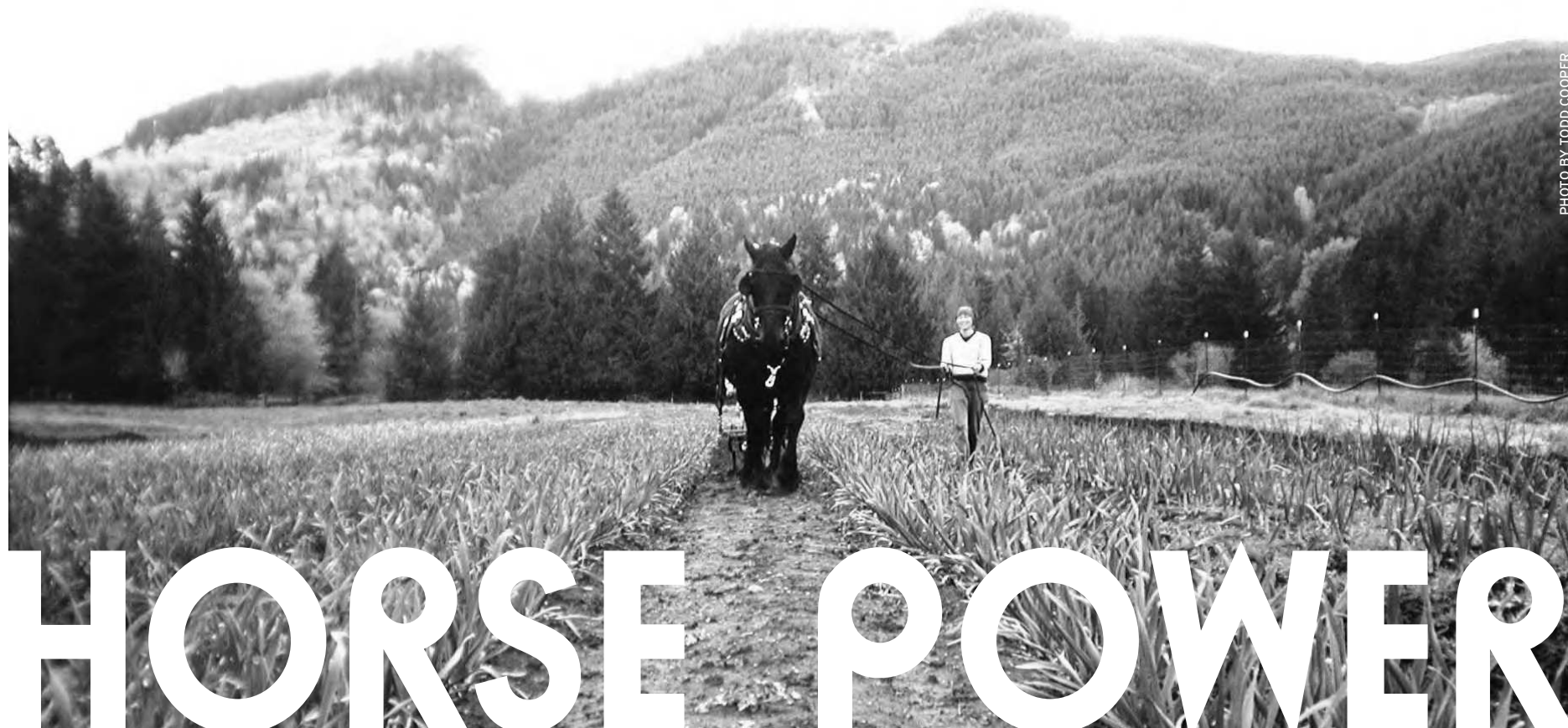




HORSE POWER

COTTAGE GROVE FARM STEPS BACK IN TIME. by Aria Seligmann

A big part of the philosophy on Ruby and Amber's Organic Oasis, a farm located in Dorena, is "small is beautiful." That refers to the size of the farm, but doesn't apply to Ruby and Amber, the 1,800 lb. half-sister Belgian draft horses who pull the plow. Nor will it apply to the sisters' sons, Nugget and Moose, respectively, who will one day literally follow in their mothers' footsteps.

Ruby and Amber's is a 30-acre farm that only keeps two to three acres in production each year. "The perfect size for working with draft horses," says co-owner Walt Bernard. He, along with owner Chris Woolhouse, had previously farmed without horses in California, but once they learned how to use draft horses, moved to their idyllic spot at a 1,000 ft. elevation in the Willamette Valley foothills where the land is level and the community welcoming.

