

Getting Back To Their Roots

If you look deep enough into the rolling hills of Southeastern Indiana you will find Michaela Farm nestled in the quiet town of Oldenburg. The town was founded in 1837 by German settlers and has a rich German Catholic heritage that can be sensed by the people and architecture of the area. In 1851, Mother Theresa Hackelmeier founded The Sisters of St. Francis of Oldenburg and Michaela Farm was established in 1854 to provide food to the convent. The farm derives its name from Sister Michaela Lindemann, one of the first women to join the new congregation and who began directing the work on the farm.

Prior to 1964, Michaela Farm supplied the convent with 90% of their food – which included beef, pork, chicken, dairy products, and fresh fruits and vegetables for the Sisters of St. Francis motherhouse and the affiliated private academy. In the mid-1960s farm production started to decline. The chicken house caught fire, the orchard was sold along with the dairy cows and hogs, and the gradual decrease in production continued throughout the '70s and '80s until all farming operations ceased in 1987.

In 1990 the Sisters' Council decided they wanted to restore the farm and get back in touch with nature. They envisioned the future use the property as a certified organic vegetable farm, spiritual renewal center and educational center. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s they built up a grass fed beefalo herd (5/8 beef cow, 3/8 bison), restored their fruit and vegetable gardens and created their own CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). The farm was back to supplying a large quantity of the food for the convent but more production was needed. In 2008 Michaela Farm hired Chris Merkel as their farm manager and he and his crew have been working to bring the farm and the soils back to life.

For the past 8 years Chris has been working on building a sustainable grazing system. One of the biggest challenges on the farm has been building the organic matter in the soil. "Soil health is the key to any successful farm", says Chris. "It's important to understand what nutrients are needed to produce the crop you're trying to grow. For us, we're producing forages for cattle and we also need healthy soils for the plants in our gardens."

Just like everywhere in the Midwest, the 2012 drought brought some interesting challenges but it also taught Chris and his crew a lot about what is lacking in their soils. Feeding hay in the summer became a necessity (over 100 bales in 45 days) but they took a less traditional route and rolled the bales out over the ground in an attempt to raise organic matter. The next spring brought lush growth in those areas and recent soil tests have revealed a 0.5 – 1% increase in organic matter. "We've been seeing more lush growth in the spring than we've ever seen before," says Chris as he points out a strip where a hay bale was rolled out. "That was the insight we needed to see what was lacking in our pastures." With the help of Clint Harrison, former Franklin County District Conservationist, and Robert Zupancic, NRCS Grazing Specialist, Chris has been able to install interior fencing and a watering system that has made more rotational grazing possible. They have also incorporated temporary fencing into their system to separate the pastures into smaller paddocks.

The Michaela Farm Crew realize they still have a long journey ahead of them before they get the operation to where they want it to be, but they have made some great strides in the past few years. In the fall of 2008, the slow transition to a predominantly Devon herd began. In 2009 they brought chickens back to the farm and opened a farm store. In 2014 they restarted their own CSA and the entire farm has become an educational and spiritual hub. The NRCS, Franklin County Soil & Water Conservation District and Purdue Extension has partnered with Michaela Farm on multiple occasions to host field days open to the public and the farm is always welcome to visitors. Chris plans on continuing to enhance the farm and has high hopes for the future. The garden size will stay the same but they want to increase their production with higher management, as well as increase the cattle herd as the pastures will allow. "We want to grow quality along with quantity," says Chris. "We're not perfect and we don't have all of the answers, but every year we're getting new insights into what makes our soils healthy and viable."



Chickens are rotationally grazed by using a portable chicken coop and solar powered electric fence.



Farm hands Josh Hannebaum and Bridget Collins roll first cutting hay onto the pasture for feed as well as future increases in organic matter.