

Couple works to bring kiwis to area

By MAURICE DUMAS
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BENTON — With infant son Daniel on her back and 4-year-old Elizabeth picking dandelions by her side, Mary Howell Martens Wednesday snipped away at vines that could produce a new crop for Finger Lakes farmers.

Martens and her husband, Klaas, are in the fourth year of an experimental project to learn how to grow hardy kiwi.

The couple already have plenty to do. They have a third child, Peter, in the first grade, and some 900 acres to tend to on their organic farm on Ridge Road. They grow an assortment of crops: corn, wheat, soybeans, dry beans, hay, buckwheat, barley, rye, blue corn and spelt, a wheat substitute.

But Martens, a part-time biology instructor at Finger Lakes Community College, and her husband are both intrigued by the challenge of mass-producing a new, easy-to-eat food.

"We are just inveterate experimenters," she said.

Hardy kiwi are related to the fuzzy kiwi — native to New Zealand, primarily grown in California and now sold in major supermarkets.

The hardy kiwi is smaller than a regular kiwi and is similar in size to a fig or large olive. A major attraction of hardy kiwi is the fruit can be eaten right off the vine when ripe: no peeling, slicing or preparation.

Kiwis have a sweet taste, are slightly crunchy due to their small edible seeds, and are extremely high in Vitamin C.

"They're an ideal children's food," said Martens. "Kids can pop them right into their mouths."

The Martens children liked the hardy kiwi they first encountered last fall as a gift from a Sodus farmer.

"The kids destroyed a quart in no time," said Klaas Martens.

As organic farmers, the Martens are attracted to hardy kiwi because the plant has no natural pests and can grow good-looking fruit without fungicides, pesticides or other



Maurice Dumas/Finger Lakes Times

Mary Howell Martens clips kiwi vines on her town of Benton farm last week. Martens and her husband Klaas, are experimenting with growing the hardy kiwi fruit on their organic farm. The Martens were attracted to the kiwi because the plant has no natural pests and can grow good-looking fruit without fungicides, pesticides or other sprays. "With organically grown kiwi, we'll have a very small supply chasing a very big market," Klaas said.

sprays. The Martens are controlling weeds around their 25 plants with wood chip mulch and by mowing.

One native pest has been deer, who nibbled the leaves and defoliated several vines last year. The Martens now ward off the unwelcome visitors by hanging small bags of perfumed soap on the trellis.

The Martens are growing four different varieties of hardy kiwi on a trellis built from 2-by-8 planks on poles topped by three strands of wire about five feet from the ground. They expect the kiwi plants to grow so well they will require a much sturdier trellis than used for grapes.

The rampant growth, if trimmed properly, can also lead to a large harvest, up to 50 pounds per plant.

The first crop may arrive this year if the three male plants produce flowers to pollinate the female flowers. The small first crop will probably be added to weekly fruit baskets the farm

supplies to about 10 families during the season.

Klaas Martens expects to easily sell larger crops of kiwi at The Windmill farm and craft market in Barrington, with the fruit fetching up to \$1 a pound. That's \$2,000 a ton, a much higher price than the \$150 to more than \$1,000 now paid for a ton of grapes, depending on whether they are Concord or a vinifera variety.

"With organically grown kiwi, we'll have a very small supply chasing a very big market," said Klaas Martens.

The biggest drawback so far is the long waiting period between planting and a full harvest, up to eight years before a farmer gets any return on the investment.

Although the vines can cost up to \$17 each, the Martens only bought a few, getting most of their plants by making cuttings from hardy kiwi vines at the state Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva. The

cuttings were rooted in 1999 and planted near the orchard the following year. If the Martens want to expand the plantings, they can create more plants from cuttings trimmed from their own vines.

Whatever the Martens learn from their experiments on kiwi varieties, soils, pests, trimming and trellising will be passed on to others.

The Northeast Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, funded through the United States Department of Agriculture, awarded them a \$1,078 grant last year. In return, the couple will put together a report detailing their findings, which will be made available to other farmers and gardeners through the University of Vermont.

And of their own volition, the Martens will host an open house the first year — perhaps this fall — their plants produce enough fruit for a free tasting party.