



# Farming Her Own Way

Black Sheep Farm's Brenda Hsueh

— Black Sheep Farm, Chesley, Ontario—When I pull into the grassy path beside an old barn and open my car door, a party of four greets me. The first to arrive, hurtling toward me like an uninhibited puppy intent on giving me a wet kiss, is Luna, a gray, Great Pyrenees-shepherd mix. Following several steps behind is farmer Brenda Hsueh, holding the hand of her four-year-daughter, Emma. And behind them is shepherd Skyler Radojkovic, Brenda's partner and Emma's dad.

For me, a visitor from the city, the scene—radiant blue sky, June-lush grass and a restored nineteenth-century barn—is one of bucolic, timeless beauty. But I know that for my hosts, it is a rare moment of downtime on this 40-acre regenerative farm. Fifteen months of lockdowns with no childcare has isolated the family in its bubble and put a premium on every moment of the day.

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"If we, as farmers, got COVID because our kid was in daycare, our farm would be wiped out for the year," says Brenda. "We had to be in total lockdown." The eight-hour-a-day, five-day workweek she and Skyler anticipated having during the 2020 planting season suddenly turned into a six-hour-a-day, three-day workweek. "I nearly panicked," Brenda recalls. "How can I make a one-acre market garden work on three days a week?" The answer was to become "hyper efficient," one parent rushing to complete a long list of tasks as soon as the other returned from the fields to take over childcare duties. Things eased up that summer once Brenda was able to hire a teenage employee through the Canadian government's national summer jobs program. This year, Emma is a little older and can spend a bit more time in the fields.

After 13 years on the farm, the pandemic is just one more challenge for Brenda to weather on her path as a farmer. Her goal: to make a living off the land while increasing the biodiversity in her fields, pond and atmosphere surrounding the area. While she is exactly where she feels she should be, this is hardly the future she imagined for herself, growing up in Edmonton, Alberta, as a self-described "indoor child" who played piano and read books.

"I had no ties to agriculture, I was not interested in the outdoors and I did not like insects," she says. The daughter of a lab technician and a mechanical engineer, she studied biochemistry and pharmacology at university and landed in Toronto working first for a mutual fund company, then a credit rating agency, analyzing data. But it was not her true calling. When she was let go in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, Hsueh recalls, "I felt liberated."

An interest in social justice movements fostered by her Bible study group led to an awareness of how the global agricultural-industrial-food complex fosters food inequity, and a desire to forge a more just system. At first, she thought she might end up working for a not-for-profit organization promoting food security and food sovereignty. But after spending a summer at Everdale, a community teaching farm in Hillsburgh, Ontario, she discovered that she loved planting, tending and harvesting—"it was a revelation to me," she recalls.

The work suited her curious mind. "You can't get bored farming," she explains. "There's always something new, some problem to be solved. There's a lot of rote stuff, like weeding, but you run the system, you get to choose how long you spend at any particular task, and you have to observe [nature]. It's a combination of having control and having no control." Seeds that are not viable, or drought, she notes, are things she can't control. For the farmer, troubleshooting becomes a way of life.

Skyler has wandered off to attend to work, so Brenda, Emma, Luna and I head to their community-supported agriculture (CSA) market garden, through fields wild and dense with white and red clover (which Brenda has seeded as valuable cover crops) as well as dandelion, goldenrod, and mustard. The latter are weeds she values both for their soil-enriching and pollinator-attracting qualities. We skirt pastures that the couples' 80 sheep will rotate through, and catch a glimpse of the farm's 50 or so meat chickens and equal number of laying hens.

Along the way, we meet Amy Cocksedge with the bird conservancy group Bird Ecology and Conservation Ontario (BECO). As part of a study, she's surveying the declining populations of bobolink, eastern meadowlark and savannah sparrow in this area to see if they fare better on un-grazed, rotationally grazed, or lightly grazed pasture. Because the bobolinks nest on the ground, she suspects that the ungrazed pastureland is best for them, or perhaps pastures that are grazed only after the birds' July nesting season.

At the far end of her property are Brenda's 58 vegetable beds spread over just under an acre of land, and supporting the growth of more than 100 different varieties of vegetables. There are salad greens, kohlrabi, peas, beans and edamame. There's a type of loose-headed cabbage called Tokyo Bekana, as well as pumpkins and winter squash.

Mustard greens and cucumber are visible under sheer row cover, which protects them from pests like the cucumber and flea beetles. Brenda also uses two other types of plastic-based landscape "fabric" that she detests for their environmental footprint and uses as sparingly as possible. Other rows are covered with straw mulch, a non-fossil-fuel-based attempt at thwarting pests.

