



Rabbit River Organic Farms

Richmond BC



Leaving the rat race for the farm life*

When Steve Easterbrook was 12 years old, his neighbour in Burnaby kept all different types of birds. At the time, Burnaby was more or less an equal mix of urban and rural, so when Steve became very interested in his neighbour's birds, it seemed logical for him to begin his own backyard coop of chickens and pigeons. Little did he know that, 23 years later, he would turn back to his feathered friends to begin a new career.

This prospect seems all the more unlikely given that Steve graduated in Operations Management from BCIT and then spent the next 15 years of his life climbing the corporate ladder in an electrical dry goods wholesale company. From purchasing to management to marketing to accounting to vice presidency, he eventually reached the upper echelons of the business and appeared set for a life-long career in the industry. A change in the company's ownership, however, caused him to re-evaluate his future course.

"I got to the point in my life where I had a decision to make as to whether I wanted to do the same stuff I'd always done or take a chance and make a change," says Steve. Bored and unhappy with his career, Steve chose to forgo his corporate identity. He recalls, "I talked to my wife and said, 'How would you feel if I left this company?' and she said, 'I'd really be happy to have you back' because at the time, I was working six-and-a-half, seven days a week and travelling over western Canada constantly."

Searching for a way to make a living, Steve thought farming would be something he would enjoy. "It's always been sort of my dream to have a farm operation, small scale," explains Steve. Then one day, he passed by a company in the organic food business.

Intrigued, he decided to go in and talk to the owners about organic farming. "I asked them what they felt would be a good product that they couldn't get locally, and they immediately said, 'Eggs.'" Given his background with and fondness for chickens, Steve immediately felt he had found his future direction. "When I found the egg issue and combined it with organic farming, then it was very clear to me. It made sense."

In 1994, Rabbit River Organic Farms began operation. Since Steve was the first organic egg farmer in the region, he was invited to develop certification standards. Some of the organic standards Steve established state that laying hens must be able to access outdoor soil for at least six hours each day, must be located on certified organic land (a three-year process), and must be fed certified organic feed. As well, birds are permitted to choose their own nest boxes and to engage in normal social behaviour, including dust baths to clean feathers, restore oils, and discourage pests. There is a maximum of 1,000 chickens on each acre of land, and organic standards prohibit the use of pesticides, herbicides, fumigants, antibiotics, hormones, and artificial colourants.

While beginning his farm and developing organic standards, Steve was also involved

in business and financial consulting for organic retailers. This led to writing the business plan for a local wholesale organic and natural fresh food distributor. After completing the plan, Steve was offered the position of General Manager. He accepted.

Given Steve's work off the farm, the day-to-day running of the farm is mostly conducted by Steve's mother-in-law, Janet Flamand, and an employee, Sarina Nilsson. They maintain the two acres of land that serve as home to about 600 chickens, as well as to a vegetable patch which can include field crops such as squash, beans, brussel sprouts, peas, turnips, asparagus, and kale. They also run the grading station where they wash, handle, grade, and pack eggs from their farm and other certified organic egg producers. Steve's role is to complete maintenance, plan the flocks, balance the books, and market the product.

For Steve, his new career and way of life—which includes his wife, Lynn, and six-year-old daughter, Holly—are "100 per cent preferable." He adds, "Farming is a very rewarding career, lifestyle, living, whatever you want to call it, because you are creating food and it's a basic requirement of life and people appreciate it."

So it seems that Steve owes his feathered friends not only some fond childhood memories, but also a new career and way of life.

FARM FACTS

Employed –
 seasonal: 1
 year-round: 1
 Gross Farm Sales –
 over \$100,000
 Land Owned –
 2 acres
 Land Leased –
 pending