

*The Newspaper That Cares About Rural Life*

# The Country Today

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"(The project) is as much a goal to educate researchers as to educate farmers," says Jan Harrison, a UW-Madison agronomy research assistant.

The success of the transition won't be measured in terms of financial gain only, Altfred says. For the Krusenbaums, there is a certain amount of idealism in farming.

"Our aim is not to be organic just to be certified," Altfred notes. "The main motivation for us going organic is out of a certain stewardship ethic toward the soil, the earth, and ultimately, for mankind."

"There's hardly any farmer that's a conventional farmer at heart," he adds. "Many are forced or pressured (to use chemicals) because they don't have other information available to them."

Unlike most farmers, neither Altfred nor Sue is new to organic farming. Sue grew up on a nearby organic farm, while Altfred became interested in organic farming while studying agriculture in his native Germany. Before coming to this farm, both worked on an organic farm near East Troy for several years.

The biggest challenges facing the couple are getting the right crop rotation in place and reducing soil erosion.

Crop rotation is the center of any organic farming system, Altfred notes. By rotating crops each year, farmers can better control diseases,

insects and weeds without chemicals. Crop rotation also helps to improve soil fertility. While the previous farmer grew mostly continuous corn, the Krusenbaums hope to have a rotation that includes alfalfa/bromegrass, corn, soybeans, oats and wheat.

The Krusenbaums also place a high priority on reducing soil erosion on their rolling land. Topsoil as deep as 12 feet covers the bottom land while very little topsoil is left on top, Altfred notes.

They plan to attack the erosion problem by using a chisel plow, improving grass waterways, and planting in contour strips. Their goal is to reduce erosion to less than 2 tons per acre per year.

Manure and legumes such as alfalfa will make up their sources of fertilizer. The land has a good start, having received sewage sludge applications for the past 10 years from the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District. The Krusenbaums compost all their manure, keeping it in long windrows and applying it in spring before planting.

"We feel that it's very important that manure is composted before it's put on the land," Altfred says. "The whole concept is that we're not fertilizing the plant, but the soil."

The Krusenbaums controlled weeds last year without herbicides, relying instead on mechanical cultivation. The only insecticide they used was to control corn rootworm. Altfred says this problem can be

eliminated through crop rotation.

The recent plunge in milk prices has made Altfred and Sue's conversion plans more difficult. "It's a shame farmers have to produce milk for such a low price," Altfred notes. "But it's a reality given our market situation, and we have had to adapt to it by adding more cows."

The Krusenbaums are taking a cautious approach in making the transition to organic farming, Mr. Harrison notes.

"Altfred and Sue are pioneers," she says. "They are taking risks to make changes on their farm, and they are lighting the way for others."

The case study is funded by the UW-Madison Center for Integrated Ag Systems and the federal Low-Input Sustainable Agriculture (LISA) program.

UW Agricultural and Consumer Press Service

## Tractor safety course offered

Cashton

A tractor safety and certification course for 14- and 15-year-old Monroe County youths will be held at the Cashton High School June 3-5. The sessions will run from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. the first two days, with a 30-minute break for lunch. The third day will run from 8:30 a.m. until the conclusion of the practical driving exam at about 1 p.m.

Participants may enroll by contacting the vocational-agriculture instructor from their school district.

# Krusenbaums are working hard to make unconventional ways pay

## Elkhorn

Like most farmers, Altfred and Sue Krusenbaum work hard to earn a decent living. But they're going about it in some unconventional ways.

The young Walworth County couple are converting their 240-acre dairy/cash grain farm from a conventional to an organic operation. The Krusenbaums, who are starting their second year on the farm, expect it will take five to seven years to make the transition.

While conventional farming relies on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides to grow crops, organic farming makes use of natural fertilizers and alternative pest control strategies. Low-input farming

lies somewhere between the two, seeking to move away from, but not always eliminating, synthetic chemicals.

As interest in low-input and organic farming grows, more people are asking questions about the risks involved in converting from a conventional system. Agricultural specialists from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Michael Fields Agricultural Institute are working with the Krusenbaums to find answers to these questions.

