

# ***Georgian Central Soil & Crop Improvement Association Summer Bulletin, 2021***

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## ***RGG Farm, Thomas Farrell, Bruce County SCIA***

Becca and Thomas Farrell, and their children (L to R) Everett, Charlotte and Arlo

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# Member Spotlight



**RGG Farm**

For six generations, the Farrell family have farmed just outside of Kincardine, in Southern Bruce County. They have continued to expand into the dairy and cash crop operation that they are today. In this June issue, we are delighted to feature Thomas Farrell in this Bruce County SCIA member spotlight.

Over the past many months, we have been trying to feature innovative farmers. There is a trend appearing – farmers do not believe that they are innovative, it is just what they do. The Farrells seem to have a history of trying new things. They adopted the use of GPS early. They have been using cover crop mixes for about 10 years. They were early adopters of no-till. They were the first in the Kincardine area to use strip-till, and they are planting green. Thomas joined the Ontario Soil Network in its infancy and is passionate about improving their soil's resilience.

## Family

Like many of our ancestors, the Farrell family left Ireland during the potato famine, and settled near Kincardine in 1854. Thomas joked that “they have not known enough to leave since.” The Farrell farm is called RGG Farm, which stands for Robert and Gwyneth, his grandparents, and Geoff, Thomas’ dad. At RGG Farm they milk cows, own about 1000 acres, rent additional acres, and do custom work. The landscape has changed drastically in the past 167 years. Now subdivisions have sprawled right up to their property boundaries. There are three generations currently involved on the farm: Thomas’ grandfather; his parents Geoff and Sandra; Thomas and his wife Becca; and his brother Patrick. Thomas and Becca have three children, Everett (7), Arlo (4) and Charlotte (2). They also own another farm and have a smaller cash crop farming company. Becca runs a bakery from their house, The Back Forty Baker, (<https://www.facebook.com/thebackfortybaker>), which has allowed her to stay at home with their children.

Thomas, who is 32, has always been extremely passionate about agriculture. He received his Associate Diploma in Agriculture from the University of Guelph, Ridgetown Campus, in 2009. He is excited to see where their soil journey leads and what doors it might open. Thomas believes that the future is full of opportunities, it is just about keeping yourself poised and open to capitalize on them. Aspiring to do the best they can in all aspects and pushing for better seems to be his, and his family’s mantra. They consider that what is best for the land is also best for the cows, as feed is half the breed. Thomas believes that continuous consistent growth, and prioritizing soil health are key to building a strong viable farm that can be passed along to their children should they choose to follow in his footsteps. Thomas clarifies that “They have to be passionate about farming, as it is a great lifestyle, but it is also very demanding.”

Division of labour, “gives everyone their place, their role,” comments Thomas. Thomas manages the fields, and his younger brother Patrick is the herdsman. However, they do help each other out. Patrick does a lot of the tillage work and runs the grain buggy in the fall. Thomas looks after the calves in the barn and the calf robotic feeding services. Their dad Geoff is passionate about crops and the cows, so he spends time assisting in both areas. Their grandfather helps when he can and makes feed. Patrick and Geoff do the evening feeding and compost pack management. Sandra manages herd genetics, herd health and bookkeeping.

## Dairy



**The dairy herd on the compost pack**

The Farrells milk a Holstein and Jersey herd of about 65 cows. Thomas notes that the Jerseys are a tougher more resilient breed that give less milk, but with higher components. Initially they milked in a head-to-head tie-stall barn. In the mid 2000’s they built a tie stall parlour in that barn, which was unique, and worked for them. In 2015, they decided to modernize and build a new barn. Since the main farm is in an A2 Restricted Agriculture zone they were only able to build a barn with a maximum capacity of 100 cows. Looking to the future, this zoning ties their hands on expansion, but since they have other properties, it does not have to be ruled out. Thomas heralds the new robotic compost barn as one of the best things that they have done on the dairy side of their operation. The barn was designed to improve the environment for the cows and included: a compost pack with a footing like pasture, which has significantly reduced feet issues; fans, sprinklers, and automatic curtains keeps the air moving and keeps the cows more comfortable. Not only does the compost pack benefit the herd, but it also helps the land too. They bed the compost pack everyday with straight sawdust that comes from Englehart. They clean out most of the barn, down to about a foot deep



**Holstein & Jersey herd at RGG Farm**

after wheat harvest every year. They always leave some of the pack to retain the compost microbes and bacteria. Thomas explained that “The rich manure compost product is just like rocket fuel when you put it on the fields”. They try to follow as much of the wheat as possible with the manure (about



# Member Spotlight cont.

100 acres a year).

