



Sweet Meriam's Farm welcomes interns Joel Pitney of Oregon, Nell Hanssen (back left) and Kristen help turn under a cover crop and turn up the soil to dry before rototilling. The stone house on the Markley farm was built by Kristen Markley's great-great-grandparents, Phillip and Rachel Markley. Kristen is the sixth generation to farm the land.



Hannah Markley enjoys an organic tomato grown by her Aunt Kristen Markley.

Sweet Meriam's Farm Nourishes Soil And People

GAIL STROCK
Mifflin Co. Correspondent

BEAVER SPRINGS (Snyder Co.) – It's all about sustainability – the desire to sustain, to nourish.

For Kristen Markley and Nell Hanssen of Sweet Meriam's Farm in Beaver Springs, it's all about nourishing the soil, nour-

ishing people with the freshest of vegetables, and nourishing the soul through a healthy lifestyle.

Markley and Hanssen operates Sweet Meriam's Farm, a community-supported agricultural farm (CSA) that supplies fresh organic vegetables and herbs to members from June through October. Members join

by buying a share in the vegetable operation and then receive more than \$18 worth of fresh produce each week for 22 weeks. The share fees coming in from many members at the beginning of the season helps CSA farmers cover production costs and assures them of a market.

For Markley, co-owner of the vegetable operation, it's a very meaningful way to keep her family's 130-acre farm in agriculture for the sixth generation.

"My grandfather grew grains for Walnut Acres (an organic health food store and farm in Penns Creek). My grandmother Meriam Markley was very committed to organic farming," explains Markley. "In fact, I've named the vegetable operation after her. Her strong spirit, loving heart, and passion for organic farming still inspires me. This farm means a lot to me. It feels good to till the soil my ancestors tilled."

Markley concentrates on building healthy soil through cover crops, composting, and

crop rotation. Although she and those she works with prefer working with their hands in quiet farm surroundings, they do use a rototiller and Markley's grandfather's old Allis Chalmers tractor. They also irrigate from the nearby pond during droughts.

Markley has sold organic vegetables at local farmers markets and restaurants for the past 10 years. This year, she's expanding into the CSA enterprise. To do this, she advertised over the Internet for someone experienced with CSAs. Nell Hanssen, a Connecticut native who ran a CSA in Maryland, then joined Markley as co-owner of the vegetable operation.

"CSAs offer an alternative to the conventional food system that creates a gap between where food is grown and put on the table," explains Hanssen. "Farming this way closes that gap. It lets the consumer know how their food is produced."

Markley and Hanssen encourage members to come and see how their food is grown. They want members to visit the farm, help in the garden and on harvest days, and explore the woods and enjoy nature.

"People have gotten disconnected from where their food comes from. I want to connect the community back to the farm," said Markley, who has worked in the Rodale gardens and currently works for the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA).

"I want members to see that we offer varieties of produce not offered in the store. The produce in stores is bred for shelf life and often lacks the flavor and nutrition that's in home-grown varieties," Hanssen said.

Markley and Hanssen grow more than 40 kinds of vegetables and herbs on five acres of the farm. The rest of the pasture and fields are rented to a tenant farmer for his heifers. Markley's experience selling vegetables at farmer's markets has taught her that people are willing to try a new variety of vegetables if they're taught how to prepare it.

Hanssen says none of the varieties offered are unusual to her or Markley, but patty-pan squash and edible flowers might make some customers pause.

Customers are usually open to a new kind of eggplant, but

(Turn to Page B3)



Nell Hanssen of Connecticut came to Sweet Meriam's Farm in January to add her expertise with CSAs or community-supported agriculture. Seedlings are started in the farmhouse in February, then moved to the greenhouse.



Kristen Markley (left) and Nell Hanssen tend to early season seedlings in their greenhouse. They're thinning swiss chard, kale, lettuce, leeks, and cabbage.