



Bobbi Boos and John Perry.

In Harmony with NATURE

John Perry and Bobbi Boos have big plans for their small farm



BY SHAWNDRRA MILLER
PHOTOS BY JOSH MARSHALL

John Perry digs a shovel into the side of an enormous compost heap. “If you get on toward the middle it gets really hot,” he says. He rests his hand in the hole, watching pale curls of steam drift up — even on a humid September afternoon. This particular pile at Owen County’s Sundry Farm is in a late stage of decomposition. It’s one of three piles occupying a wide circle on this hilltop land Perry farms with his partner, Bobbi Boos.

“Compost is key to organic gardening,” he says, leaning on the shovel.

Boos, clad in Wellington boots and Local Growers Guild shirt, chimes in. “We knew we had to do something drastic to get the clay up to speed if we were going to grow in it.”

When the couple began farming this ground two years ago, they quickly discovered that compost was the limiting factor. Eliot Coleman’s organic gardening handbook, “The Four-Season Harvest,” taught them that in order to farm the way they wanted to, they needed 40 tons of compost per acre.

“That’s his general guideline,” says Perry. “His belief is that if you get the microbes, you get the soil going, then you’re able to do away with pests, and disease goes down. And it’s true.”

He moves from the nearly finished pile to the finished. He holds a handful of the fine black compost under his nose. “Smell it. It smells like a leafy forest,” he says.

Perry composts spent brewery grains, picking up 2,000 pounds from Bloomington Brewing Co. each week. He mixes this with horse manure from a local stable and turns the piles using a small loader to make sure they reach 160 degrees. That temperature kills weed seeds and sterilizes the material so no pathogens remain. What does remain is a rich amendment that feeds their clay soil, so it in turn can feed their customers.

“Soil farming first” is how he and Boos put it: Their small organic farm and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) depend on this process.

Sundry Farm is only 2 years old, but the couple have a clear vision for its future. While Perry is new to agriculture, Boos is a seasoned farmer. She has about 15 years of farming under her belt, having worked for two other agricultural enterprises. But the

route she took to farming was a bit circuitous.

“I did not grow up with healthy food,” she says, “and I was not a healthy child.” At the age of 19, she took a job at Bloomington’s food co-op, BloomingFoods, and she encountered the power of nutritious food. Selling natural and organic goods led to buying them. As she ate healthier meals, she realized how much better she felt, and this galvanized a passion for sharing good food with others.

Eventually she took that passion straight to the source — moving from indoor sales to outdoor growing. She found that she had an aptitude for farming. “I realized I could do it,” she says. “I couldn’t keep a houseplant alive, you know. And I learned, working with experienced farmers.”

When she moved to the 3-acre parcel just down the hill from where she and Perry farm now, she kept a few goats and chickens. She began gardening small-scale, with no plans to expand. She didn’t know then that big changes were in store.

“John and I started growing food down there,” she says, “but it wasn’t enough to make a living.” Then, after five years with Monroe County’s LIFE Farm, working for Jeff Evard, she found herself in the midst of an unexpected transition. Evard shifted his focus to consulting while marketing seeds and wholesale crops. But just as her farm job was ending, in a happy coincidence of timing, a for sale sign showed up on the property above her on the hill.

Now the couple grow vegetables in roughly 1 acre of beds and greenhouse space at the end of a steep lane. Their 11-acre land encompasses woods, a pond and her former digs. Sundry Farm opened in 2013, selling produce through 14 summer CSA subscriptions and at the Bloomington Farmers Market. Last winter, seven CSA members continued receiving greens, carrots, storage crops, maple syrup and other products throughout the cold months.

This summer Boos and Perry provided produce, eggs and canned goods to 16 CSA members, and they have tentative plans to continue the winter subscription option. Their goal is to expand up to 20 members, meanwhile continuing to sell surplus at the Bloomington Farmers Market.

They also “wildcraft,” harvesting persimmons and pawpaws from the woods behind the house, picking sumac berries from numerous trees and tapping maples to make their own syrup. Perry started a



mushroom bed at the edge of the woods, raising winecap mushrooms for the CSA.

In addition to blanketing their plots with compost, they strive to care for the land with other strategies. They leave strips unplanted to invite pollinators and shelter wildlife. (“Some of our weeds are intentional,” jokes Boos. “Not all of them. I don’t mean the ragweed in the squash.”) They don’t plant concentrations of any one type of food, and they take care to rotate crops.

Evard, Boos’ former employer, has watched the developments with pride and says their hard work is paying off. For one thing, the amount of time they invest in soil fertility increases the nutrient density of their produce. “It’s very high-quality food,” he says. “They are doing an incredible job of healing the land up there.”

The partnership works well because of their complementary skills. “We both have these similar passions for what we want to get done,” says Boos, “but we have a pretty different skill set to provide to make it work.” While both work the fields, they each focus on other realms: She keeps the books and stays on top of organization and planning, and he deals with mechanical issues. (Their 1986 tractor recently lost a cylinder, and repairing it falls to him.)

She also has an off-farm job that keeps her hands in the soil. As garden and gleaner coordinator for Hoosier Hills Food



Bank, she leads volunteers in growing and harvesting food for the hungry.

