

Farmer Pursues Better Way To Grow Berries

By Chad Libbey

RICHFORD: An organic vegetable farmer from Richford recently received a \$3,690 grant for his plans to start a pesticide-free, pick your own strawberry and blueberry operation.

Dean Stockman received the grant through the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program which is run through the University of Vermont under the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. The program offers grants to farmers using experimental agricultural techniques throughout the Northeast.

Stockman said that he picked the two fruits for very specific reasons.

"I picked blueberries mainly for future interests," he said. "They'll be ready in the next five or 10 years. Blueberries don't need any chemicals either. I picked strawberries mainly



cals either. I picked strawberries mainly for public relations. There are a lot of traditional people around here that like to pick them."

To keep down pests and weeds without the benefit of pesticides, Stockman will plant the fruits in patches of oats and white clover. He said that the two plants used together are very effective at keeping down weeds.

"The oats were planted last summer, and once they are up a few inches you put the clover down," he said. "The oats dried up and became like mulch over the field. That will keep down annual weeds. The white clover is short-growing and adds fertilizer to the soil. I was hoping by doing this it could help with weed control. I'm trying to get natural mulch."

The listing of grants from SARE said that Stockman will monitor the effectiveness of the cover crops and measure their weed control properties on the berries.

Alternative farming techniques aren't new to Stockman. He said that organic farming is in his blood.

"My father has an organic farm in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts," he said. "My father's father was an organic farmer before him, and before that it was all organic. I come from a long line of farmers."

Stockman is one of the largest organic vegetable farmers in Franklin County,



Dean Stockman, an organic farmer, surveys lettuce sprouts in his wood-heated greenhouse on his organic vegetable farm in Richford. Stockman recently received a grant for growing strawberries and blueberries without chemicals. (Photograph by Chad Libbey)

and plants mostly lettuce on 35 acres of tillable land near the Missisquoi River in Richford.

To get his produce to markets in Boston and Washington, DC, Stockman has joined the Deep Root Organic Truck Farmers Coop, a collection of 12 farms in Vermont and Quebec that pool resources to have their vegetables shipped south.

Stockman said that organic vegetable farming has been a tough venture and that his farm has survived by keeping overhead low. For example, he built his house, including the foundation, for a price tag of \$4,000.

"Well, for the last three years we have grossed an average of \$70,000 dollars," he said. "We just have to struggle. We have very little to live on, but we get most of our food needs from what we grow."

Which, for the acreage, is quite impressive. Stockman has an encyclopedic knowledge of what his plants require to grow, and credits most of his success to the soil.

In fact, one of the reasons that Stockman decided to settle in Richford is because of the soils. He went to Johnson State College and when he graduated in 1988 was look-

ing for a place to start a farm.

"I knew people in the area," he said. "There's something special about the river bottom land here. It's only found throughout Vermont, western Massachusetts, and western Connecticut."

Stockman said that the soil, called Hadley Silt-Loam, is found here because of a band of metamorphic rock extending through the area, and that it is very deep and mostly free of stones.

"I have very little trouble growing produce as good as you would find in a supermarket," he said. "That soil's as good as you would find in California. I can grow things here like you can't believe."

However well his soil may grow vegetable crops, he is having trouble finding a market for them. That is why he wanted to get the funding for the blueberry and strawberry projects.

"There is no market for it because they can do it so well in California," he said. "They have flat land, water, no pests, and no weeds. The blueberries are future investments. When I can't farm here anymore, I will have something left to pay the taxes."