

Making Black Gold at Black Dirt Farm



photo by Jack Kittredge

Tom poses on the ramp by the bin. At the left hens wait for access, on the right is the tractor Tom uses to move material from the bin every month to compost piles (one of which you can see just beyond the tractor exhaust pipe).

by Jack Kittredge

For anyone unfamiliar with New England ways, in the early days when towns were being surveyed and chartered sometimes the folks marking the edge of one town used a slightly different line than the folks surveying the edge of the adjacent town. The difference, often a long narrow slice, was an unincorporated, townless area called a "gore". Such an area was the 12.5 square mile "Goshen Gore" in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.

Finally incorporated in 1867 and named Stannard in honor of Vermont General George Stannard, who became the "Hero of Gettysburg" when his troops were credited with breaking the back of Pickett's Charge, the town also features Stannard Mountain which rises to over 2600 feet.

On the west slope of the mountain, on a shoulder at an elevation of about 1400 feet, sits Black Dirt Farm – owned by Tom Gilbert and his wife Molly, with their two kids. Molly is from Leyden, Massachusetts, and Tom grew up in Brooklyn, New York – not farm country!

"But I spent a summer when I was 14," he explains, "working for my uncle on a farm in Leoti, Kansas growing 4000 acres of wheat. That was a big cultural experience for me. I liked the honesty and simplicity of the culture. The big tractors and farm airplane hangars were also kind of exciting and I thought it was cool that my uncle had three hired guys but grew 4000 acres of crops! Also, my folks had a Vermont getaway where I spent my summers. I ended up farming for the Duttons in the Brattleboro area for three years before I went to college -- a big, diverse family operation. The diversity piece attracted me."

Tom went to Evergreen State College in Washington and took about 30 percent of his credits on community scale composting systems. He met Molly there, where she was studying health and wellness. She then took a couple of years of acupuncture school, and is now a mental health therapist with a practice in Hardwick.

Tom has worked in composting for the last 17 or 18 years. For a while he worked for Karl Hammer at Vermont Compost, feeding food scraps to chickens, making compost, and selling eggs and compost products. Then he started a non-profit composting

of partners, and had programs all over the state. In Brooklyn or San Francisco you can pick up a lot of material in one city block. But agriculture is often in rural areas and this was our solution to the fact that rural areas are very hard to haul in, economically. So having a scaled down system makes sense."

One of Tom's innovations was to take a critical look at the infrastructure and investments made to start up traditional composting companies. He has found ways to replace large specialized dump trucks with small trucks with motorized hoists and dump trailers.

"If you have a specialized truck for this purpose in the city," he states, "it will cost you \$150,000. This whole trailer here we can fabricate for between \$20,000 and \$25,000. If you buy yourself a used farm truck for another \$20,000 you can get into this for \$40,000, instead of \$150,000."

At its high point High Fields was selling about a thousand yards of compost a year. It was a \$700,000 per year organization with 11 employees, relatively stable but growing.

"But," Tom says, "I didn't set out to be a composter. I'd rather be a homesteader."

So he resigned and 4 years ago they found 240 acres in Stannard to settle on. It was a dairy farm until 1964 when the milk laws changed and the owners decided not to upgrade. After that it was in hay for various dairy farms. When Tom and Molly bought it they were helped by a land trust which had protected the land. Tom worked off the farm the first two years and has been working full time for himself on the farm for two years.

One thing which is important to Gilbert is not to specialize in any one operation or scale it up to overshadow other things he is doing. Since there are usually economies when you scale up, making an adequate income is often harder when you stay small and generalized. To address that, Tom has a plan.

"Our business model," he says, "is to have a chain of enterprises, each feeding into the next, and each creating a small profit. This way we can maintain our scale and not have to scale one up so that it dominates the others. For both resiliency and personal reasons our goal is to integrate the various operations such that we realize value from each action on the farm that would otherwise not be valued in the market, while at the same time reducing our input costs."

Picking up food scraps from restaurants and institutions, for instance, is a service for which Tom charges. He then sells many of those scraps to a farmer to feed livestock, and brings the rest to his farm. Those scraps he then feeds to chickens who

facility with the goal of developing decentralized systems for realizing the value of compostable materials communities already possess.

"I spent 13 years running the High Fields Center for Composting," he relates. "I don't have any academic training for this. Most of what I know I just learned by doing it. I started out picking up food waste in the back of a Chevy S10 pickup truck. I had to replace my weak springs every couple of months! Then we went to a 24-foot box truck with a lift gate. We had twice as many containers as we needed, and we took them out empty and swapped them for full ones at grocery stores and restaurants and institutions.

"We had a program," he continues, "called 'Close the Loop' and our mission was to build out these highly decentralized community-scale programs. They would have a farmer who was composting, somebody doing the hauling, trying to create a market for everybody. We worked with all sorts



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Gilbert activates the lever which opens the gate on the tipped trailer and allows food scraps to dump into the bin. The board wall in the foreground can be removed to give the tractor and loader access to the bin.