The new build initially had one robot, but since their milk production increased over 30% when the cows moved into the new barn environment, they stepped up to two robots. This barn has had huge benefits for the cattle, but the addition of the robots has also provided the family with more flexibility and decreased the commitment level. His brother and dad share the responsibility of manning the robot calls, but Thomas added, "We run Lely robots, so we don't have many problems."

## Cropping

A three-way split of corn, soybeans, and winter wheat is their primary rotation. They try to look after the land and keep their rotation set. They also grow alfalfa to provide feed to the cows. For the past seven years, they have planted sorghum after winter wheat as a cost effective, high quality heifer feed. Today, approximately 20% of the crops they plant are fed to their herd. They are planning to build a new silo this year, so they will be feeding more corn silage in the future.

Thomas believes that the best thing that they have done on the cropping side is to better understand and focus on soil health. That has led them to more cover crop use, prioritizing getting manure across as many acres as possible, reducing their tillage/moving to strip tillage, and addressing compaction issues (monitoring tire pressure and switching to radial tires). Implementing these technologies have resulted in increased yields, lowered inputs, and more resilient soils.



**Cover crops last fall**

Cover crops are used whenever possible, and they are always used after winter wheat. They usually plant a nine-way mix and try new species for a year or two to see how they adapt to their farm and their management. The typical mix will include sorghum, tillage radish, kale, sunflowers, flax, faba beans, lentils, plus other trial species. Thomas elaborated that "It is important that the components have different depths of roots, do different things to the soil, and are from different families/species". Some species fix nitrogen, some reclaim

better, and some have higher lignin than others so that they stay standing, which results in a warmer, drier soil in the spring.



**Corn strip tilled into over wintered cover when the rest had winterkilled**

In their efforts to reduce tillage, they started with minimum till. They have a Salford RTS (residue tillage specialist) that they were using ahead of corn. Since they were not getting consistent seed placement depth, with his dad's urging, they moved to strip-till four years ago and have seen improvements in crop yields and soil health. In side-by-side corn trials, their yield increased 12 to 14 bushels/ac with stronger root systems through better seed placement. Thomas noted that the price of strip-tillage equipment can make this practice

inaccessible. He was hesitant initially because he was fearful that they would be doing damage to the soil structure as the strips work down six inches, deeper than with the Salford unit (two inches). This has not been an issue however, as the tilled strips seem to regenerate by having completely undisturbed soil next to them.



**Planting soybeans into rye**

For the last five years, with great success, they have been planting green with soybeans (200 acres this year). Thomas suggests that when farmers are evaluating a new concept that they start on a small acreage ("baby steps") to get themselves comfortable, but that they should start right away. For example, thirty years ago they started with no-till on twenty acres. Thomas commented that the plot "Has to be big enough that you pay attention to it, as opposed to two acres in the back somewhere". He also pointed out that the benefits compound upon themselves, so you should try it for a few years. With different cover crop species, he likes to give the plot at least two years because a fiasco could have been due to a weather event. Moving to reduced tillage may take three to five years before you see the true benefits. Thomas added, "The longer you are in it, the easier it gets." He also encouraged other farmers to keep with it and not to give up when evaluating new concepts. After sticking with reduced tillage and other soil health initiatives, Thomas' bean yields are higher now than ever before. He acknowledges that this may be partially due to genetics, but he likes to think that it is the resilience, and moisture retention that they are building into their soil. Weed and pest pressures have also been reduced in this system. Scouting is a key component of that success.

## Challenges

Thomas believes that outside influences, public perception, and a lack of understanding from policy makers about agriculture is one of the key challenges facing us today. The main farm is right on Highway 21, so traffic pressure is also daunting. Finding soil health initiatives that work in your area of Ontario can also be challenging. Being a part of the Ontario Soil Network has assisted with this issue. The network connects you with research results, and the opportunity to reach out to other farmers who might be trying some of the same approaches. Breaking away from tradition can be a challenge on a multi-generational farm. Each generation has their own perspectives, which can make advancements difficult. Thomas acknowledges however that his family have been great to accept new concepts. In the end, they are all trying to head in the same direction with the common goal of improving the farm that has been in the family for generations.

*We would like to thank Bruce County SCIA for suggesting that we interview Thomas Farrell. It was a delight to speak to him. I thank him for taking the time to share his farm story. His passion for agriculture is inspiring! He is a great example of a phenomenal steward of the land. Follow him on Twitter @ThomasFarrell23 to see firsthand what practices he is evaluating.*

Lorie Smith



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