Mixed greens planted into high tunnel beds prepped with the power harrow

Oatka Creek Farm

Rooted along the Oatka Creek

Thirty minutes southwest of Rochester, NY, Oatka Creek winds through fertile farmland before joining the Genesee River. Nestled within its valley in LeRoy, Ben Pfeffer and Carolyn Fitzgerald tend 20 acres of historic farmland that has been in Carolyn's family for eight generations.

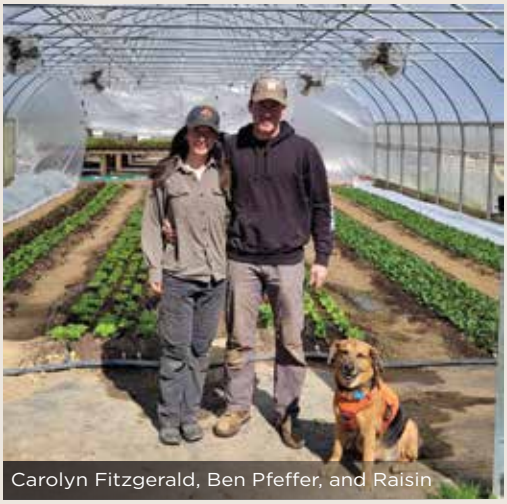
Oatka Creek Farm specializes in high-quality seasonal vegetables grown with organic methods. Their produce reaches the community through a 75-member CSA program, the LeRoy Farmers Market, and on-farm sales. Ben and Carolyn are first-generation farmers – neither grew up farming – but their shared path to agriculture has shaped the farm they run together.

"We got into organic farming as young adults and never looked back," says Carolyn.

Growing up, Carolyn developed a love for farming by spending time with her grandparents on their family farm and hearing farm stories of different generations. She went on to earn a degree in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems from Green Mountain College in Vermont, where she was first introduced to organic vegetable production and animal husbandry. After graduation, she moved west to Colorado, eager to explore farming in a new climate.

Carolyn's farming journey intertwined with Ben's at Raisin' Roots Farm in Fort Collins, Colorado in 2018. Ben's path to farming began after college where he studied various farming methods from producers across Maryland, Oregon, and Colorado.

Throughout these experiences he honed his skills in organic, low-till practices, always seeking more knowledge from others. Ben enjoys experimenting with and implementing both new and traditional ideas and technologies. That curiosity guided his work at Raisin' Roots and continues to help Oatka Creek Farm grow sustainably as both a farm and small business.


Carolyn Fitzgerald, Ben Pfeffer, and Raisin

In 2022, they relocated to LeRoy to be closer to family, taking over fields once planted with corn, triticale, and alfalfa and began transitioning the land into organic vegetables - a change that brought both challenge and opportunity.

Scaling Sustainably

Diverse vegetable production can demand an incredible amount of hand labor and frequent soil work as beds are flipped and crops are rotated throughout the season. For Ben and Carolyn, soil health has always been a priority. They utilize practices like cover cropping, crop rotation, high tunnel production, and organic methods to care for the land.

Farm at a Glance

COUNTY: Genesee County, NY

WATERSHED: Oatka Creek, Genessee River Watersheds

CROPS: Organic vegetables

FARM SIZE: 20 acres

SOILS: Clay loam, Teel silt loam

SOIL HEALTH PRACTICES: Cover crops, crop rotation, reduced tillage, organic methods, pollinator habitat, riparian buffers


Buckwheat cover crop and Raisin

All photos courtesy of Oatka Creek Farm

Great Lakes RESTORATION

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Oatka Creek Farm

Still, scaling sustainably means continuing to experiment with tools and techniques that can reduce labor while protecting the soil.

One of the most important tools they use is a paperpot transplanter, which allows them to quickly and efficiently set hundreds of seedlings in the ground while limiting soil disturbance. However, the paperpot system is most effective when beds are flat, uniform, and free of large clods – conditions that are hard to achieve in Oatka Creek Farm's heavy clay soils.

