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2 Solebury women take up organic farming

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Editor's Note

Roots to River Farm is an organic farm in its first year of operation. It is owned and managed by Bucks County native Malaika Spencer. She's worked on farms throughout the world and has managed small projects, but has never taken on such a large endeavor. Even with a world of knowledge, not everything can prepare Spencer for the unpredictable nature of farming. This occasional series will document life as a young farmer and the successes and struggles of Roots to River's first year.



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Stephanie Veto / Staff Photographer

Amanda Midkiff and Candice Lannette cover rows of young plants to protect them at Roots to River Farm in Solebury Township.

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Malaika's tips for organic garden practices

Organic weed practices: Instead of using

Posted: Monday, September 23, 2013 1:30 pm | *Updated: 12:48 pm, Mon Nov 4, 2013.*

By **Stephanie Veto** Staff photographer

Roots to River Farm owner Malaika Spencer and assistant manager Amanda Midkiff are busy planting seeds and buds in their bright and warm greenhouse in Solebury — well protected from the cool morning air.

Spencer is a few months into the first year of owning and operating her farm. She and Midkiff have been transitioning 12.5 acres of leased farmland that was previously used for commercial production into an organic agricultural space.

Day after day, the farmers fill rows and rows of crates with fresh dirt and gently place the delicate newborn buds in their own cups. The crates are positioned on tables to rest and mature under the protection of the greenhouse until they're strong enough to be planted outside.

The women tediously label each row of plants with their dirt-encrusted fingers as they log what they plant and when in a thick blue binder.

The occasional rain shower patters on the plastic roof of the greenhouse, drowning out the radio playing in the background.

During dryer days, Spencer is busy outside, tilling the ground with her John Deere tractor. Her faithful dog, Kidogo, follows close behind and keeps watch — his ears alert and his fierce blue eyes darting in all directions for critters to chase.

The land Spencer is busy tilling was previously used for conventional corn and soybean production, which means chemicals such as herbicides and pesticides were used

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herbicide, mulch your garden with straw, wood chips or plastic to keep the weeds down.

Organic pest control: Cover brassicas (cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, brussels sprouts) and cucurbits (squash, pumpkin, zucchini) with a row cloth to keep out flea beetles and cucumber beetles. Organic sprays such as Bacillus thuringiensis and pyrethrin can help with cabbageworms, leafhoppers and harlequin bugs. Garlic and mineral oil sprays can work for aphids. However, the best way to control pests is to help encourage beneficial bugs such as ladybugs and spiders to keep the pests down. When you spray a pesticide, it affects those populations, too, and then your garden has no natural defenses for its pest problems.

Organic disease prevention: Diseases are harder to control organically once you have them. The key is to keep your plants as healthy as possible. Controlling pests that may be paths to disease and keeping leaves up off the ground either by staking or mulching will help control soil-borne diseases. Making sure the plants have enough room for ventilation and plenty of sun to dry out after they get wet is another good way to prevent fungal diseases.

regularly.

"With that sort of agriculture, you're not putting very much back into the soil," Spencer said. "You're taking away and then you're adding synthetic fertilizers that are not naturally found."

Spencer said she and Midkiff, a full-time intern and a part-time farmer, are working hard to rehabilitate the soil. But before they started working the land, a soil test revealed there were hardly any organic matter or nutrients left.

Nutrient-dense soil is essential to growing crops organically, and growing on land with poor soil presents a major challenge for the organic farmers, Spencer said.

To fix this, the women have added mushroom compost to the soil. They also added soybean meal, fish emulsion and other nutrient-dense materials to the soil at the vegetable roots to help with fertilization. Plus, they tilled the soil to aerate it.

"We're really going to be focusing on keeping the health of the soil and natural biology that's there to provide nutrients for our plants," Spencer said.

Because they use no chemicals, weeds, insects and other pests and disease become a concern.

Spencer said everything they do will follow organic practices. However, the USDA requires a three-year buffer period between having a traditional agriculture farm and bringing it back into a much-healthier organic system, she said.

"After three years, we'll be able to be certified organic, which just means we'll be getting more credit for the things that we've been doing," Spencer said.

Until then, theirs will be considered a transitional organic farm. But like all the challenges of farming, that doesn't deter Spencer.

"Organic agriculture is to me a very obvious step in the right direction," she said. "We're getting actual nutrients into our bodies from what we're nurturing, to be the life that we need."

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Images from Roots to River Farm in Solebury, an organic farm in its first year of operation.

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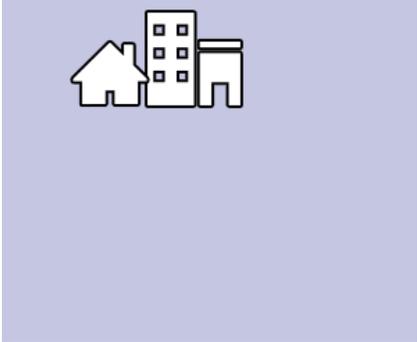
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