



## 2014 International Year of Family Farming

*“Feeding the world; Caring for the Earth”*



# It's about food and feed, Yukon, Canada

## Il s'agit la nourriture et les fourrages, Yukon, le Canada

### Our Family (Notre Famille)

“Bonjour”, (Hello) from our **organic, diversified** family farm, our **Aurora Mountain Farm**, in the **Yukon** Territory of northwest Canada.

Like most farmers, **farming is about food or feed!** We have **many animals** to feed and grow lots of food for them and us. What stands out most about our operation is how much thought we put into our farming practices to determine what is sustainable, functional and reasonable.

We are a **family of four**. Our eldest has her own family and lives off the farm, but returns often with our **grandchildren** to visit. Our **youngest** is away at university, but returns in **summer** to **work** with us.

My **husband and I** both come from Alberta, about 2000 km south of here. He's from the city, with a science degree in Agriculture, and I grew up on a farm and have a degree in Teaching. We **love the quality of life farming** gives, and the **learning about life** that happens on farms – we were lucky to be able to **home school** our children here.

Like so many farms today, it is a **challenge to live solely on income from the farm**. My **husband works full-time** on the farm all year. I **also** work on the farm all year and **teach at Yukon College** in Whitehorse. Besides my teaching, I often get asked questions about Yukon food and agriculture. Sometimes I get to combine my passion for farming and food with my work at the college in special projects like the 4-Season Experimental Greenhouse Project or curriculum design for a “Food Matters” course.



Together, my husband and I, and our son, also operate the **Yukon's only mobile red meat slaughter facility**, TumTum's Black Gilt Meats. For us, farming, is really all about **food and community**. So we are community **advocates for food**, and involved in:

- Food Secure Canada
- Slow Food
- Canadian Biotechnology Action Network
- Growers of Organic Food Yukon
- Fireweed Community Market
- Northern Food Security Network
- Yukon Mobile Poultry Processor



Our son comes home in the **summer** to help, when there is a lot of work to do in **the long hours**. We also have other **occasional helpers**. Sometimes people come to our farm from the **World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms group** (WWOOFers). Many of our **customers** come to **help** during **harvest** times. We feel this helps provide an important **connection to food**.

## Our Farm (Notre Ferme)

Our **65 hectares (160 acres)** Aurora Mountain Farm, (see <http://auroramountain.yukonfood.com/>) is in the **Takhini River Valley**, north of **Whitehorse**, our nearest town, 35 km away. It's not big by Canadian standards, but it is considered **large for this area**.



Located on the **Yukon Plateau**, our farm is in an area characterized by **thin glacial soils**. We are surrounded by **boreal forests**. Native vegetation is open forest with mostly **pine and spruce** (*shown in the background of the photos right*) and a few **aspen** in the areas with slightly more fertile soil.

The valley we live in experienced a **very large forest fire in 1958**, which burned over 400 square miles of forest. Since our **climate is very dry**, wood **decomposes very slowly** and much of the partially burned logs and roots, from that fire, are still very visible in the area around our fields. These make walking in the woods quite a challenge.



We have a **very short growing season**; snow often arrives in September or October and stays until May. **Precipitation levels are low**, like the desert, at only 250 - 275 mm p.a.



Our **core business is food** - lots of different **meats** and **plant** types. We currently raise almost 500 **chickens** a year, **pigs**, **beef**, and hens for their **eggs** and we try to grow enough **food to feed them all** – so we are very diversified in our production. Many farms in our area only grow **hay**, but more and more farmers are working to grow more food for people.

We grow as much feed for our animals as possible on the farm. About **half our farm is native forest and meadows** and we have about 40 acres of **pasture** and 35 acres of **alfalfa** and **mixed grass hay**. We have an area of about 1 acre that gets rotated between the **pigs and garden**, *shown in the photo to the right*.

As well, we have an **86 hectare (210 acre) grazing** lease. This land cannot be farmed, but is **fenced** so animals can be grazed. It consists of **native meadows** and **forested areas** and provides enough feed for our small herd of **cows** for about 4 months of the year.

**Predators** still live here too: **bears, wolves, foxes, and coyotes**, and overhead **raptors** in the skies – all occasionally visiting our farm, especially in search of hens. Three livestock **guardian dogs** (*photo p7*) protect our livestock from these predators. Generally, their barking is enough to encourage wildlife to go around our farm and find easier prey.

