

By Charles Johnson

A farm for family

With a few acres, they're raising 13 children and lots of veggies

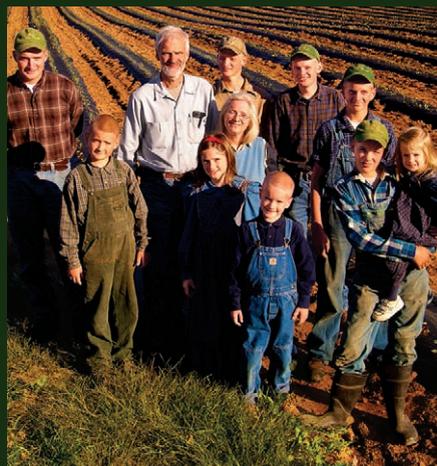
That middle word in the Colvin Family Farm's name sums up almost everything Steve and Val Colvin work to accomplish on their place in Tennessee, atop Walden's Ridge west of Spring City.

"More than anything, we wanted a good place to raise a family," Val says.

Boy, did they ever get it! Their place, blessed with 13-count 'em!—children,

► **Large photo:** The Colvins grow a wide variety of fruit and vegetables, including cabbage.

► **Right:** Steve and Val Colvin with their nine children who live on the family farm today.





►**Above:** Val and Steve Colvin look at newly-planted strawberries. The crop is a fairly recent project for the hard-working Tennessee family.

reminds a visitor of the old-time farmsteads of grandpa's time. Their four oldest offspring are now all grown up and live off the farm, but the Colvins still have nine more children living, working, playing, and being educated right there at the home.

The Colvins bought about 42 mostly depleted acres on a rundown farm here in 1999. Rehabilitating the low-organic soil was the first task.

"Our philosophy is that we want to feed the soil, to put tilth back in so the soil can produce the plant, not just hold the plant," Steve says.

The idea works. They produce enough vegetables and fruit on 13 acres to turn a profit and provide for the family. Of course, the entire family works to do it, from little 3-year-old Charity to 21-year-old Adam.

"All the children help. Everybody can do something. The little ones are good strawberry pickers and can do other things, too. The older boys are very good with machinery. Adam has worked out how to do things with the computer and promote the farm on the Internet. It takes us all," Val says.

Online marketing is key to the farm's success. They e-mail a newsletter to customers, including their 165 Community Supported Agriculture customers. That lets buyers know

how the season is going and what vegetables and fruit are available.

"It educates consumers in how farms operate and some of the risks involved. The CSA customers take the risk along with us. When the green beans get eaten by deer, that's part of their risk. We do our best to keep a continual supply of things for at least 25 weeks of the year, and we let them know how things are going out here, good or bad," Steve says.

The farm's diversity on those 13 acres allows them to sell products ranging from strawberries and lettuce to broccoli and onions. The place hops from April through November.

No doubt, the Colvins are innovative growers. To make a decent living, however, their marketing became just as innovative.

"Direct marketing is the key to everything we're doing. That's the reason we can make a living on such a small-sized property," Adam explains. "We're doing organic markets plus the CSA. There's a huge difference in price, compared to crops grown for commodity markets."

Their farm is "Certified Naturally Grown," meaning they use no chemicals. The program is a peer-reviewed system, separate from the federal government's organic farming standards.

"The farm is inspected by other farmers, who go through a detailed checklist of practices. There's a small annual fee for it," Steve says.



►**Above:** The Colvins turn out a wide range of produce starting with spring crops to fall plantings such as broccoli, and cauliflower.

That designation helps them build a marketing plan. Adam says plenty of consumers want products like theirs and willingly pay premiums for them.

"There's good demand for our produce. We also post what we have on Facebook and Twitter and interact with customers. They seem to like that connection. The more connected they are, the more satisfied they are. They can make more of a connection between the food they eat, the farmer and the land," Adam says.

Net savvy. Because of his computer expertise, Adam started managing the Cumberland Sustainable Farmers Market in Crossville, Tenn. He uses the Internet to let buyers know what products are available from participating farmers, then takes orders online.

Farmers are paid up-front, then fulfill orders by sending goods to be picked up at the market on the designated day. "People really enjoy this. Some drive 45 minutes to an hour to pick up what they ordered," Val says.

The Colvins also sell produce to independent grocery stores and restaurants, and now want to expand by buying a nearby farm. That would allow the older children to continue to farm. "We seem to have found our niche in the world. We wanted a family place and here we are," Val says. ■