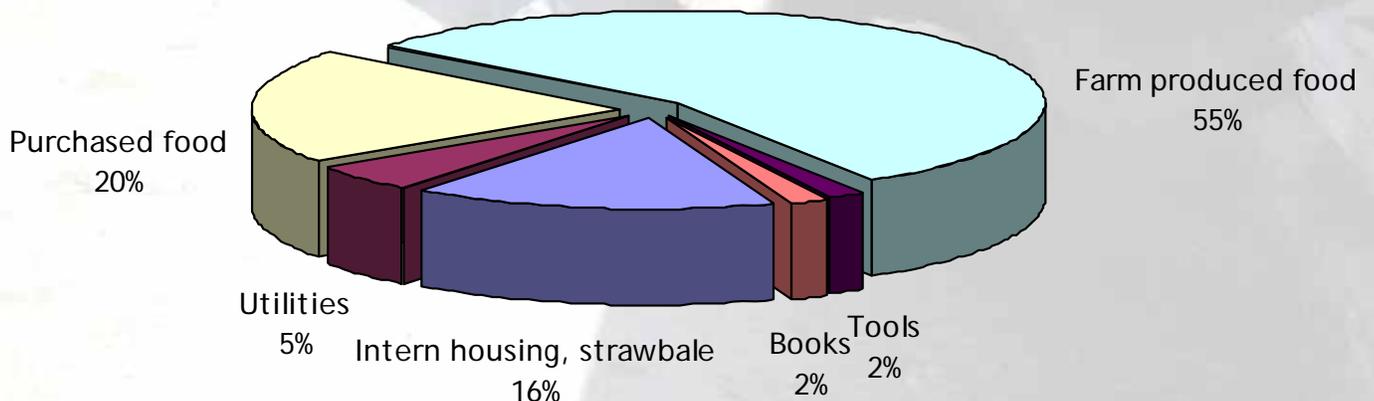
"Think local is my advice. I know that there's a lot of other advice out there, like 'sell through the internet,' or that there are a lot of niche markets lined up. They're all real and important, and I'm not denigrating that. I say think local because I think that if we are going to improve food available to the average person we need to have more people who grow locally for local populations."

On Financing the Small Farm Dream

"Most interns don't want to hear about economics. They just want to know 'What's the magic bullet? How do I make lots of money?' but they don't want to know about economics, really. But let's think about this again. Why is it that you think you can start from scratch with no money and go to the bank and take out a

mortgage and then grow enough strawberries to pay for that mortgage and do it in a sustainable way? At first, keep your job, save your pennies, make your down payment, earn some equity, and then you make the switch. I don't know a single farmer on this island who has built his land base and infrastructure without outside income, another job, an inheritance or investment. I wonder whether I could have paid for what I have here through my CSA or through my milk production or through meat production alone. I don't think I could have. What I did instead was to keep my job and grow food here I wanted for myself and my family. And in the process I developed the infrastructure and when the time was right I made the transition and now this is supporting us entirely."

Figure 2
Education Costs By Percentage



S&S Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Homestead Farm has applied for further funds from SARE to help support the planned transition to an institutionalized teaching farm.

Effects of Marketing Strategies on Production Methods

Production at S&S Homestead is governed primarily by the farm philosophy, involving all the systems as a whole. Quality products are produced through the excellent soil fertility, animal health and year round vegetable production, ensuring the best products for the farm and its customers.

Soil Fertility

Soil fertility is the basis of the healthy systems at S&S Homestead. Feeding the soil organisms feeds the pastures, the fields and the gardens, and in turn the animals and humans who are also part of the system. Perpetual fertility means that Sehmsdorf continues to market excellent products to his customers, as well. Over ten tons of compost produced on the farm each year utilizes garden and kitchen waste and animal manures. The compost is inoculated with a series of biodynamic preparations, intended to enhance the metabolic processes in fermenting the compost forming bacteria. Sehmsdorf explains:

“If you nourish the microorganisms in the soil, through these methods, according to biodynamic thinking, they’re supposed to be able to supply everything needed. So, whether that is entirely true, I don’t know, but we’ve been doing it for thirty-four years and we do not see any deficiencies nor do we see any disease. And the productivity is really good, both in terms of vegetables and fruit and animal protein.”

Vegetable Production

The climate on Lopez Island is temperate, with the average last frost date falling around April 15. However, in order to provide CSA customers with year round produce, season extension techniques are used. A greenhouse and hoop house keep tender plants protected and producing, while cold frames and row covers warm field crops. Several crops are grown which can be continually harvested throughout the winter season, such as kale and salad greens under cover. Increasingly, the farm is seeking sustainable, socially responsible sources for biodynamic vegetable and grain seed. The farm grows all its own seedlings in the greenhouse, potted in compost. This saves money and ensures that outside disease is not introduced to the system. Rainwater nourishes the



Garden soils are double-dug and enriched with composts and biodynamic preparations

plants, further reducing costs. Because of the direct way Sehmsdorf’s produce is sold, on-farm, there are no transportation costs and the products are sold at their fresh-picked best.

