

# The ENTERPRISE COMMUNITY

Thursday, August 2, 2001

## Doing what comes naturally

■ *Organic farming finds a new home in Manchester.*

By Nancy Hebb  
Special Writer

It seems logical to find lambs at a place called Lamb Farm, located on Lamb Road. Ironically, John and Suzanne Smucker's Manchester farm got its name even before they started raising sheep.

"A friend kept sending mail to us at 'Lamb Farm' when we moved here, and the name just stuck," Suzanne Smucker says.

Known to many area farmers as "the old Silkworth place," the Smuckers' 220 acres support a diverse operation, producing products ranging from organic compost to free-range chickens, organic hay to conventional grain crops. The process of improving their land and developing marketable commodities is still a work in progress, explains Smucker, but they've come a long way since moving to the farm in 1997.

The Smuckers always possessed the desire to move to the country.

"Farming's in our family, on both sides," Smucker says. "As a boy, John helped at his uncle's farm near Wooster, Ohio. When we bought this place in 1986 or '87, we didn't have a clear idea of what we'd do, but we knew we wanted to farm down the road."

They also realized they wanted to do as much as possible organically, starting on a small scale, from scratch, doing things their own way.

John Smucker, whose background is in banking and engi-

neering, owns Ann Arbor-based MCE Electronics, producer of microwave components for wireless communications.

Suzanne Smucker's career was in nursing. She owned a home care business in the Detroit area, which she sold before they moved to Manchester.

"We wanted to remain close to Ann Arbor, but be in the country. This area is ideal," she says.

"John's parents were a big influence on our attitude toward organic farming. They exposed us to organic gardening. We wanted to embrace the same concepts in farming and add back to the soil."

Minimizing exposure to harmful chemicals was another reason the Smuckers have embraced many of the guidelines for organic production.

After the major job of clearing the property and reestablishing fields that had been rented out for a decade, the couple hired a soil consultant, Joe Scrimger of BioSystems, an organic farmer in Marlette. The soil needed improving. One of the recommendations Scrimger made was composting.

Most people are familiar with the garden compost pile, but creating large quantities of compost for a commercial operation is not so simple.

"We decided we'd start making our own," Smucker says. "We have several sources for manure that's trucked in. We have a compost turner, and the process takes the manure from an unstable state and, through the aerobic action of mixing air and temperature, we break it down into a stabilized, nitrogen-rich soil additive."

They sell their compost to gardeners, greenhouses, and organic farmers. Many customers purchase the compost because they are very conscious of the run-off issues associated with commercial fertilizers, according to Smucker. With the huge long lines of compost behind her, she grins. The investment in the equipment needed to create commercial quantities of organic compost has added value to the farm two ways: Improving their own soil and creating a very marketable product.

Matt Shane, a Michigan State University extension agent who lives with his family in the original old farmhouse, works for the Smuckers as their farm manager. He recently told a group of sheep producers visiting

Lamb Farm that he's seen a big improvement in soil quality from the addition of organic matter.

"We did a lot of digging for fence posts and buildings initially, and never saw a single earthworm," Shane says. "Now when we dig, we see lots of nice, big night crawlers."

This has been accomplished using the manure and a particular type of high-calcium lime, mined sulphamag, and other minerals approved for organic farming. They've sprayed fields with fish emulsion, which proved expensive and very, very fragrant.

"We've also used green manures," Smucker adds, "plowing nitrogen-rich plants back in to add organic matter to the soil."

Lamb Farm's compost is produced to standards set by the Organic Crop Improvement Association, an internationally recognized certifying agency. The Smuckers started working toward having the farm itself OCIA certified just three years

ago, and hope to receive certification this year.

Sheep were added in 1998. Why sheep?

Laughs Smucker, "Sheep are user-friendly. They can tolerate a lot of learning by their novice human owners! They've just been terrific."

The flock started out with 30 ewes. By acquiring select groups, they now have 120 ewes and raise their lambs for direct marketing as USDA certified fresh or frozen meat.

To do this, the Smuckers must send their lambs for processing under USDA inspection, at a plant where an inspector is always present. The USDA also certifies their on-farm facilities for storing and selling the meat.

"We sell most of the lamb piece by piece, frozen, unless we

can work with a buyer and arrange ahead of time to provide fresh lamb," Smucker explains.

Suzanne Smucker is the farm's marketing department.

"I target a market, then I make calls," she says.

She follows up by introducing the product itself to potential clients.

Lamb buyers have included Arbor Market, Coleman's, Four Season's, and Arbor Farm Market. Restaurants also have embraced their meat.

"If you've had lamb at Dan's River Grill, Heritage Inn, or The Village Club in Bloomfield Hills, it might have been ours," she says with pride.

