What If Every Church Became a House of Prayer?

Jessica Stotz

Andrews University

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A Farm Takes Root
WHAT ONE COUPLE LEARNED ABOUT THE EARTH AND STEWARDSHIP

In the rolling landscape of Michigan’s St. Joseph River valley, Paul and Shelli Meulemans are carving out a healthy lifestyle, one vegetable at a time.

It all started with planting more raspberries than they could eat. “The rest is history,” says Paul, recalling his father’s ambitious Wisconsin backyard growing operation — a source of inspiration for Paul’s dream of someday having his own farm. The proverbial seed of this dream was further nurtured by watching his grandparents run a small-scale market vegetable operation, which grew from a simple hobby into a source of supplemental retirement income. Paul muses: “The idea that one could simply grow things in the earth, then sell what grows, was a cool idea.”

Shelli Nash Meulemans didn’t grow up with an overabundance of raspberries but was exposed early to growing food in a large family garden, preserving the harvest for healthy meal options throughout
the year. This influenced Shelli in her pursuit of education and licensure as a dietitian, studying at Andrews University, where she met Paul. Married in 2011, their family has grown from two to more. First, the additions of four furry friends – Nacho, Kona, Zyla and Maple; more recently, little Bria joined as the newest farmhand.

Although the Meulemans have had a family garden for multiple years, the dream of a farm didn’t move into actionable stages until 2017. They worked hard to conduct market research and determine crop profitability, plotting potential planting carefully and intentionally, finally moving into full-time farming this summer: growing a variety of fruits, vegetables and greens, all as a certified naturally grown farm, avoiding the use of synthetic herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

A specific niche is the production of leafy greens. Paul states that the vast majority of greens are grown in California and southwestern United States, negatively impacting the cost and quality of greens reaching consumers in the Midwest. “[By] growing these crops locally for people in the area, we deliver a superior product due to the short supply chain,” says Paul.

Transitioning to a full-scale farm hasn’t been all roses and raspberries. The Meulemans cite extensive damage by four-legged, green-chomping, cotton-tailed pests, and poor experiences with weed control. They struggled with doubt and discouragement after substantial crop failures, poor market returns, and seemingly impenetrable failures. Their motivation to keep going and growing comes from customers who share a deep appreciation for the farm’s produce and ethos. Paul draws advice from one of the harder lessons in the school of farm life: “Don’t be afraid to start over. In our line of work, it can be very disheartening to destroy a crop and replace it, but if you see that failure is inevitable, it is better to destroy it than wait and have it taking space and cluttering your life.”

Paul and Shelli’s passion for responsible farming practices extends beyond their home. They have a passion for good nutrition, and a burden to share it with the community through food stands, farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), and wholesale product supply to local grocers. As largely self-taught organic farmers, they have taken the responsibility to share their knowledge of sustainably caring for God’s Creation. They also find that caring for themselves includes observing a weekly day of rest from the frenetic farm life — a treasured Sabbath to recover physically and mentally, to step back and reflect on the past week.
Q & A WITH THE MEULEMANS

Is buying organic produce really worth it? What difference does it make?

There are three basic arguments that can be made in favor of choosing organically grown products. The reduced environmental impact; the quality, flavor and nutritive value; and the reduced toxin load in our bodies. Conventional agriculture relies on chemicals — fumigants, herbicides, fungicides and pesticides. Sustainable agriculture relies on farm management techniques such as fertilization techniques, crop rotations, animal feeding and waste management. It’s good to remember that by choosing organic produce, you are reducing the toxin load for you and your family.

I’m on a tight budget and can’t afford to make the switch to an entirely organic pantry. Is it true that some produce is “safer” than others to buy non-organic?

Chemicals are compounding in our body. While we cannot totally eliminate them, by reducing the toxin load we can bring them down to a level manageable by our body’s systems. The Environmental Working Group (EWG) puts out lists of the “Dirty Dozen.” [https://www.ewg.org/foodnews/dirty-dozen.php] and the “Clean Fifteen” [https://www.ewg.org/foodnews/clean-fifteen.php]. You should avoid non-organic produce from the Dirty Dozen list, and the Clean Fifteen are examples of produce that can be conventionally purchased when organic is prohibitively priced or unavailable. Bear in mind that this response is purely based on your personal health, not the health of the planet.

Any tips on how to make my garden grow?

Get a soil test. It takes time and effort to make soil that will truly meet the needs of your crops, so be patient and test yearly. Providing soil microbes with a level of organic matter will be critical to success. Aim for 5 to 7 percent. Focus on weed prevention. At the farm, we make a clean and ‘stale’ bed by leaving it covered with plastic until the weeds germinate, then die. Then, don’t till! Tilling disrupts the soil microbes and causes soil compaction, ultimately bringing up more weed seeds.

Veggie recommendations for the young sprouts in my household?

Kids will find Hokkaido turnips absolutely delicious. They are sweet and crisp.

What is your passion? What niche are you cultivating as you take your place among God’s stewards?

What oft-overlooked produce do you recommend adding to my grocery list?

Kohlrabi. Get it fresh at a farm; I have never had good-tasting kohlrabi from a grocery store. Peel it, cut it into chunks, and eat fresh on a salad, in a stir fry, baked with potatoes, or creamed on toast — enjoy it!

Truly, the Meulemans have responded to the commission God has given each of us — to care for the earth He created and everything in it. What is your passion? What niche are you cultivating as you take your place among God’s stewards?

Wisconsin native and Andrews University graduate, Jessica Stotz, is a physical therapist. She also loves to serve. After a year abroad as a student missionary, she continues to seek ways to serve humanity.