

Workshop Title:

Getting Started With Draft Horse Farming

Speaker(s) & their titles: Stewart Fotheringham, Whippetree Farm

Executive Summary :

Stewart Fotheringham and his wife Nicole Burkhard practice draft horse farming at Whippetree Farm in the Annapolis Valley. Stewart is a wood worker, and wanted to source his own wood from the forest. He pursued this interest in Ontario where he participated in the Haliburton Forest Internship program for six months.

Philip Nunn also participated in this presentation. The couple have sought mentorship from this dairy farmer, as he has had an extensive farming career and a lot of experience in this particular field.

Detailed Notes:

Tractors vs. Horses

Tractors deplete in value, require mechanical repairs, use fossil fuels, and lead to soil compaction (rolling pin effect). However, you have the convenience of being able to simply turn the key and go, and they have a bucket loader.

Horses are self-replicating (breeding) and self-healing. They use farm-grown fuel that they are often able to grow and harvest themselves and require minimal inputs. However, they have good and bad days- it takes a change in one's mindset towards the work. A person using these methods must work with the horses as a team and have a certain stubbornness and tenacity!

Horse farming has many other benefits:

Buying a horse supports another farmer, and often helps keep the money local.

You can't buy a horse on credit- so you can't acquire interest!

They are modular power units- they have flexible outputs- if you need more power add more horses.

They have a full time 4 wheel drive! You can ask them to give a little more when it is necessary, and they will want to help you because of the personal relationship you have developed with them.

They give you a marketing edge- people will want to invest in what you are doing.

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You have to give the horses a rest in the field, which gives you yourself time to contemplate and dream, making farming more enjoyable.
Horses are entertaining! They are beautiful and intelligent, and help make farming a truly joyful experience.

Cost outline:

Depends on who you know and where you're living.

\$1200-5000 for a 2-horse team

Between 6-14 thousand overall, after the horses and all the associated equipment (mainly farming equipment) were purchased.

\$1200 for hay- if equipment is bought it can pay for itself over 2 years.

The 2 Systems they use (influenced by 2 farmers):

Intensive (Coleman)	Extensive (Nordell)
Labour (hard work)	Horse work
Higher value crops	Integrates overcrop
Successional planting (till & replant right away)	Great for root crops, grains, brassicas, animal feeds
Easy to irrigate	

Stewart and Nicole have a 6 acre garden and harvest hay and oats- work a lot of land, but it is very cheap comparably. Their limiting factor is flat, rock face land.

Their disc hiller and hullboard hiller are their most important tools. Disc hillers are 'horse hoes' for potatoes. It is hooked to a single horse. Beds on 32 inch centers, move up and down walkways to loosen and aerate soil, so water soaks in.

They grew 1/2 and acre of carrots with nearly no hand weeding, and also many other root veg. They say it's incredible!

Spring tool harrow, lever harrow and millboard harrow are all gear they work with. Theirs are mainly made by Amish folk in the United States.

Sourcing:

Used: ASK EVERYONE!! Look for rock walls, hedgerows, old barns. Auctions and estate sales, kijiji and classifieds (AVR and Rural Delivery) These sources encourage community cooperation.

New: Pioneer Homesteader (company in the US). These tools have more possibilites, 4 or 5 in one- which saves time.

Breeds: Based on your needs

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Drafts pull ~10% of their body weight (i.e. 1000 lb horse pulls 100 lbs/day)

Heavy draft: Suffolk (what they have), Punch, Percheron, Belgian, Clydesdales. (Note: these last 2 are for logging or making a living)

Light: Halflinger

Ponies: Norwegian fjord (for homesteading or a small CSA; they are cheaper and are easier to maneuver)

***When starting out, the horse's temperament is what is most important. Go to a farmer that knows horse farming and has experience; have them go with you to find a team.

Older horses, that only have 20-30% of their working life remaining are a little slower and have more experience- these are ideal, but harder to get! MOST IMPORTANT:

Horses need a routine. Building trust takes a long time, and a certain kind of person, but is well worth the hard work!

Pasture management:

Perimeter fencing

Step in fence post (single line) good for rotational grazing

Horses are picky grazers- they tend to eat around weeds. Other livestock can then follow behind them to keep the weeds down. (Horses > cattle > sheep > chickens)

They maximize night-time grazing- it is cooler for the animals and they get hydration from the dew. They can then be in the shade of the barn during the day where there are fewer bugs, and then you don't have to chase them down when you need them to work.

You need ~2 acres/horse for grazing

Benefits:

- Compost- the carbon:nitrogen ratio of manure is ideal
- Natural hot bed-works really well for seedlings!
- Nutrient cycling-through the above practices

Care:

Practice ferrier and shoeing every 6 weeks to trim feet. They learned to do it themselves.

Salt and mineral supplements every day. Most horses here are deficient in Selenium.

Net cost- budget \$500/bill as a yearly average.

Horse Logging:

This is a complimentary winter business, which can be quite lucrative; people will pay a lot for high quality wood that is harvested sustainably.

Mentorship:

One wants exposure before jumping in, and it is an invaluable source for gaining knowledge as it is such a critical time for learning. Advice is easy to find; good, reliable advice is much harder to come by. Horse farming stayed in NS later, so there are still many people around who have first hand knowledge. Books are also great- it is so important to have a reference library. The 'Small Farmers Journal' comes out 4 times a year. They have subscribed for 6 years and can't recommend it highly enough.

Next year they are looking for Apprentices and putting on workshops:
www.whippletreefarm.ca, and they are on fb too

Other Resources:

www.orchardhillfarm.ca

www.smallfarmersjournal.com

www.ruralheritage.com

www.draftanimalpower.com

Question Period: Mainly addressed by Phil

12-14 hrs max grazing time/day

Feed the horses oats when working them; adjust to age and workload-older horses need more supplementation.

The working life of a horse is 15-18 years, however some are still working at 28 years.

Problems with breeding- prohibitively expensive with some breeds

Options for retirement:

 Slaughter in Quebec

 Horse-rescue retirement homes

Phil uses oxen (bovine family) they are even more economical, and very simple tools are made for them. He says there is a niche market possibility for Water Buffalo, as they are not yet in NS. A female and calf cost about \$3-4 thousand dollars.