

Slavic Heritage Farm Rugby, ND



Can an abandoned farmstead in rural North Dakota be converted into a productive farm operation? That is exactly what Julia and Mirek Petrovic are trying to find out. Originally from Russia and the Czech Republic, the couple spent a year traveling the county in their Airstream, interning on organic farms from Pennsylvania to Washington State. Through their travels, they happened across an old farm site, 25 miles south of Rugby, ND. Equipped with heritage seeds, organic principles, and a strong work ethic, they began restoring the uninhabitable 12-acres into a home and small farm enterprise. With no local industry data available for analysis, they took a leap of faith and began their business in 2011 growing organic vegetables and selling them at farmer's markets and directly off the farm. Julia added to their marketing mix with value-added baked goods, breads, and Slavic specialties. They soon learned that their small town local markets could not guarantee enough steady income to fully support their enterprise. Like many other high risk start-ups, they had to reassess the situation, given some first-hand market knowledge, and devise an improved plan for the future.

In 2013, with funds from a ND Specialty Crop grant, they planted over 5,000 berry canes, plants, and bushes to explore the world of agri-tourism and farming. Once the fruit comes into production, they plan to open a U-pick berry patch and develop a value-added line of goods.

For the vegetable production side of their operation, they began developing a relationship with the Bisman Coop. Bisman is a consumer-established cooperative grocery store in Bismarck. Due to high demand, the store needed more local specialty crop producers to supply organic produce. The Petrovics wanted to help serve this niche, but Bismarck was too long distance to

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justify the elevated cost of transportation. They entered into a discussion with other small farmers and determined that, if they could pool their products to create enough economy of scale, it may become profitable enough to capture some of the Bismarck market. To make that happen logistically, they would need a central cold storage/warehouse location for packing, processing, and shipping the combined products. With the help of several more grants, they purchased a building in Anamoose, ND and began refurbishing it into a local food buying, processing, and marketing hub. Here again, to maximize efficiency, Julia envisions utilizing members' non-marketable foods to source a Food Hub café, bakery, and value-added product line.

Analysis

Since the inception of Slavic Heritage Farm, the Petrovics' have built their business with farm income, partially supplemented by Mirek's off-farm woodworking and construction. Family labor is augmented by occasional traveling volunteers who connect with them through the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) network.

Julia's natural marketing ability and artistic flair has adventitiously contributed to building brand recognition, as her unique art, high quality prose and exceptional photography compliment their physical and virtual farm presence and promotion activities.



While the first six years have comprised a lot of hard work and challenges, the Petrovics have realized some enterprise success. Land improvements and asset accumulation have improved their business production capabilities. They now have some experience and first hand market data to help guide their decision making, and they are on their way to opening their FARMtastic Food Hub.

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Advice

When planning an organic orchard system, the Petrovics discovered that it was not adventitious to plant into sod. If they could do it again, they would have killed the sod in the immediate row that the trees and canes were going to be planted into. They have struggled with keeping the grass under control since their planting.

In 2016, Julia was able to start their own seeds in a small seed-starting greenhouse that Mirek had constructed. Unfortunately, early spring was so warm that Julia had trouble regulating the temperature and keeping the plants from overheating at times. In addition, an early infestation of aphids became a stress on the young plants and owners alike. Anyone planning a greenhouse for early season plant starts must plan to spend a fair amount of time taking actions to control the heat/cold fluctuation and possible pest infestations that may occur during that time of year.

Having 5 young children to raise, along with all their other farm duties, Julia finds herself working to strike a balance between family time and farm time. It is difficult to juggle the needs of young children and the needs of a farm enterprise. Julia advises parents of young children to realize ahead of time that you won't be able to do everything you would like right away, because your time needs to be split. Her advice: "When starting from scratch this type of business almost everybody, I believe, makes similar mistakes. Doing too much, having high hopes, and being reluctant to let it go when the business is not providing. But I believe that this kind of path is kind of important, it is a so called sweat equity. You gain valuable experience, but need to know when to quit (not the whole business, but a certain aspect of it) before you really burn out."