Livestock Management

The high quality of Sehmsdorf’s livestock is due to selective crossbreeding and sustainable practices. The cattle and sheep are entirely grass fed, either by pasture during warmer months and homegrown hay in the winter. Two acres per cow is allotted. A rotational grazing system ensures that the animals continually have access to fresh grass and the areas left behind are naturally fertilized. Moving the sheep regularly to fresh pasture also eliminates internal parasites. Sehmsdorf’s theory as to why his animals are so healthy stems from the concept of the biodynamic system: “I believe we’ve actually developed place-specific immunities, because the animals eat the plant matter that is produced from the farm composts and manures, and so it goes around and around, and so our animals are healthy without ever being inoculated and we have zero vet bills. I think that’s a good record.”

Because he produces his own inputs, Sehmsdorf can charge less for superior products, a fact his customers enjoy. And by direct marketing his beef, lamb, pork, poultry and eggs, customers visiting the farm can see what they’re getting: fresh, healthy food that is produced sustainably.

“We’re very concerned about selling, not at the high end premium rate, but at a rate that people can pay, and we also make allowances for people who have no money.”



Personal Goals, Philosophy and the Future of the Farm

Sehmsdorf and Simpson seem to be well on their way to fulfilling their fifty-year plan. They have established a market for their products on their terms, and feel confident that they are providing their neighbors with the best possible product. Occasional challenges arise, which Sehmsdorf approaches with introspection and a sense of humor.

“People have said to us, ‘We buy your food because it’s cheap.’ Which, to us, is the wrong motivation. We want them to buy our food because it’s better for them, and because it supports the local economy and the physical and social environment we all live in, but, you know, people are funny!”

However, affordability remains an important aspect of his philosophy.

“We’re very concerned about selling, not at the high end premium rate, but at a rate that people can pay, and we also make allowances for people who have no money. We take payment on a sliding scale. And we give long-term credit. And people are remarkably loyal about that. And because we’re making a good return, why make more? Everyone benefits from that.”

The current channels of marketing are working so well, Sehmsdorf must evaluate the possibility of expansion. “So, if you ask me, do I have any ideas for new expanding markets, yes, but only if we go to the next step.” The next step would be the dream Sehmsdorf has for S&S Homestead.

“I want to turn this into an institution that is linked to WSU’s small farms program, to the island school, and to the whole community through our local land trust.”

Twenty-five of their leased acres are part of a larger 125-acre property owned by a neighbor. Sehmsdorf dreams of acquiring the entire acreage for community-based education and food production. However, land prices on the island now fetch between ten and twenty thousand dollars an acre.

“I would love it...if someone with deep pockets could buy the land, the Lopez Community Land Trust could hold it in trust, and it could really become a major training site and educational site, right here. You know, I see all kinds of possibilities.”

Henning Sehmsdorf inherited his optimism and hope from his mother, whom he deeply admired. He keeps a woodcut she carved and gave to him the day after the Dresden bombings.

“It’s a quote by Martin Luther which says, ‘And if tomorrow the world were to perish I would still plant my little apple tree today.’ And it shows a man with a boy and they are planting a tree under birds flying. This has become my life’s inspiration. I mean, you might say in a way I’m doing what I’m doing because of that.”



Northwest Direct is a four-year research project involving the five partners listed below. Our goal is to increase profitability of small farms in the Pacific Northwest through research and extension. We have documented locally based food systems, developed case studies of direct marketing farmers, fostered expansion of farmers markets, and addressed regulatory and infrastructure barriers to direct sales. Northwest Direct is coordinated by Washington State University's Small Farms Program. More information is available at www.nwdirect.wsu.edu.



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On-Farm Interview Assistants:

Linda Brewer, Oregon State University
Richard Carkner, Washington State University

Case Study Transcribers:

Karen Faunce
Maia Lassen-Purser
Eileen McGovern
John Potter
Ariel Spaeth Agenbroad

Case Study Reviewers:

Hilario Alvarez	David Hedlin
Sam Asai	Herb Hinman
Judy Bennett	Larry Lev
Wade Bennett	Robert Plamondon
Karen Black	Thom Sadoski
Linda Brewer	Thomas Schotzko
Janie Burns	Henning Sehmsdorf
Serena Campbell	Aaron Silverman
Jim Fields	Elizabeth Simpson
Diane Green	Lori Steele
Mike Heath	Garry Stephenson
Maria Heath	Stan Urmann

Case Study Layout Designer:

Ariel Spaeth Agenbroad

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The Northwest Direct Farmer Case Study Series:

Idaho:

Measuring Success on the Urban Fringe:
Meadowlark Farm #01

Profitability through Diversification:
Greentree Naturals Farm #02

Growing Profits at Home:
Riley Creek Blueberry Farm #03

Mid-Size Producer, Capturing Local Value: M&M Heath
Farms #04:

Oregon:

Marketing Quality on Creative Growers Farm #05

Life in the Slow Lane:
Raising Pastured Poultry on Norton Creek Farm #06

Ideal-Driven Farming in Oregon's High Desert:
Fields Farm #07

High Expectations: Transitioning to Direct Markets at
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Sembrando Semillas para un Futuro Mejor: #12
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Rural Roots, Inc.
PO Box 8925
Moscow, ID 83843
208-883-3462

www.ruralroots.org