The certified organic farm is a CSA (community supported agriculture), which means participants buy shares in the farm and are in turn offered a weekly basket of fresh produce and flowers. Shares for flower baskets alone are also sold, and the farm has a booth at the Tuesday and Saturday Farmers' Markets in Eugene.

The farm employs three to five seasonal workers, including Paul Campbell, who along with Bernard and Woolhouse, stands in the fields on a warm, overcast spring afternoon.

Although the farm employs one small tractor — "mostly for moving stuff like compost around," says Campbell — the engine's been converted to run on locally produced biodiesel fuel.

"The horses are fueled by renewable fuels — like grasses, grains and don't emit pollution, but compost," says Woolhouse.

In addition to sustainable energy practices, the farmers are looking at ways of decreasing, not increasing, the amount of land they work. "We try to get the highest yield out of the smallest space," says Campbell.

He hopes to teach that to others, to make farming even more sustainable. Smaller farms mean less erosion, soil disruption and more

preservation of wild habitat. Studies also show that small farms have substantially higher yields per acre than larger ones.

Plus, that makes Ruby and Amber's work a little easier. The horse sisters have been farming organically together for six years, three of those years with Bernard and Woolhouse, who've collected various horse-drawn farm implements and taught themselves how to use them. "We want to teach and preserve the culture of horse-farming," they say, and hold workshops to train others. Attendees come from Portland to California to learn the old ways.

Bernard points out the equipment they use as he gets the horses ready for work. First he'll use a harrow, a small metal tool for pulling up weeds. He points to antique plows and newer equipment he uses "to combine the best of both worlds," he says.

The horses are ready. Straps attached to the harrow with a bit create balance and breaking action. The horses' bridles have blinders to avoid distraction. A wide bar connects the straps to the harrow. It can also be attached to a cart for riding. "But walking," says Bernard, "is much easier on the back."

He takes off behind the horses. "You're not leading them, just skillfully managing the reins," he says. "They're much stronger than you."

"Lines train the horses, you just tug gently, plus they're listening," he says. "You watch the ears to know what they're about to do."

Two horses generate 48 HP — they can pull 10-15 percent of their weight all day with breaks. They can also work wet soil when a tractor can't.

As the horses pull the harrow, weeds are pulled out by their roots. As Bernard circles with the horses, Campbell points to the ground, "Here, we'll grow root crops: onions, carrots and beets." Overhead irrigation will be used in this area, but mostly the farm uses drip irrigation.

Next, Bernard and Woolhouse hitch up the plow, and Bernard once again begins to circle. As the horses go by, the plow's gentle rolling

is all that can be heard, along with Bernard's whispering a quick "Step up" (go) and elongated "Whoa" (stop). Occasionally, he breathes "Gee" (go right) or "Haw" (go left). The quiet is noticeable, along with the mist settling over the fields, and the scent of fresh earth.

"The plow responds to the subtlety of the soil and you can make adjustments as you go," he says.

There is a pattern and rhythm working and communicating with horses. A kinship, a partnership. Plus, it's easy on the soil, minimizing soil compaction and erosion.

The horses' weight is distributed only where their hoofs are in contact with the ground (as opposed to a tractor wheel). They naturally avoid softer beds where plants are planted.

Also, the slower speed and closeness to the soil gives better knowledge and information about the soil, says Bernard.

"You can plow an acre in one day, if you know what you're doing and the horses are in good shape," says Woolhouse. The farmer has to be in good shape, too. Plowing an acre is the equivalent of walking 11 miles.

"Walt makes it look really easy, but it's not," says Campbell. "It's a lot of work to keep a straight line in that furrow," he says, as the horses go 'round a second time, with Amber stepping right into the gully she just helped dig.

After the plowing is finished, Ruby is led back to the barn, and Amber's left to weed the garlic beds alone. "Once the plants get too big, you can't use two horses," says Bernard. "You can use a single horse for smaller, narrower areas, but you can't cut a tractor in half."

Now Woolhouse drives Amber, who pulls a walking cultivator. It skims under the surface of the soil and easily pulls up the weeds. "It's nervous-making," says Bernard. "If you're not careful, you can run right over your own crops."

Meanwhile, Amber looks down, carefully plotting each footstep she's about to take next, watching the row as she goes. **EW**

An open farm day is planned from 1-4 pm Sunday, May 25 at the farm, which is located at 75976 Booth Kelly Camp Rd. in Dorena. Call (541) 946-1504 for information, or visit the Farmers' Market booth.



CHRIS WOOLHOUSE, RUBY, PAUL CAMPBELL, AMBER AND WALT BERNARD.