For years, they relied on a 3-point rotary tiller to prepare the beds. While it broke up the soil, several tillage passes were necessary, or extra compost had to be added. "Not only are you flipping the soil structure, but you're also bringing up a bunch of more weed seeds from the seed bank," explains Carolyn. For a vegetable farmer, that's frustrating - you're trying to make this nice bed, while bringing up more weeds to manage."

"We're really excited to be involved in this network, to be a re-source, and learn from others."

Ben and Carolyn began researching new tools that could ease the burden of bed prep, improve use of their paperpot system, and move their soil management in a healthier direction. Their search for solutions led them to try a power harrow.

A Brighter Future for the Soil

In 2024, Ben and Carolyn received a $6,000 grant from American Farmland Trust's Brighter Future Fund to purchase a power harrow which helped bring the idea to life. That same year, they joined the New York Demonstration Farm Network, coordinated by AFT and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The Demonstration Farm Network elevates farms across New York that are adopting conservation practices to improve soil health and protect water quality, while also testing new approaches.

The network fosters regional connections and encourages peer-to-peer learning among farmers and agricultural service providers.. When Oatka Creek Farm joined, they gained access to resources to help them evaluate this new tool through an on-farm trial beginning in the 2025 growing season.

The goals of their trial are twofold: reduce the negative effects of vertical tillage on soil and decrease the manual labor needed for bed prep. Unlike the rotary tiller, which flips the soil vertically, a power harrow stirs the soil horizontally, reducing the disturbance of soil layers and keeping weed seeds buried. The result: fewer weeds, reduced soil compaction, and improved soil structure.

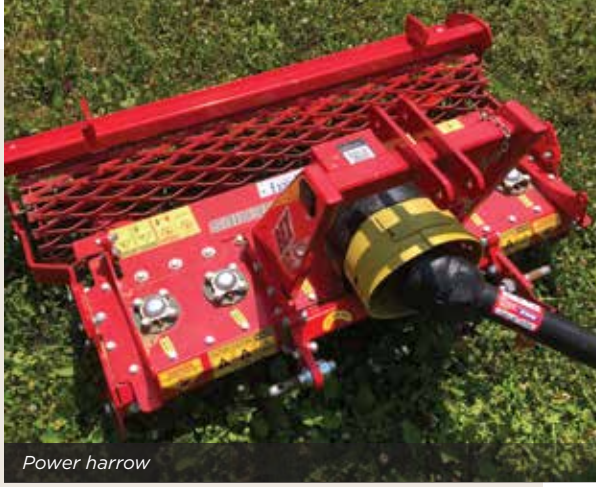
"This is a game changer for our operation in terms of labor, time, fuel use, crop establishment, and soil health," Ben says.

Stewarding Land and Community

For Ben and Carolyn, farming is about more than their own fields. Community and collaboration are central to their work, and beyond the Demonstration Farm Network, they also participate in groups like the Good Farmers Guild of Western New York, a farmer-led network that shares knowledge, resources, and support.

"As farmers, we're often siloed in our own worlds and forget, for lack of energy or just stubborn independence, to look to the community around us of other farmers," says Carolyn.

By sharing their experiences and learning from others, they hope to inspire fellow farmers and help build a stronger, more connected agricultural community.



Power harrow

Early Observations

Oatka Creek Farm has already observed positive changes as a result of using the power harrow:

- *Beds can now be prepared in a single pass with minimal soil disturbance.*
- *Smoother beds enable the paperpot system to easily slide transplants into place allowing seedlings to establish more evenly.*
- *The power harrow is gentler on soil structure and helps to reduce hardpan formation.*
- *It leaves a uniform surface behind that saves time and labor during planting.*

Next Steps:

- *Manage plant residue before harrowing by raking it into walkways to prepare for direct seeding or transplanting.*

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