



Chuck and Lisa. Photo credit: E. Ferry.

Mighty Food Farm

Chuck Currie and Lisa MacDougall

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Purpose of Loan: Equipment purchased to improve labor efficiency and soil conservation.

- Planet Junior seeder
- Budding wire basket weeder
- Potato planter
- Three-bottom plough

Farm description: An organic, vegetable and egg business supplying a 120-150 member CSA program for 9 months per year, and several wholesale accounts in southwestern Vermont and northwestern Massachusetts. 2009 is their third season in business.

Acreage: 186 leased acres, including

- 12 in vegetables
- 10-15 for pastured laying hens
- 10 in cover crops.

Employees: 3 full-time, March-October. 5 part-time, June-September.

Technical Assistance: Lisa prepared the loan.

Sources: This profile was written May 2009 by Kim Motylewski. It's based on a 2/13/09 loan application and an interviews with Chuck Currie, 5/14/009 and Lisa MacDougall 5/19/09.

Mighty Food Farm – it sounds like a place that comic strip superheroes would live. In fact, it's 186 acres in the southwestern Vermont town of Pownal where two everyday, farmer heroes, Lisa MacDougal and Chuck Currie, are pursuing their agricultural ideal. They produce an array of organic vegetables, eggs and flowers, feed their neighbors, and protect the crucial, natural gifts on which that bounty depends.

From beets to kohlrabi to tomatoes, the Mighty farmers cultivate a dozen acres of vegetables. On another dozen acres, they raise 200 laying hens on a combination of pasture grasses and grain. Twice a day the farmers move the mobile coops to fresh ground, where the birds fertilize and scratch, improving the land.

The produce and eggs supply the farm's CSA program of 120 to 150 members, two farmers' markets, and its several wholesale accounts, including Bennington College located just 10 miles from the farm. Other customers are just across the border in Williamstown, Massachusetts: Wild Oats Co-op, Mezza Bistro, The Buxton School and Cricket Creek farm stand.

Mighty Foods is the couple's first entrepreneurial effort. Both in their twenties, Chuck came to farming from a suburban upbringing north of Boston. Lisa had learned to tend and ride horses as a kid in Ipswich, MA. They hatched their agricultural aspirations while earning degrees at the University of Massachusetts, in Amherst.

Chuck says it was a class on sustainable agriculture, with John Gerber that made up his mind. The class visited many small farms and he saw people like himself, from non-farm backgrounds, making a go of it on the land. Soon he'd switched majors from Chemistry to Plant, Soil and Insect Science. After graduating he worked on farms in the Pioneer Valley and learned the ropes.

At that point he met Lisa who was finishing an identical degree, and working at the Hampshire College farm. "I was hooked after that." She says farming impressed her with its wholesome purpose. She loved the work of growing food, the changing seasons, and of course, eating the produce.

The 2009 season will be the third one for these young farmers. Like the two previous ones, it's had its ups and downs. The recession has meant that the CSA membership hasn't increased as they had hoped it would.

On the bright side, the loan Mighty Food received from the Carrot Project's Microloan program for New England Farmers has enabled them to purchase tractor attachments that have significantly improved their labor efficiency and soil conservation.

The tractor-mounted, Planet Junior seeder they purchased has replaced a hand-pushed device. With the Planet Junior, seeding crops such as carrots, beets, beans, peas, radishes, salad greens and turnips is much quicker. The rows are straighter and perfectly spaced.

Correctly spaced rows enable the farmers to use another piece of newly acquired gear – a Buddingh wire basket weeder. The basket weeder looks like two parallel rows of hamster wheels running behind the tractor. As they turn, the wheels gently loosen the soil and uproot weeds on both sides of the planted row. Lisa says the equipment will allow them to cut down weeds earlier in their growth, do it much more quickly than hand-weeding could and with less soil disruption than the larger cultivators they would use for larger weeds.

A newly purchased potato planter is another welcome addition. Last year it took six people two days to plant the potato crop. With the new equipment, four people spent one day on the job.

“This is a major improvement,” says Chuck. “Without the Carrot Project loan, we would have done without the equipment,” and worked harder than they needed to. With it, they can work smarter. Chuck had applied for a credit card to finance these purchases, but was denied.

For now, Lisa and Chuck are focused on optimizing their systems, and amid the hard work of growing food and a business, making time to enjoy the season and their customers. Someday, when they own their land and can invest in silos, the Mighty farmers’ dream of eliminating their most expensive inputs by growing feed grain for their chickens and by raising oil crops to power their tractors with biofuel. That day will be a mighty big one.