In the “gleaning” part of the job, she takes small groups of volunteers to Harriman Farms, north of Spencer. Proprietor William Harriman gives all surplus to the food bank. The gleanings amount to over 1,500 pounds of food for the hungry each week. In the “garden” part of the job, she manages the volunteer crew growing organic veggies in the Monroe County Parks Department’s community garden.

The work fulfills her mission to share healthy food with others, and it also feeds her gregarious nature.

“It’s all a fit,” Perry tells Boos, referring to the various roles she plays. “You’re a facilitator in so many ways. I mean, yes, you’re a farmer, but I feel like your real passion is facilitating between the people who need food, like ‘good food for all.’”

“That’s true,” Boos responds. “I like food; I know how to farm, right — and I

want as many people to experience that good food feeling as possible.”

Her many responsibilities add up to a satisfying life and a tight schedule. On this particular day, she and Perry were up at first light to harvest for the CSA. They’ve packed the boxes in a shaded shelter made from two salvaged billboards, which are being used as tarps. After a midday farm tour, Boos will load the shares into her Jeep and take them to delivery sites, then head to the food bank for her job. She won’t drive back up the lane until 9 p.m.

Other days find her serving as president of the Local Growers Guild, a cooperative she helped found. The volunteer position means several meetings a month and ample opportunity to network with other small farmers. “There are so many (small farmers) in this area,” she says. “And then because there are so many, we get to work with each other, and it builds off each other.”

Through sharing “ideas, stresses, solu-

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Spinach Tye planted for winter that will be protected by row cover. Purple Viking potatoes. John Perry determines what stage the compost is in by smell. Perry opens a tobacco seed pod.

tions and plans," Boos says, Sundry Farm's newest endeavor started to take shape. It centers on those grain-and-manure piles: They've crafted a business plan to make compost and seed starting mix for area farmers.

So what started as part of an overall strategy to take excellent care of the land may end up helping other farmers do the same.

Maggie Sullivan, former Local Growers Guild director, who first met Boos a decade ago, says their commitment to earth-friendly practices is a big reason why she chose Sundry Farm's CSA. "I definitely made a conscious choice to subscribe to her CSA because I wanted to support her vision," she says. "This is something she talked a little about when we first met — being able to provide food for a certain number of families around town and being able to react to their needs."

Through the weekly produce allotment she shares with her mother, Sullivan discovered a previously unknown affinity for beets. The self-described "beet addict" says she appreciates the intentionality behind Boos and Perry's small scale.

"They just love working with the land, and they're very focused on sustainable growing," she says. "They don't have to bring in too many off-farm inputs, whether that's fertilizers or whether that's labor. And at the same time they're improving the land where they are. ... You could argue that their farming is making it



LEFT: Banana peppers. RIGHT: Bobbi Boos.



a better place, environmentally."

Though Sundry Farm's target number is 20 CSA members, the farm will grow in other ways after it hits that number. Adding more livestock is high on the priority list. First they'll increase their chickens from their flock of 30. Then they might add dairy goats or a small Dexter cow. "I'm still leaning toward goats because they're my size," the small-boned Boos says, laughing. "I can handle a goat."

And then there's the possibility of raising feeder pigs. Unless that notion gets derailed by Boos' wish to bond long term with her livestock. "My personality is that I'd like to have the sow," she says. "I want the pet. I'd like to have the sow and sell the feeder pigs. But that's not really the place to start, since neither of us have raised pigs."

Further down the road, they may construct a commercial-grade kitchen, capitalizing on Perry's HVAC and kitchen repair experience. "That's the 10-year plan," he says with a laugh. "We're two years in with big ideas."

In late fall and winter, Boos' food bank work will be finished for the season. But on the farm, the work continues year-round as the couple manage a four-season farm model. They'll use a combination of protective structures: a high tunnel greenhouse, hoop houses and low tunnels to grow food. And even as the growing season slows way down, by February they

will be well into their maple syrup days.

They tap 20 trees near the house, with plenty of expansion potential. Their yield was about 6 gallons last year, and their CSA customers were happy to have small jars of it in their shares.

And nearly everything the couple have offered has met with enthusiastic response at market. People happily sample (and buy) unusual items like sumac berries, which they sell to make a lemonade-tasting tea. "We're fortunate that the Bloomington community is well-educated about food," Boos says.

They've even had customers inquire about home-grown cigars. Perry grows tobacco as a natural pesticide and occasionally enjoys a cigar from the dried leaves.

Just now, out near the plot where tobacco grows high, Perry pauses on hearing a liquid-like trill. "The tree frog moved!" he says to Boos with boyish excitement. "Hear him?"

"He's out here now?" Boos responds, and listens for the note to repeat. They first spotted the tree frog in an old play set's "tower" next to the packing structure.

They've begun to notice more wildlife. "Since we've been growing like we have," Perry says, "we've got toads this big around." He holds his hands wide. Box turtles mosey around the compost; a bullfrog lives in the greenhouse. Rabbits and deer take their portion of the harvest



from time to time. A great blue heron comes to visit the pond. And on the insect front, they see praying mantis babies and beneficial wasps galore.

Watching living things thrive like this is clearly a thrill for the couple. It tells them they're working in harmony with nature, making their never-ending to-do list completely worth the trouble. *FI

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