Our chickens are also protected with **overhead netting** in tractors while in the fields on pasture, (*see photo next page, while photo previous page shows coop nets in winter*). The soil here is ideal for **ground squirrels** – often referred to locally as ‘**gophers**’ – which dig underground burrows. Besides **creating holes and mounds** in the fields which are a challenge for farm machinery, gophers can eat a fairly large share of our plant produce if not controlled. Rather than use poison, we **trap** the animals and bring them to a nearby wildlife preserve for **feed for recovering raptors**. (*For more on gophers see <http://www.env.gov.yk.ca/animals-habitat/mammals/agsquirrel.php> or <http://www.yukonwildlife.ca/>*)

We are working continuously to meet all the principles and ethics of organic farming. Our **chickens and crops are certified organic**, but not everything that we produce is certified. When we don't grow enough ourselves, there is a lack of local certified organic feed to use.



As well, we like to be able to **feed our pigs on over-ripe fruit and vegetables** (*see photo right*) from our local market and not all of that is organic.

**Our operation itself is organic** - a living and evolving system. So our farm management decisions constantly change, as we learn how aspects of the farm fit together holistically.

Part of our learning involves **record-keeping** to provide feedback on how we are operating the farm and land. At the end of the day, this has to be “reasonable” - our records have to show **profitability**, without sacrificing **sustainability and functionality**. It is quite a **challenge**!



But with years of experience, tracking operational costs closely and pricing our product effectively, we are getting closer to that **balanced operation and healthy balance sheet**! We are fortunate in this to have customers who support us through times of ‘cost stress’. For example in 2013, we had to dramatically raise our prices, due to a spike in feed costs, but our customers supported us and all birds were sold at this higher price.

## **Our produce - ‘Feeding the world’** **(Nos produits - ‘Nourrir le monde – chez nous et pour Yukon’)**

Locally raised, ethical meat is in high demand. We provide **ethically grown food, yarn, garments and soap** from our family farm to ‘feed’ our Yukon part of the world. We sell **direct** from our **Aurora Mountain Farm, on-line** and at **farmers’ markets**.



We have diversified our products beyond ethically grown meat and certified organic chickens and eggs to include **jam, jelly and marmalade** from locally harvested berries and herbs, as well as hand-made soap and hand-made natural fibre garments.

### **Chickens (Les Poulets)**

Our meat birds, **Redbro chickens** (*see photo above right*), are flown here from a hatchery in Quebec – takes 16 hours. They are an active, problem-free breed, developed for raising on pasture. We raise two batches a summer in a **chicken tractor system**. They are kept in a moveable pen which fully encloses to protect them from predators (*See photo right*).



The pen is gradually shifted across our hay field. This **helps fertilize the field** and provides fresh greens for the chickens, to add to their certified organic grain we feed them.



We sell the poultry fresh in mid- and late- summer, from the **farm-gate**, through prior orders. Often buyers come to help in their processing.

### Eggs (les oeufs)

Our layers are also certified organic. They are with us all year and need protection from predators. We have three **Maremma**, a large livestock guardian dog breed, who love to guard them against any intruder night or day, any season. They have an **insulated coop** connected to an outdoor fixed pen - with protection overhead. They are happy to go outside any time temperatures are over -10C. We sell eggs locally and at **farmers markets**.

### Pigs (les cochons)

We have invested in **heritage pigs**, of various pure and cross breeds - **Tamworth, Large English Black and Berkshire**. Each sow has one litter of 8 to 12 piglets per year. The pigs **live behind the barn**, in a **shelter with one open side**, and a **straw bed**. We raise them on **grass, hay**, and a **grain mixture** (of local barley, oats, or wheat mixed with an organic protein concentrate). But pigs also like **fruits and vegetables**, especially peaches and tomatoes, in their diet, so they get bins of over-ripe fruit delivered **from shops** in town all summer and clean up our market garden at the end of the season! We sell pork in fall through **direct marketing**.



### Cattle (les boeufs)

Our (**Hereford**) cattle herd is small and is now mostly **for us**. Calves are kept 18 months before slaughtering **for beef**. The cows, including one **Jersey cow for milk**, and the bull are kept all year.

### Goats (les chèvres)

We no longer keep Spanish goats, but we still have a good supply of **cashmere fibre** from combing them each spring, and **tanned hides** from animals that provided goat meat. We spin and make garments from their fleece and that of other animals. We use **goat milk from a neighbouring farm** as the base **for hand-made soaps**.