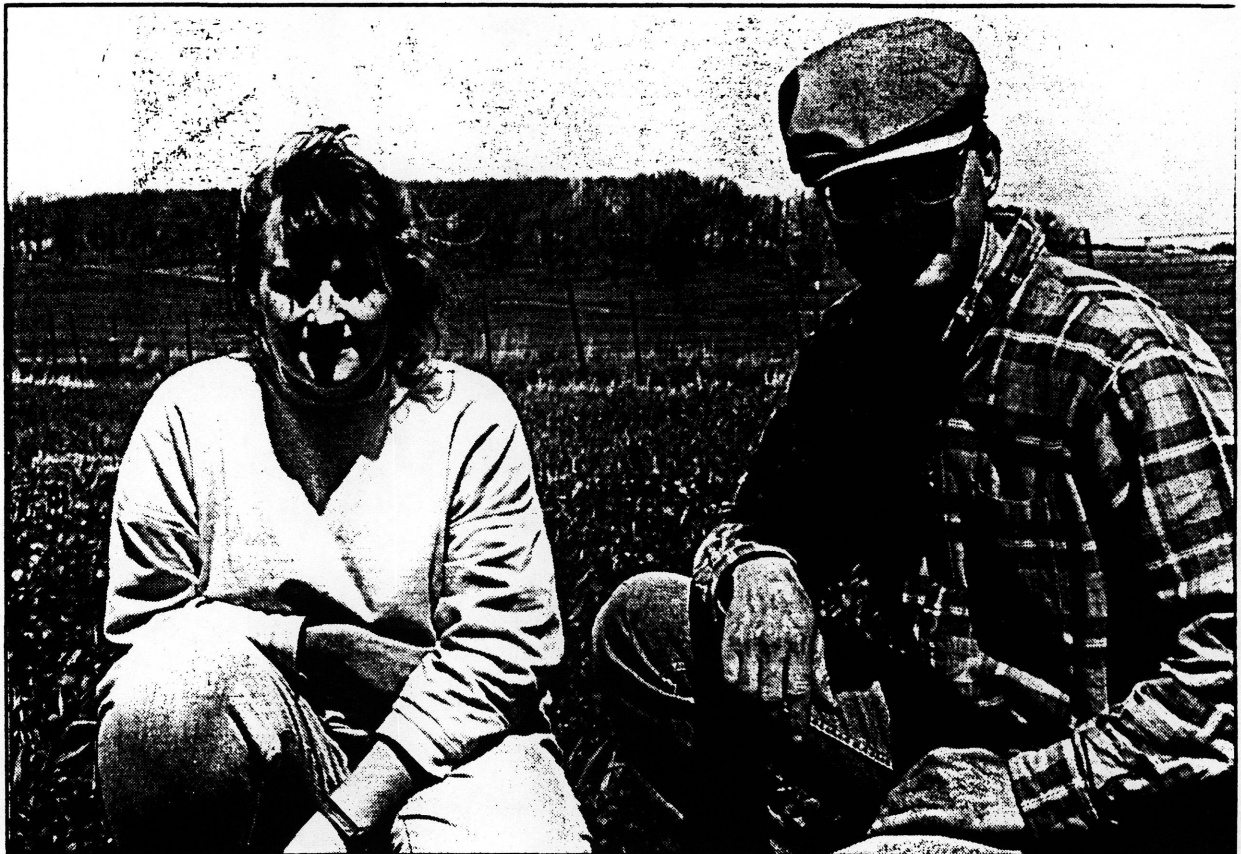
The specialists are monitoring farming practices, finances and decision-making processes to look at how the Krusenbaums make the transition to an organic operation.

The project's long-term, whole-

farm approach will give researchers a more in-depth understanding of how the different components of farming fit together, says Josh Posner, a UW-Madison agronomist who coordinates the project with John Hall of the Michael Fields Institute. Traditional research on individual experimental plots doesn't allow for these connections, Mr. Posner adds.

"Our hope is that this case study would put us in a better position to respond to questions from farmers on low-input alternatives," he says.

The team also hopes to learn how researchers from various disciplines and farmers can work together most effectively.



## Innovators

Photo by Brenda Blum

Sue and Altfred Krusenbaum of Elkhorn, in Walworth County, are trying unconventional methods to convert their 240-acre dairy and cash grain farm to an "organic" operation, stressing composting of manure and non-chemical means of controlling weeds and insect pests.