



Photo by Pat Hendrick

Steve Tucker and his family farm's "Million-Dollar View."

# Sowing a tradition

## 140-year-old farm changes with the times

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**Y**ou can get a guided tour of Tucker Farms anytime or, in season, pick strawberries, wander a corn maze or harvest your own Halloween pumpkin. But the first thing you'll notice at the 300-acre spread near Gabriels, halfway between Paul Smiths and Saranac Lake, is not what's growing under your feet but what the Tuckers call their "Million-Dollar View." It's a matchless mountain vista stretching from Loon Lake Mountain in the north to the Santanonis in the southwest, encompassing in between Whiteface, the Sentinels and the Great Range.

It's scenery many would pay dearly for, but for 140 years this land has been growing food, a fertile oasis surrounded by dense forests and unforgiving mountains. In 2002, Tucker Farms was recognized by the New York State Agricultural Society as a "Century Farm" for more than 100 years of continuous family operation.

As we jounce along their fields in a sturdy pickup truck, an aged dog leading the way, Steve Tucker talks easily about the place. A slender, soft-spoken man of middle age, he wears a T-shirt that says, "Conserve Today, Save Tomorrow," and has recycling images all over it. His brother Tom's son is the sixth generation on this tract; three generations of Tuckers work it now, with little other help. Their forebears began the farm in the 1860s and were soon growing vegetables for guests and guides of the nearby Paul Smith's Hotel. When Steve, a Clarkson University graduate in industrial management, returned home after college, they were growing lettuce. "That was labor-intensive and inconsistent," he says, "so we dropped it and were strictly potatoes and grain for quite a few years. But there wasn't much money in either one. So we got into other vegetables."



Photo by Thomas D. Tucker

The Tucker Farms corn maze seen from the air.

Now there's an understatement. Tucker Farms raises 65 different vegetables, along with 10 varieties of potatoes and several grains. Steve points out multi-acre rectangles of rye, buckwheat, oats and winter wheat, laid out in alternating patterns "for the variation in the color." Indeed, the scene has the look of a Rockwell Kent painting about it. What goes where is determined by a three-year rotation plan.

In the veggie acreage now, Steve introduces us to golden beets, white beets and candy-striped beets—he pulls one up and cuts it open, and it looks like a peppermint starburst—as well as several colors of Swiss chard, purple and red carrots, leeks, squashes, pumpkins, ornamental gourds, purple and green asparagus. Crossing the road, we walk down long rows of turnips, collard greens, kohlrabi, three different kinds of basil, cilantro, parsley, radishes, beans, peas, "nine or ten different Oriental greens," red

and green mustard, arugula, watercress, bok choy, red kale—both the land and the list go on and on.

In the midst of all this, the Tuckers still raise several acres of potatoes for every disposition from chips to French fries, but mostly for seed. They have names like Adirondack Red, Adirondack Blue (both developed by the Tuckers) and Yukon Gold. Some of the seeds they plant are from the Uihlein Farm near Lake Placid, Steve says, while the rest are from a seed company in Maine.

This year, for the second time in three years, Tucker Farms won an Eastern Region Grand Champion prize in a contest for overall quality sponsored by New York state and the Empire State Potato Growers. The Tuckers con-





A boy hesitates before entering the corn maze.

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tend that the high elevation of the northern Adirondacks is ideal for growing vigorous, disease-free potatoes. Geologists say that their site was once a lakebed that bequeathed ideal soil, perhaps the most fertile in the Adirondacks outside the Champlain Valley.

Potato championships aside, I'd never before associated Adirondack mountain farming with acres of cilantro and bok choy. Where do they sell all this exotic, upscale produce?

Think five-star places like The Point on Upper Saranac Lake. "I've also got the Wawbeek and Lake Clear Lodge," says Steve. "In Lake Placid I've got the Lake Placid Lodge, Interlaken Lodge." He names a few more high-class eateries where people will plunk down \$15 for a salad as long as it's got purple carrots and beets that look like peppermint candies inside.

"I got in with The Point about five years ago," Steve explains. "We sell most of our potatoes as seed, but we started selling some to them, and then the chef asked me what else I could grow for him. He wanted a lot of vegetables fresh, and he wanted me to make money at it. So I took the seed catalog and he pointed out stuff that he would like—high-end vegetables.

"We pick in the morning, deliver by noontime and it's on the dinner table that night," Steve says. "You can't get fresher than that."

As we move to yet another field with yet another to-die-for mountain vista, Steve points out red and black gooseberries and currants. They're experimenting, Steve says, at the request of the local resort chefs. One chef in Lake Placid is from Tennessee and desperate for fresh collard greens—so, ever alert for new opportunities, the Tuckers are learning how to grow collard greens. They even have eight rows of dahlias for centerpieces and general ambience at the resorts.

"We used to put lime in this soil about once every eight to 10 years," says Steve, indicating the gooseberry plants. "Now we've got to do it every three years."

