

Farming In A Harsh Environment

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UNION, Me. — Farming anywhere can be tough but the seacoast of Maine with its harsh winters, short growing season, and not the best soil produces a challenge to the best of agriculture experts.

The challenges have caused many Maine farmers to unite in order to discover ways to provide a better living while still doing what they love, producing food from the farm.

Such is the case with Mark Hedrich and Linda Rose, owners of Agricola Farms, located in Union, overlooking picturesque mountains and ponds and bordering on the St. George Rive. Agricola Farms is not far from the scenic rocky seacoast of downeast Maine.

Decades ago, a dairy farm and John Deere dealership was located where Agricola now stands. Today it is 117 acres of mostly fields, some woods, a farmstand, two 96-foot greenhouses, and three other equipment storage/maintenance or livestock shelter buildings.

Surrounded by blueberry fields, the farmstand is a natural place to sell mouth-watering blueberry products. The blueberry jams, chutney, syrups, and ice cream toppings are made by local farm women.

"We sell hay to some of these farms and, in turn, we sell their products at our stand," Linda explains.

The farmstand is a fun shop with locally made jewelry, notecards, pet items, small toys, wooden crafts, locally made cheese, and some sheepskin items. Linda and Mark also sell their own homegrown flowers, produce and lamb.

Approximately 60 acres of Agricola are hay. More than nine

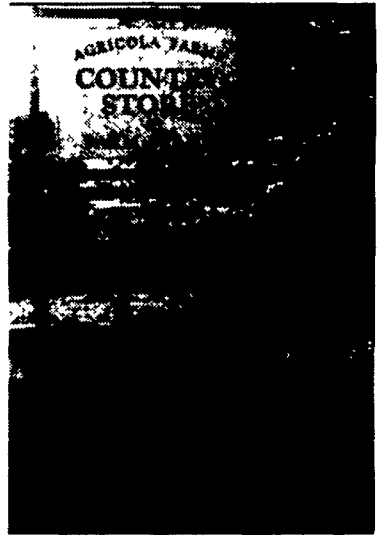
acres are in vegetables, many of which are heirloom and specialty varieties.

Sheep are raised for freezer lamb, wool, and breeding stock. The Roses also have a couple of cashmere goats, and for conversation, a miniature donkey and several miniature horses.

"We use intensive rotational grazing pasture management systems," Mark says. The greenhouses are used to grow the vegetables and flowers and vegetable seedlings, and flower planters and baskets.

More than 200 varieties of vegetables are grown in the fields and raised beds, using floating row covers and tunnels on some crops such as the melons.

The major crops are tomatoes,



cukes, peppers, corn, melons, squash and pumpkins. They also grow beans, onions, garlic, peas, lettuces, eggplant, greens, beets, broccoli, cauliflowers, cabbage, and herbs.

Local farmers have united to form two farmers markets. One is located in the seacoast town of Rockland, lobster capitol of the world. The other is in picturesque Camden.

A community-sustained agriculture program added in 1998 has proven successful in strengthening farm diversity while increasing community involvement. Forty families are shareholders.

Mark explains, "We have participated in the Senior Farm Share Program since its first year in 2001 which benefits local elders as well as many small regional farms."

Agricola Farms holds four additional events per year, including Open Farm Day which is hosted with the Medomak Valley High School Heirloom Seed Project.

To supplement the farming income, Mark and Linda are the local Gallagher Power Fence dealers and offer a large inventory of livestock fence.

Their farmstand is open from May through December. Linda makes wreaths from the local pine trees and has been successful at selling these over the Internet.

As members of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, Mark and Linda said that while California could probably produce all of the milk the country needs, they think that cows dotting the rolling hillsides of Maine are an asset. "Besides we need the cows' fertilizer for the farms and gardens," Linda said.

Mark and Linda point out that wildlife benefits from farmland more than from sprawl.

Other Maine farms in the Knox County area involved in the co-op projects raise sheep, train and raise dogs, produce maple syrup, raise herbs, rabbits, goats, berries and produce honey. They raise chickens, freezer beef, and anything the land allows.

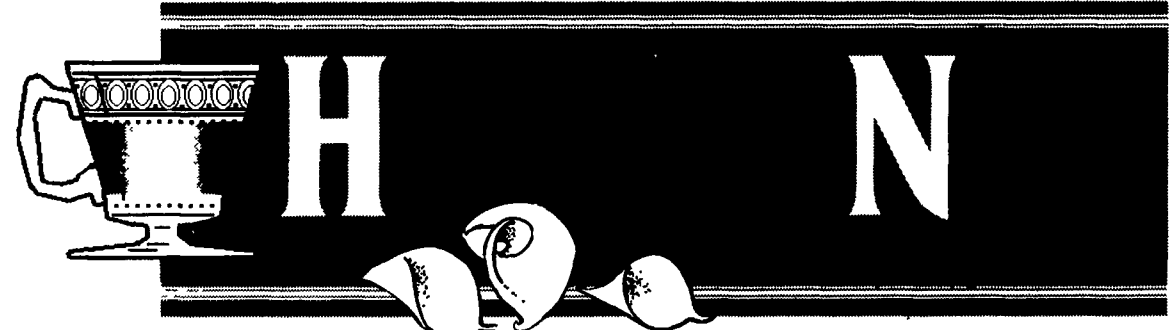
Diversification, they all believe, is the key to surviving on a Maine farm.



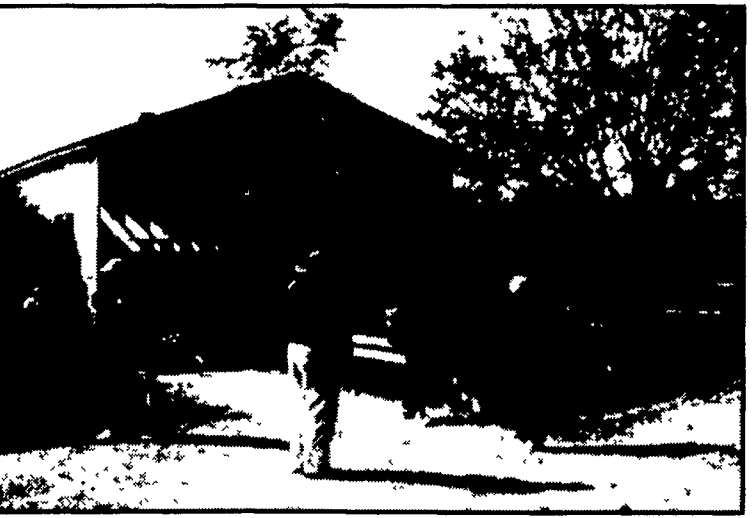
Linda and Mark on Agricola Farms battle with harsh winters, a short growing season, and poor soil, but have discovered diversification makes farming profitable in Maine.



Bright purple elderberries are grown and sold on Agricola Farms.



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A busload of customers visits the farmstand.



Miniature animals attract farm visitors.