### Wild food preserves (les conserves de la nourriture sauvage)

We harvest **wild berries and herbs** from around the **Yukon**, including Yukon's territorial flower **Fireweed** (*epilobium angustifolium*); **yarrow** (*achillea millefolium*) and **dandelion** (*taxicum officinale*). We climb the **mountains** near the **Alaska border** to pick **wild mountain blueberries** and travel to special spots deep in the **boreal forest** to harvest the tiny wild **lingonberry** (see top photo page 5). Wild highbush **cranberries** grow along the banks of rivers and streams or in the small pockets of moisture found at the base of exposed rock.

A few **neighbouring farms** have planted **native berry bushes** to make them easier to water and harvest. We trade picking for berries by giving one basket picked in exchange for a basket to keep. From these locally harvested berries and flowers we make:

**Jams (les confitures)** – Lingonberry /Yukon Cranberry (*photo right*), Rhubarb Saskatoon, Mountain Blueberry Jam;

**Jellies (les gelées)** : Chokecherry, Yarrow, Dandelion, Highbush Cranberry, and our best seller, a very local Fireweed Jelly (*see photos right and far right*)

**Marmalades (les marmelades)** - Raspberry and Rhubarb Marmalade;

**Mustard (les moûtards)** – Fireweed, Dandelion and Rhubarb mustard. We are currently testing a new Saskatoon berry mustard.



### Market garden (le jardin des legumes)

Our market garden covers about an acre of the farm. We grow a variety of **cold hardy vegetables**, like kale, collards, and salad greens. We have found ways to provide **winter protection** to grow Hard-neck Garlic (*see photo top page 2*). Most years we have enough to harvest and sell at our local **Fireweed Community Market**, or **Potluck Food Co-op**.

## Sustainability - 'Caring for the Earth' (le Développement Durable - 'Prenons soin de notre terre')

There are many ways in which our family farm operates to help care for the Earth. Here are some:

### Towards a fully sustainable farm, i.e. a zero-balance system (Vers une ferme durable vraiment- une systeme en balance)

Aurora Mountain farm is an **integrated operation** working towards developing a zero-balance farm system, meaning that it **will need no outside inputs**, including fertilizer and feed. We are constantly learning and incrementally heading toward this.



We purposely **select crops suited to our** soils and climate so they have reduced inputs. Our animal **breeds** are chosen because they are **good foragers** and **easy to keep**. Their **manures and offal** are an integral component of our **compost**, providing **nutrients** for our gardens and fields. Zero-balance will give us long –term sustainability at its fullest.



### Protecting the environment (Protéger l'environnement)

By using livestock guardian **dogs** to protect our livestock, we help **protect Yukon wildlife**. The “**bark zone**” provided by the dogs, means that **predators** like wolves, coyotes and bears don't get accustomed to the easy prey of livestock and **remain wild**. Since the dogs also keep predators from managing the ground squirrel populations, those we trap to control their population become food at a local wildlife preserve for its recovering raptors e.g. owls, hawks.



### Connecting people with their food (Connecter les gens et les nourritures)

Our **food produce is sold** to people directly from the **farm-gate or farmers markets**. Our customers know and care about where their food comes from and how it was produced, **ethically and organically**. As well as this involvement in their food, many take some **practical part in its production**, when they come to the farm to help harvest and collect it. As the Earth provides us with the food, this better connects people with the Earth than a supermarket.



### Community building (Aggrandir la communauté ici)

When we **share food production tasks** we are helping to **build a community** that can share and work together. We are involved in **many organizations** which do this. Working together on processes like slaughtering meat, is also **more efficient with resources**. Our community shares slaughtering facilities and times to do this. Sharing such meat production processes helps build neighbours and friends into a stronger community and one which **cares about its food production**.

### Internet community building (Aggrandir la communauté sur net)

On the global scale, the Internet allows us to **share and source information** from a wider community of like-minded people than what is in the direct area around us. As a diversified farm, we need **smaller equipment**. As part of our commitment to building community, we maintain the <http://yukonfood.com/> **website** which provides web space for other local farmers and community groups connected to food. The internet also gives us access to **open-source technology** to find smaller machinery and **manually based machinery**.

We can learn and share such ideas across the world, helping us to move towards **our aim – a fully sustainable, functional and reasonable family farm**.



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**For more information about family farming and the 2014 IYFF go to:**

<http://familyfarms.enviroed4all.com.au/family-farm-snapshots/> for more in this series of snapshots