"Acid rain?" I ask.

"Acid rain. It depletes the pH."

I ask about other challenges the Tuckers face as vegetable farmers in a place where the growing season isn't much over 90 days and frosts have struck in every month of the year.



Steve, Ben and Tom Tucker with the antique tractor that's still in use.

"I don't like to use chemicals because of their cost and their environmental impact, but with the potatoes there are so many bugs that can bring diseases in," he says.

The farm is inspected three times a year by New York State so its seed stock will remain certified (in fact, a state official is poking around in their fields as we watch). Then there's the high price of fuel, disruptions of their more distant markets, thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement, and worries about frost—three springs ago, they lost most of their pick-your-own strawberry crop to a June freeze.

"Farming is not a job you go home at night from," Steve says. "It's your life. It's in your blood, being outside and the long hours and self-reliance. You've got to do your own buying, your own marketing, your own repairing." I think back to our arrival, when Steve and a couple of hands were trying to locate a part so they could get one of their tractors running.

When those tractors do run, some of their fuel comes from the very customers to whom the Tuckers sell produce. Steve explains, "Last fall we started experimenting with bio-diesel by mixing vegetable oil with diesel fuel. We get used vegetable oil from the restaurants we deliver to; they're glad to give it away. We strain it and then mix a blend of 75% vegetable oil and 25% diesel. We have done no modifications to our diesel engines to handle the mix; we gain about 5% more horsepower, the engines burn cleaner, and with the price of diesel fuel more than doubling over the last two years we have still spent less this year than two years ago." The next innovation may be a heated fuel tank; since the vegetable oil gels at about 36 degrees, they can't use it in cold weather.

"You've got to be versatile, go with the flow," Steve continues. "It's tough; you have to be tougher." They've diversified, he says, partly because it's better for the envi-

ronment, but it should also help perpetuate the farm. The view may be worth a million dollars literally as well as metaphorically, but they do not want to see it captured by condos. The Adirondack Park Agency has zoned their land Resource Management, thus limiting the number of buildings to 15 per square mile, an average of one per 42.7 acres. The Tuckers believe this will help keep the land agricultural, and so they have not considered other steps such as conservation easements.

Diversification has extended beyond merely growing an astonishing array of produce. Three years ago they introduced a corn maze. "The Franklin County cooperative extension has been trying to get farms to get into agritourism, so we decided to give it a try," Steve explains. "We had 1,500 people the first year and 2,000 last year. We thought it would be a tourist attraction, but it mostly drew local families."

The maze is open Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday afternoons and Friday nights. Admission is \$7 for teens and adults and \$5 for children ages 4-12. They close the season with a haunted maze on Halloween night.

How does one create a corn maze? It's not just random slashing at the stalks. The first year, Steve says, "I got as much information from the Internet as I could and made a design, planted a six-acre field of corn, and when the corn was about six inches tall we transferred the design from paper to the field."

Steve tells me the patterns cut in the field have gotten more complex each year. This year's was done in consultation with two home-schooled children, Luke and Hannah Eckert, and their mother, Sheila. The Adirondack theme includes a beaver notching a tree, a moose, an owl and a canoe. The farm also offers wagon rides through their pumpkin patch before Halloween, allowing kids to pick out their own pumpkins.

"If we hadn't gotten into all of these vegetables and the corn maze and the pumpkins rides, we probably would be out of business," Steve muses as we return to the barns. I ask if diversifying has really been profitable.

Steve thinks for a moment. "Well, we're breaking even now," he says, giving us a huge bag of assorted beets as we prepare to leave. "We haven't made any profits yet." It's a refrain common to many in farming these days.

We offer to pay for the beets, but he refuses. "They were picked three days ago," he says. "They're not fresh—I couldn't take money for them." ■

# Never an idle moment

Most people have some idea what farmers do in warm weather. But what about winter, when the Tuckers' fields lie deep under snow and temperatures can drop to 40 below zero?

"My grandmother always told me that idle hands do the devil's work, but we don't have to worry about that," Steve says. "We are never bored."

How do they keep from being bored?

They plow 40 driveways.

They bag and ship seed potatoes to buyers all along the East Coast and Midwest.

They repair machinery "that we just patched together to keep going in summer."

Community involvement also keeps them busy year-round. Steve belongs to the volunteer fire department, the Knights of Columbus, and the local fish and game club. He also sits on the Brighton Town Board. Tom is also in the fire department and is a state firefighting instructor and a county fire investigator, as well as a single parent and the coach of his son Ben's soccer team. Clearly, they've taken Grandma's advice.

—Neal Burdick

**DIRECTIONS:** From Saranac Lake, drive north on Route 86 for 7.5 miles and turn left onto Hobart Road. Go about a half-mile to the farm buildings on the right. For information, call 518-327-3195 or visit [www.tuckertaters.com](http://www.tuckertaters.com).