"It hasn't been a huge marketing campaign, for either the lamb or organic hay or compost," Smucker confesses.

Word of mouth is her main ally, and has brought her individual family buyers. They are the consumers she plans to target next for lamb sales.

"Selling the product is a lot

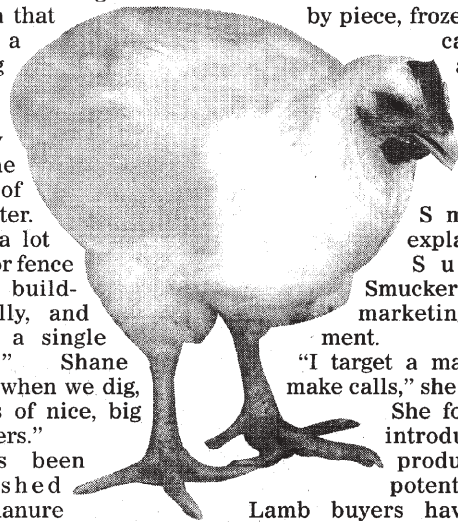
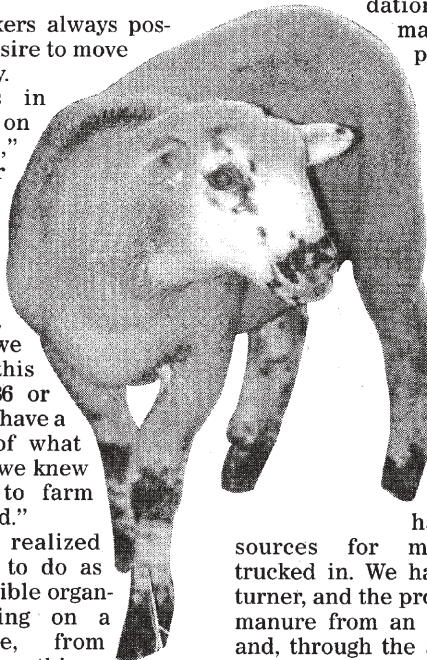




Photo by Nancy Bobb

Suzanne Smucker and Dan Watson are proud of the Lamb Farm operation. The Smuckers' farm supports a diverse operation, producing products ranging from organic compost to free-range chickens and from organic hay to conventional grain crops.

harder than raising it," she says. "It's a challenge to have the product, whether it's hay or lamb, exactly as the buyer wants it, when they want it."

For example, the farm might get a big order for lamb shanks, but not other cuts. Production and marketing then becomes a balancing act.

Although disclaiming her hands-on contributions to the farming operation, Smucker pitches right in when it's time to load up chickens or worm sheep.

Says Dan Watson, called their all-around farm hand and crop expert, "She's great. She does a lot."

Watson, a life-long Manchester resident, works rented land on his own, but plans to abandon that and concentrate on Lamb Farm in the future. He's active in

many local agricultural organizations, and has lots of experience with sheep and cattle (both beef and dairy).

One of the most interesting aspects of Lamb Farm is the Smuckers' willingness to try new things. While alfalfa produces the main pasture for the Smuckers' rotational grazing system, they also look for other cost-efficient, viable feed alternatives to help them increase their per-acre production.

To this end, Michigan State University sheep specialist, Joe Rook D.V.M., and Matt Shane have arranged numerous tests of forage crops for the sheep at lamb farm.

A recent educational "pasture walk" conducted by Rook, and

## LAMB

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Shane, open to other sheep producers, explained this year's trials at Lamb Farm. Part of the acreage is planted in crops usually used as winter forage in India. These flourish at a time when grass pastures are depleted in Michigan. Another field is sown turnips and oats.

Prolonging the grazing season and minimizing the amount of harvested hay and grain the sheep must be fed simply makes economical sense.

"We want to have the farm sustain itself, so we can keep it operating, cover our expenses, and support our employees," Smucker says.

In her mind, they're just getting started.

"We want to do no harm, coexist with nature, and operate a very

diversified, profitable farm."

Long-term plans may include producing organic vegetables and fruit, honey, chicken and beef.

"Who knows?" Smucker says with a shrug. "We'll look for niche markets and assess whether we can fill them."

In the near future, Smucker hopes to have a store-like setting on the farm, where people can come in and shop.

"It would also be nice to just have people come to the farm to see what farming's like," she adds.

Talking to Suzanne Smucker, whose enthusiasm is matched only by her energy, and viewing the improvements made to this very old farm in just a few short years, it's easy to envision success. They've infused Lamb Farm with fresh vitality, proving that new and ages-old methods can work for the consumer, the land, and the landowner.