Key Management Strategies Critical to New Leaf Farm Success

- Personal relationships with local markets and the community
- Intensive cropping to provide income for two families from 3 acres
- Cover cropping to enhance soil quality and fertility and reduce weeds

Dave believes that the ability of New Leaf Farm to market locally and to sustain their accounts through relationships to their customers and the community has been and will continue to be critical to their success.

Another key feature is how the crop mix and marketing are planned to provide a target income for the two households supported by the farm. Part of this planning is the balance of production land used for green manures and for income-producing crops. In addition to using cover crops for soil fertility and improvement, weed management, and other production benefits, they are also used to manage the workload of the farm. For example, as New Leaf Farm shifted from producing head lettuce to salad mix, they found that they could produce more income per unit area with the salad mix. That allowed them to put a little more of the production area into cover crops while maintaining the same income. They focus on excellent, intensive management of the area producing income crops, and limiting the area in intensive production helps them to do that.

Key Assets Critical to New Leaf Farm Success

- No mortgage keeps debt low in start-up
- Farm located near markets
- Proximity to ocean moderates temperatures
- Well drained soils well-suited for vegetable production
- Abundant water for irrigation
- Hoop houses to extend the season

Historically, the farm was in hay and pasture for many years. Dave’s parents bought the farm in 1982, making Dave the farm manager. They gradually transferred the property to Dave and Chris, who became full owners in 1998. This gift helped tremendously in establishing New Leaf Farm, allowing the Colsons to operate from the beginning without a mortgage, eliminating one of the major burdens carried by most young farmers.

The location of the farm is within a 40-minute drive to Portland, the major market, and a 15-minute drive to Freeport, the secondary market. This proximity to markets is a major convenience, but the
burgeoning tourist industry in Freeport creates some competition for labor, particularly for high school students. The students can make more money with less physical labor in fast food restaurants and outlet stores in town than working at the farm.

New Leaf Farm is close enough to the coast to benefit from the moderating effect of the ocean on winter temperatures, but far enough away to avoid coastal fogs in summer, so their summers are warmer and sunnier than if they were directly on the coast.

The soil types at New Leaf Farm are of the Elmwood and Melrose series, which are both fine sandy loams and fairly well drained. The topography is a gently sloping to level bench of soil deposited by the glacier between two ridges. When the glacier receded at the end of the last Ice Age, the ocean came in and left a four-foot deep layer of blue marine clay on top of 70 feet of sand and gravel. When the ocean later receded, another 3 to 9 feet of sandy soil was built up on top of the clay creating a shallow perched water table accessible to crop roots. The Elmwood soils are suited to grass, cover crops and most vegetable crops while the Melrose series is appropriate to grasses, alfalfa and other deeper-rooted crops.

The farm uses an overhead irrigation system for the open fields. Dave has put together a snap-on system using lengths of light-weight 1.25” plastic pipe. With the help of a Maine Department of Agriculture cost-share grant program, they put in a deeper well in 2003 with a capacity of 60 gallons per minute, bringing them up to 4 wells supplying water for the household, vegetable washing, and irrigation in the greenhouse and field.

Because of drainage limitations, fully half the 105 acres of the farm are in non-managed land or left wild for ecological habitat purposes. Woodlands constitute the bulk of this property, along with hedgerows and a small percentage in streams, ponds and wetlands. The land is bordered by a horse farm on the south, homes of several acres each on the west and forest to the north and east. About 15 acres are in permanent hay and pasture for the few steers they raise every year.

The central building at New Leaf is a large, 1½ story passive solar greenhouse they built themselves. This is used for plant propagation and fall crop storage. The Colsons also have four 17’ x 96’ and one 30’ x 96’ plastic-covered commercial greenhouses used for producing salad greens, tomatoes, peppers and basil. The small apple orchard, established in 1984 and added to every year since, now has about 60 trees on one acre. Nearby is a covered three-bin composting area and an extended array of cold frames for herb production. A newer 40’ x 80’ equipment barn is set up for efficient access to tractors, tools and machinery and a well organized wash room and packing facility nearby rounds out the vegetable production area.
New Leaf Farm’s Passive Solar Greenhouse, used to start transplants and store fall harvest crops.

**Farm Labor**

New Leaf is a primarily a family-run farm, with apprentices and summer staff. Labor sources include:

- Dave: Full time, year-round
- Chris: Full time, year-round
- Steve: Full time, 10 months
- 2 to 4 Apprentices: Summer only, live on farm
- 2 to 4 High school students: summer only
- Non-farm worker: on occasion, for miscellaneous tasks
- Occasional volunteers from the local community

In addition to the Waldorf school student volunteers, there are also adult volunteers who work regularly at New Leaf Farm. For them it is a social outlet or a form of exercise (cheaper than belonging to a gym!) as well as a connection to the farm. Volunteers can require skillful management to make sure that they add to, rather than distracting from, the work that needs to be done, but they can also be valuable ambassadors for the farm in the community.