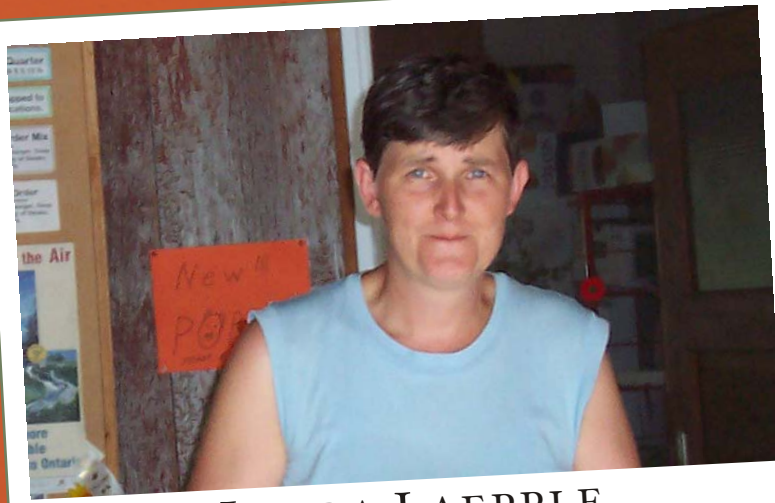


# Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profits

Growing a sustainable farm business



**LINDA LAEPPLE**

LAEPPLE ORGANIC FARM

Linda Laepple's agricultural roots extend through countless generations of Bavarian farmers. Today, she and her family pursue that tradition at their Waterloo Region organic farm.

## The Series

*Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profits* is a series of seven case studies featuring innovative farmers with non-traditional backgrounds. The series shares practical production tips, innovative marketing approaches and creative ways to successfully negotiate the myriad challenges that new farmers face in their start-up years and beyond.

### **Participants in the series include:**

**Elisabeth Bzikot** - Best Baa Farm and Ewenity Dairy Co-op

**Linda Crago** - Tree and Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm

**Caitlin Hall** - Reroot Organic CSA

**Shin Kang** - Skyland Farms

**Linda Laepple** - Laepple Organic Farm

**Achim Mohssen-Beyk** - Reachview Farm and Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op

**Ute Zell** - Smiling Goat Farm

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**“W**hen I was 20 I came to Stratford and worked for 11 years with a German family. I had started to work for them in 1980, in Bavaria, then their farm was sold for the Munich airport expansion, and they immigrated to Canada. They asked me if I wanted to come with them. I said, ‘Yes, for a year.’ And I stayed for 11 years.”

“We were potato growers in Germany and we got a call from my former boss, who said there is a farm for sale. My husband got the call on Friday,

he flew over on Saturday, and the auction was on Monday. He didn't know a word of English, except yes and no.”

### **The farm**

Linda and Fritz Laepple own a 283-acre mixed organic farm in Waterloo Region. They have farmed there with their six children since emigrating from Germany in 1998.

The Laepplés' farm business has four main components. They grow 20 acres of potatoes, some of which they sell at their farm store, but most of which go to Pfennings Organic Vegetables, an

“People gave us advice when we were looking for farms. They said, ‘Look at the farmhouse. If there are nice farmhouses in the area, then this area has always had productive land.’”

organic produce distributor in nearby Baden, ON. They raise cattle, which they sell as freezer beef at the farm store.

The Laepplés also produce rye, wheat, and spelt, some of which is milled at home for use in Linda’s bread – baked fresh every Friday for sale at the farm. In addition, the farm produces mixed grains for the cattle, and hay for home use and for sale to local stables. The Laepplés have never hired outside labour, but they do host volunteers.

#### Starting out

The Laepplés were drawn to Canada in part by the promise of a steady market for their organic potatoes. As a young woman, Linda had built strong ties to Waterloo Region’s German-Canadian farming community, and a fondness for the area.

She had been farming in Germany for seven years when she and Fritz were presented with the opportunity to grow organic potatoes to sell to their friends, the Pfennings, in Ontario. Because they were coming from a successful operation in Germany, the couple was able to draw from savings to purchase their Kitchener-area farm.

“People gave us advice when we were looking for farms. They said, ‘Look at the farmhouse. If there are nice farmhouses in the area, then this area has always had productive land. If

there are crappy houses, than it has been a poor area... For the winter, look at what size snow blowers they have!”

The property they chose has good buildings, good soil, and is not too snowy in the winter. But it was an unlucky place for its previous owner, a cash cropper and pig farmer who was driven close to bankruptcy, in part by the uncontrollable cycles of commodity markets.

“He had high input costs, and there was not much money in the soybeans or the corn. He had very high electricity bills, because he had insulated the barn, and he had about ten blowers going to keep the temperature down, he had so many pigs in there. His wife had to work as a bus driver, because the farm would not support them.”

The Laepplés took a very different approach to managing the farm. Some of the first changes they made were to the barn: they removed the insulation from the windows in the barn, opened up the barn to natural ventilation, and reduced the number of animals kept inside.

“We saved so much electricity that Hydro came out and checked the transformer three times. They even replaced it, because they could not believe that this farm all of a sudden doesn’t use that much electricity anymore!”

