

The Natural Farmer

Dave Cassell, New Hampshire Small Farmer, Eyes 28th Straight Conference – Summer 2002

By Steve Lorenz

Perhaps the worst time New Hampshire subsistence farmer Dave Cassell ever had at a NOFA Summer Conference was in the early 90s when there were some bad rains. Cassell, who always camps, had set up his tent in a slight depression.

"Somehow the rain water slipped through, and it was just a big mess," he says in a way that makes you know he knows how to take the good with the bad.

But save that rather wet experience, Cassell has nothing but fond memories of the 27 NOFA summer conferences he's attended, which is to say, all of them.

"It's always a vacation for me," Cassell says. "There's good food, good thoughts. I'll take a walk around campus after dinner to see what wild stuff is growing, or I can walk by the book dealer, or see the keynote speaker. About the only problem I have is there's not enough time to do everything."

He only wishes the conference was bigger, that more people came to it or other organic growing conferences.

"It seems we're reaching the converted more than getting new people," he muses.

More than 50 years ago, when Cassell was growing up on a 430-acre Virginia farm, he says it was still a pretty good time for farmers. His family had dairy cows and beef cows, chickens. They grew grain and vegetables. In a word, the farm was diverse.

Not so nowadays, he laments, except for those in the organic movement.

And in his experiences flying and driving around the country as an internal auditor for the Navy, a job he retired from several years ago, Cassell saw fewer and fewer home gardens.

"You look for gardens in people's yards, and you don't see them. You see a lot of grass, but that's not real tasty."

In his trips to his old home in Virginia, he sees big developments going up, and no food getting put in. At the Summer Conference, Cassell says, there are plenty of people who aren't farmers or gardeners, but consumers.

"These are people 2, 3, 4, or 5 generations removed from farming," Cassell says. "And all you need to be is one to not know how things are done. But they're there, and the animals are there, and these consumers and their kids are getting good exposure to farm life. Maybe that's the key."

He says even though his travels have taken him all over the world, and he's chosen to live in New Hampshire, it's heartening to know he's not as 'far' from his childhood as he might have thought he'd be: on 10.5 acres, he grows much of his own food, and he heats with wood. Although it's not always less developed, Cassell likes New England: the seasons, the woods, the solitude.

And he likes the opportunity to go to the NOFA Summer Conference. In 27 years, he's seen the conference — and the organization — grow, get more organized, and grow some more.

"I always learned something every year, at the very least," Cassell says.

He recalls one particular year in the 80s at Johnson State College, where he saw "lots of innovative technology, driven by desperation."

The demonstrations included one man living way off the grid showing how he used an alternator from a police car and motorcycle parts to give him light. And other people showed slides of their walk-in refrigerator, which had a huge block of ice in the middle to keep everything cold throughout the year.

One thing Cassell looks forward to every year is the food at the conference, but he remembers when it was more "hit and miss."

"Early on, we prepared meals ourselves with volunteers and whatever contributions we received. You got what happened to be coming out."

In later years, when professional cooks prepared the meals, the food was great, and some chefs really got into organic food, making it an education for them as well as the conference participants, Cassell says.

Over the 27 years, Cassell saw lots of campuses — University of New Hampshire, Green Mountain College, Franklin Pierce, Williams— which all had their benefits and disadvantages. But Hampshire College, with its rural setting, its more central location, its own farming operations, is the right place to be, Cassell says.

"We really found our home in Amherst," he says.

As you'll find if you look at your registration form, the NOFA Summer Conference is not just about organic farming and gardening. That suits Dave Cassell just fine. In fact, that's what he likes most about it.

"It's the coming together of ideas," Cassell says. "From composting toilets and building technology, and it's tied into different religions and sexual orientations. Hearing Wally and Juanita Nelson talk about their voluntary simplicity. It's not just meticulous about organic gardening and farming. You're enriched by going much further around, around human life. Every year, it's a circle."

*We hope the arrival of this summer issue of *The Natural Farmer* finds you all well. And if the weeds are getting to you, or the grubs, or maybe that drought, remember: the Summer Conference is just around the corner.*

Dave Cassell is going for the 28th straight year. He says it's all a "gradual, steady learning process." Do you need refreshing in certain areas? Are you trying to expand your horizons or your farm operations? Or are you looking to change your life's work? Have you gone to almost as many conferences as Dave, or are you thinking about coming to your first? If you're the "converted" and you're coming, do you know any folks who aren't converted? Let's try to expand. In us all lies the possibility of growing the organic movement exponentially.

We're not going to lie: Just like Dave Cassell, you'll have conflicting workshops—two, maybe three or four at a time that you really must go to—but if that's the conflict of your summer, if that's the source of consternation, then that's a good thing. So come to Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts on August 9th (or the 8th for the exciting pre-conference with Joel Salatin) and meet good people to share good thoughts and good food. And maybe you'll see summer conference devotee Dave Cassell at the contradance. If you do, be sure to say hi.