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2016 Data

Harvest, Planting & Yield Data					
High Tunnel Planting Began		8	May		
Outdoor Planting Began		22	May		
High Tunnel Harvest Began		22	July		Peppers
Outdoor Harvest Began		30	July		Pickling Cucumbers
High Tunnel Harvest Ended		31	Aug		Peppers
Outdoor Harvest Ended		31	Aug		Pickling Cucumbers
High Tunnel Harvest Period Lasted		6	weeks		
Outdoor Harvest Period Lasted		5	weeks		
<i>Crops Reported</i>	Total lbs. harvested				
	<i>2016</i>				
Cucumber	55.4				
Pickling Cucumber	125				
Tomato	-				
Zucchini	-				
Bell Pepper	121				
Cabbage	-				
Kale	-				
Beet	-				
Radish	-				
Carrots	-				
Lettuce	-				
Total	301.4				
Notes:					
Tomatoes were planted into the high tunnel 2nd week in May.					
Peppers were planted into the high tunnel 3rd week in May.					
Cucumbers were planted into the high tunnel 4th week in May.					
Harvest data may be skewed, family had emergency in June and needed to be out of town for several weeks.					
High Tunnel Soil Test	Actual	Recommended	Variance	Hi/Low/Avg	
<i>(0-6") depth</i>					
pH	7.2	-	-		
N lbs. per acre	113	60	53	High	
P ppm	92	16	76	High	
K ppm	1050	160	890	High	
Organic Matter	4.10%	-	-		
Soluble Salts (mmhos/cm)	0.83	< 1	-	Avg	
Notes:					
Some plant material from the previous growing year is left in the tunnel over winter and worked into the ground in the spring. Fresh animal compost is added as needed.					
Soil is Neutral; some crops grow fine in this, others prefer slightly more acidic soils.					
Soluble Salts are within an acceptable range.					

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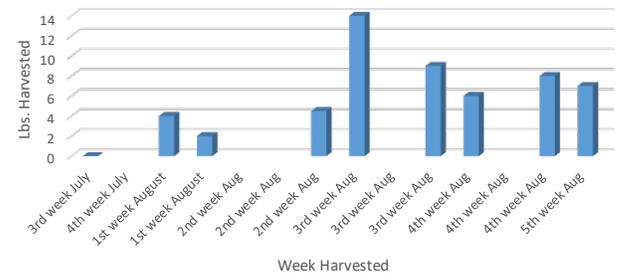
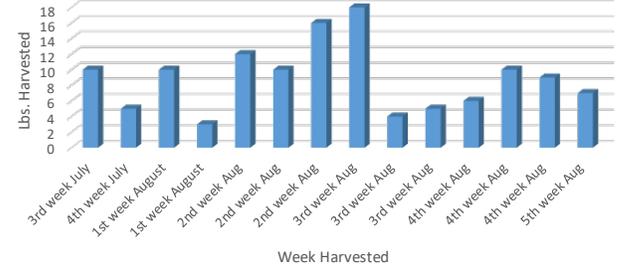
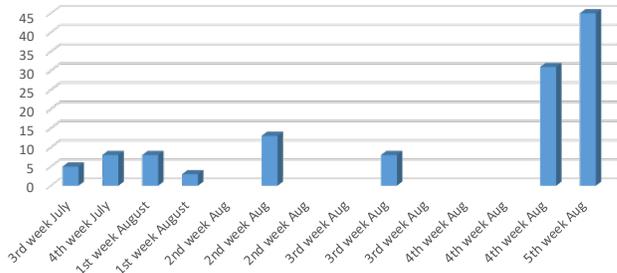
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2016 Data Cont.

Plant and Harvest Dates		Cucumbers planted in the high tunnel last week of May; outside first week of June.																														
<p style="text-align: center;">Cucumber</p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Cucumber Harvest Data</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Week Harvested</th> <th>Lbs. Harvested</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>3rd week July</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>4th week July</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>1st week August</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>1st week August</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr><td>2nd week Aug</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>2nd week Aug</td><td>5</td></tr> <tr><td>3rd week Aug</td><td>14</td></tr> <tr><td>3rd week Aug</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr><td>4th week Aug</td><td>6</td></tr> <tr><td>4th week Aug</td><td>8</td></tr> <tr><td>5th week Aug</td><td>7</td></tr> </tbody> </table>			Week Harvested	Lbs. Harvested	3rd week July	0	4th week July	0	1st week August	4	1st week August	2	2nd week Aug	0	2nd week Aug	5	3rd week Aug	14	3rd week Aug	10	4th week Aug	6	4th week Aug	8	5th week Aug	7						
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