#### Sustainability and self-reliance

These energy-saving measures are typical of the family’s approach to farming, which is guided by a commitment to ecological sustainability, frugality, and self-reliance. Linda calls it “making use of what you have”.

Over the last nine years, the Laepplés have installed a solar water heating system, replaced the old oil furnace in their farmhouse with a wood furnace, and installed a large woodstove in their kitchen, on which Linda does the cooking in the winter. Linda also bakes her bread in a wood-fired oven – built by Fritz – which she heats with brushwood from the farm and scrap from a local sawmill.

She and Fritz hope one day to create an alternative energy demonstration project at Laepple Farm. To begin working towards this goal, they have mounted wind sensors on their silo, and have started a renewable energy cooperative: Local Initiatives for Future Energy, or LIFE Co-op. Linda is enthusiastic about LIFE Co-op, which has recently received a grant to create a learning plan. But she is equally proud of the simpler measures by which her family achieves ecological and economic viability for the farm.

“The best part of it is that we don’t need to go to the grocery store for our food.”



**“One thing benefits the other... The manure from the cows becomes compost, which is our fertilizer. But it has to be handled right.”**

In addition to their homegrown beef, grain, and potatoes, the Laepplés raise ducks and laying hens for meat and eggs, maintain an apple orchard and vegetable garden, and keep a Jersey cow for milk, butter, yogurt and cheese. Linda calculates that this ‘house cow’ alone saves the family \$3,000 a year.

Further cost-saving measures include doing all their own building and renovations, and repairing all their machinery themselves. The workshop at Laepple Farm is fitted out with welding equipment, a complete woodworking shop, and a machinery repair shop, including a hoist. Two of their sons are now licensed mechanics. Linda still cites equipment repairs as a major production cost – “you always have to buy parts” – but her family’s do-it-yourself approach has kept these costs manageable.

### **Diverse skills for a diverse farm**

“You produce what you’re experienced in. This was our main thing. And for organic farming, you need compost, and you need livestock to do that. So we knew we had to keep some livestock. When we came here, we had the opportunity to board horses. I was raising yearlings and 2 year-olds for my old boss, and then we started to build up our beef herd. I had experience raising horses, and Fritz had experience in so many areas, but also in the potatoes. And we had the machinery to do that.”



“The Laepplés’ mixed production strategy distributes risk among four areas: potatoes, beef cattle, grain and poultry.”

As experienced farmers, the Laepplés arrived in Ontario with the equipment and knowledge needed to launch a successful mixed organic farm. Linda describes the farm’s diversity as the operation’s greatest strength.

One of the benefits of the Laepplés’ four-pronged production strategy relates to risk management: not putting all your eggs in one basket. In 2004, changing organic regulations prevented the farmers from spraying for Colorado beetle. As a result, the family lost half their potato crop. However, they were able to balance this loss with revenue generated by a bumper grain harvest.

A mixed farm also presents a way to lower input costs by linking different production systems so that the farm may produce much of what it needs. But Linda underlines the broad skill set that maintaining such a complex, self-contained system demands.

“One thing benefits the other... The manure from the cows becomes compost, which is our fertilizer. But it has to be handled right. You have to put it out in rows and you have to turn it at the right time.”

Making compost from manure might not seem like a difficult skill to master, but it is a good example of the kind of specialized knowledge that

# Linda counsils new farmers to seek out apprenticeship opportunities on established farms.

mixed organic farming requires. To successfully run their farm, the Laepples must be builders, carpenters, metalworkers, mechanics, bakers, veterinarians, horticulturalists, and accountants.

## Lessons

Both Fritz and Linda honed their diverse skill set by learning agriculture as a trade. A wide range of practical skills are taught at the German agriculture college they attended, from safe chainsaw handling to home canning techniques. Linda credits the Laepple Farm's economic and ecological viability in part to this practical education and hopes that young farmers in Canada might one day have access to such courses.

Linda also highlights on-farm learning as a crucial means of developing the skills and experience required to operate a farm. She counsels new farmers to seek out apprenticeship opportunities on established farms.



The Laepples are firm believers in maintaining a 'house cow' for home dairy production. Their jersey cow saves them \$3000 and 2920 plastic milk bags each year.

"In years back, you had to work one year on a farm. Even if you had all the money, you were not able to buy a farm unless you worked. And this should apply today... There are so many farmers who are looking for the right person to share the

workload and the business with. There are opportunities (for new farmers) to do a business partnership, or to look after one aspect, one area where they have experience."

## What is FarmStart?

The objective of FarmStart is to **support and encourage a new generation of farmers** to develop locally based, ecologically sound and economically viable agricultural enterprises.

There are many challenges in agriculture today but there are also **many exciting opportunities**. By thinking about agriculture in new and innovative ways we can meet the challenges head on with a variety of solutions that promote a **a sustainable, healthy and regional food supply**.

Successful farms make important contributions to the health and vibrancy of both rural and urban communities. FarmStart encourages new farmers to engage in **entrepreneurial strategies that creatively turn challenges into opportunities**.

To learn more please visit [www.farmstart.ca](http://www.farmstart.ca) or call 519.836.7046



The Ignatius Incubator Farm - Guelph, ON