

# A new field

— with thanks to old neighbors



Picking rocks out of the furrows by hand takes times but but this extra effort will be well-rewarded with a higher-quality field later on. (David Greenberg photo)

by David Greenberg

Since I sold my tractors a few years ago, I've hired neighboring farmers to do heavy field work. Last fall I had been waiting about a month for some plowing to get done. Halfway into November, with rain predicted the next day, I decided to till up some of the ground with my old BCS rototiller, just in case the tractor didn't arrive. As I was getting ready to take the tiller out, my neighbor showed up, ready to plow. Thank God. I was not looking forward to tilling sod, and the tractor would do a better job anyway.

Out to the field we went. I had spent many an afternoon poking around the farm with a shovel and soil probe, looking for the best piece of land to work up. This experienced farmer's opinion meant a lot to me. When he said that the land looked good for vegetables, I was relieved.

He started plowing but stopped after about 50 feet. Getting off the tractor, he walked down the furrow toward where

I stood at the edge of the field. He mentioned that he usually picks the rocks out of the furrow before making another pass. I nodded blankly. He continued, explaining that it does take extra time, but this way he gets at rocks normally buried. There was a pause, he seemed to be waiting for me to speak. He added that he realized that some people don't do it, but he always did. I was trying to figure how to respond. When I said that I could walk along behind the tractor picking the rocks, he seemed visibly relieved. So off we went.

His tractor was four wheel drive and about 65 HP, more than enough power for his two-bottom plow. He was moving fast. I had almost to run to keep up. After a few trips up and down the field, I found a rock too big to move without a tool for extra leverage. I heard the tractor stop. My neighbor was climbing down from the cab with a crowbar in hand. He handed it to me without saying a word, I thanked him and we continued on. The

bar was well worn. I guessed that he had pried quite a few rocks loose with it over the years.

A few minutes later, he was out of the tractor again, picking up a particularly large rock half buried between the two furrows. I thought, "this man is really into picking rocks." When I came around to that part of the field, I saw that he had placed two more rocks on top of the big one, forming a small balanced sculpture. He was obviously enjoying this rock picking thoroughly.

As I raced along, trying to keep up with the tractor, thoughts of this man's ancestors came to mind. I imagined the effort it must have taken the generations before him to claim farmland from the sea. Building dykes and ditches, clearing ocean debris and, and then farming the land to the absolute best of their ability. I imagined how, as a young boy growing up in Holland, my neighbor would have been steeped in this tradition of sparing no effort when preparing land for farming.

I came back from my reverie to the wide open expanse of the New World, to Hants County, Nova Scotia, where farmland is so abundant and our farming culture so battered that little pieces of land like this have almost no value in comparison to the polders of Holland.

Getting out of the tractor once the job was done, my neighbor looked back over the field saying that he thought this land would be just great for vegetable growing. I asked how much I owed him. He seemed to get a bit uncomfortable as he added up his time. He came up with a very low figure so I insisted on paying him 50 percent more, explaining how much I appreciated his help and that, having owned tractors in the past, I knew how much it costs to keep them running. He accepted the money with a smile, got back on his tractor and headed for home.

Standing at the edge of the field watching him go, I was left invigorated and motivated. After having a rest and snack, I went back out to the field and

picked rocks. Hauling load after load of rocks to the edge of the field, there was a spring in my step that had never accompanied my rock picking work before. I had picked up a measure of my neighbor's land improvement ethic. When the field was cleared of the last rock, a feeling of great satisfaction came over me. This was a new dimension of farming pleasure I had not experienced before. In the past, rock picking had been something I had done haphazardly while tilling the land. I would see a big rock, or more likely hit a big rock with my tiller, stop and heave it off to the edge of the field and hurry back to my running machine, racing to get the land ready for planting.

My ancestors are mostly urban, Jewish intellectuals and merchants. Not surprisingly, from the beginning of my farming career, I have devoted a lot of time to marketing. Selecting profitable specialty crops, building relationships with customers at the farmers' market, and starting one of the first CSAs in the

province seemed obviously worthwhile to me. I expected these kind of activities to pay off since they reflected the same set of skills and values that I had grown up observing in successful people that I knew and admired.

The essence of my neighbor's land improvement ethic is a confidence, a hope, that the extra effort picking rocks today will be repaid with a better field in the future. Every time I am able to farm with more hope, confidence, and commitment to the future, I find that I have more energy for the work and enjoy it more.

When I started to farm as a young man, I knew that I was getting into a line of work and a way of life that my upbringing did not prepare me for. So here's a big thank you to all of the old timers, the mentors, and helpful neighbors for sharing the knowledge us newcomers need to make it in the country.

(Writer David Greenberg farms in Centre Burlington, N.S.) ●

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