Her fields feel part wild, part cultivated, expressing Brenda's "don't-sweat-the-weeds-too-much" approach. Though she suspects that even organic farmers who tend neat and tidy black plastic-covered rows "would look at these and have nightmares," she says as she gazes upon her beds like a proud mum: this is the way she farms.

Her most prized crops are the 15 to 20 varieties of tomatoes she grows on seven beds, all of them heirloom types except for the popular and flavorful Sun Sugar cherry tomato. There is a pinkish variety, Rose de Berne, the deep red-toned Japanese Black Trifele and the yellow-orange Jaune Flamme. The generous space she gives to this crop is a kind of insurance to offset the fact that she is philosophically opposed to greenhouse growing, which would extend the season and protect against weather calamities.

## I want the roots of my tomatoes to reach deep down into the ground to get nutrients, and get water from the sky.

Try a side-by-side comparison of her tomatoes against greenhouse grown, she says, and there's no comparison; hers taste "incredible."

As we wind up our tour of the garden, the loud clop-clopping of an Amish horse and buggy passing by on Side Row 8 rings through the air, just one of the many Amish and Mennonite farmers in Grey County. The sight and sound reinforce the air of timelessness that hangs over the farm.

Next, we head through chest-high fields of buttercups that are taller than Emma to visit the sheep meadow. Rotating the flock through more than 20 plots is Skyler's domain, a division of labor that suits the couple.

Skyler grew up as an off-the-grid kid on the 100-acre lot next to Brenda's, which his parents purchased in the early 1980s. They couldn't afford land with a house on it, so they built the one-room stackwall house where Skyler was born. Five years later they constructed a timber frame house, then another 10 years passed before they wired it for electricity.

Though the family grew some crops, farming was never appealing to Skyler. He takes more naturally to tending sheep, and can build, fix, or jury-rig just about any tool or machine on the farm. He likes his role in the fields, too: "You get to know the animals because you move them from plot to plot every day, and you produce food off the land without having to till, weed or do the stuff I never really enjoyed." His goal is to use every part of the animal, so he and Brenda clean, wash and dry the sheared wool to be spun into yarn, and have located the last remaining tanner in the region to process the hides for sale. Eventually they hope to make cheese and other dairy products as well.

As a couple, their relationship grew slowly. Skyler returned from Montreal, where he attended university, in 2009 and met Brenda at his family's annual holiday party. "At some point I just realized I was very attracted to her," he says. He was impressed to find "someone very strong, capable and willing to change her life because of her ideals. Although we come from very different backgrounds, we agree on all the important things."

In a way, both of them were outsiders to Grey County at different points in their lives. "We were very odd," recalls Skyler of his family. In a region where families had farmed the land for generations, "We had a weird last name (his father is a Serbian immigrant), and we grew garlic, which was an exotic vegetable at the time." For Brenda, her family's move from Edmonton to Mississauga when she was in high school had placed her in a community filled with Asian faces like hers, and a wealth of ethnic food choices. Landing in Grey County, she missed that variety, and also found that she needed to teach consumers who had never seen Chinese vegetables how to cook her bok choy, napa cabbage and hakurei turnips. Even the idea of eating lamb was foreign to many. "I'm always trying to educate without being stuffy," she says. "Sometimes I just crave seeing a face that isn't white." The experience is so rare that when Emma sees another female Asian face, "she assumes that person is my sister."

Yet Brenda feels embraced by the community of farmers that surround her, many of whom are, like her, urbanites who opted to leave the city to farm. Her position as president of Local 344, the Grey County branch of the National Farmers Union, gives her a forum to exchange information and advice. She has stressed diversity there, too, and is part of an initiative to work in solidarity with the local Indigenous population. In the sheep meadow, the flock—a mix of breeds including Romney, Gotland and Dorset—is a mass of woolly beige and black dotted with placid faces. The animals crowd

around a mineral block and nose us curiously. Back at the barn, we look at the remains of an old cement silo, and the large plastic containers that will become part of an irrigation system the couple is installing. "My current obsession is how to retain every drop of water," says Brenda. Although Ontario is blessed with large quantities of water, she worries about the long-term effects of climate change. "We're already in a drought, and it's only mid-June." During her time on the farm, she's witnessed a shift from rarely needing to irrigate to a pattern of drought interspersed with torrential rains.

Yet between the droughts of 2012 and 2016, she's also seen how her soil-building efforts have paid off. In 2016, she says, "I had my most amazing year ever because the soil had changed so much. It was able to retain moisture so much better."

From the barn, as we look out over the fields we have just walked, Brenda exclaims, "Look at how many gradations of green there are!" She takes in the biodiversity she has built: birdlife so dense at times its song can be deafening, a pond full of newts, salamanders and toads, and soil growing richer and more nutrient dense by the year.

"There's just life everywhere," she says. "I don't know what my neighbors think, but to me, this is paradise."

