



# A Different Path

Vermont organic beef farm excels with dedication to environment, quality genetics.

by *Linda Eck*

‘**G**ood food is not a medicine. It’s something you like, something that is safe and nutritious, as well as being delicious and enjoyable,” explains Amiel Cooper, owner of a 360-cow organic beef farm that takes pride in its mission to produce fine-quality, healthy beef.

“I love to cook and eat beef,” says Cooper, whose beef operation is far from typical, but deeply rooted in creating an end product that will bring others to think likewise. He is quick to note that while Mountain Meadows Farm Inc., which he started in 1996, is vastly different from many of today’s beef cattle operations, it is also very much the same.

“Often people look at the differences; they don’t look at what we have in common,” explains Cooper, whose Mountain Meadows Farm was “started in the mind and dreams,

not with property, family or generations of farmers.” After years of dreaming, Cooper combined his experience in the medical field and love of the out-of-doors to develop what has quickly become a well-known and respected source for wholesome and delicious beef.

## Getting the bug

A retired pathologist, Cooper’s first experiences with farming and nature include growing World War II-era victory gardens in West Virginia and remote family fishing trips that instilled an appreciation of the outdoors. His dreams of being involved in agriculture began after being impressed by strong heartland farm values while duck and goose hunting with a

friend on his family’s North Dakota wheat farm. It was there that the West Virginia native and Harvard graduate came to realize that sometimes baking a good apple pie brings more respect and love than a shiny new car.

“These are the things that made me want to have a farm, even though I knew very little about it,” says Cooper, who now admits, “I think I like agriculture more than medicine, and I certainly find it more challenging.” The researcher retired as chief of pathology at New England’s Brigham and Women’s Faulkner Hospital and from medicine in 2010.

Now, 18 years after he, wife Lori Adcock



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and daughter Thea located their initial acreage — a beautiful old (1787) 214-acre hill farm — near Brattleboro, Vt., Cooper is living his dream of owning a large beef farm and enjoying challenges far greater than he could have ever imagined.

### Establishing a beef herd

Starting his beef herd with a registered-Angus bull from Wehrmann Angus of New Market, Va., and 20 Charolais heifers purchased from the late Mary Howe diZerega, owner of Oakdale Farms in Upperville, Va., the breeding program at Mountain Meadows has evolved immensely during the past 17 years, but it has never strayed from what Cooper refers to as a “powerful cross.”

“I like both breeds and believe the Angus-Charolais cross combines the best of British and Continental genetics,” says Cooper. “We set out from Day 1 to have a terminal crossbreeding program with retained ownership all the way to the final certified organic beef product. We have been greatly encouraged because there are many people in this region interested in organic foods.”

“The beautiful advantage of the Angus is the wonderful amount of valuable EPD (expected progeny difference) and genetic data that is available,” says Cooper, whose original “small-farm concept” has evolved into a program that utilizes nearly 3,000 acres of pasture, hay and farmland in mid-

Vermont’s majestic Champlain Valley.

The farm’s location plays an important role in how things are done at Mountain Meadows, as the farm’s mission also calls for livestock to be cared for in a humane and respectful way while also protecting and improving the land and the greater environment.

“For us the environment is important,” explains Cooper. “We’ve taken great measures to maintain the water purity of Lake Champlain and the waterways that make their way through the farm and into the lake.”

With that, Cooper is quick to praise the efforts of farm manager Brian Kemp.

“Brian’s coming on board in 2006 was a major event, and we’ve made enormous progress,” praises the doctor, who was more than willing to put a lot of resources into a farm to build up something he could be proud of and that would hopefully allow him to someday recoup a portion of his investment.

“I’m the dreamer. He’s the person on the ground that knows every cow, every blade of grass,” explains Cooper. “The idea

of sustainability and organic practices was there right from the beginning. Brian has understood, appreciated and upheld these practices.”

### Recognized for environmental stewardship

The intensity of Cooper’s passion for conservation and environmental stewardship was rewarded in August as Mountain

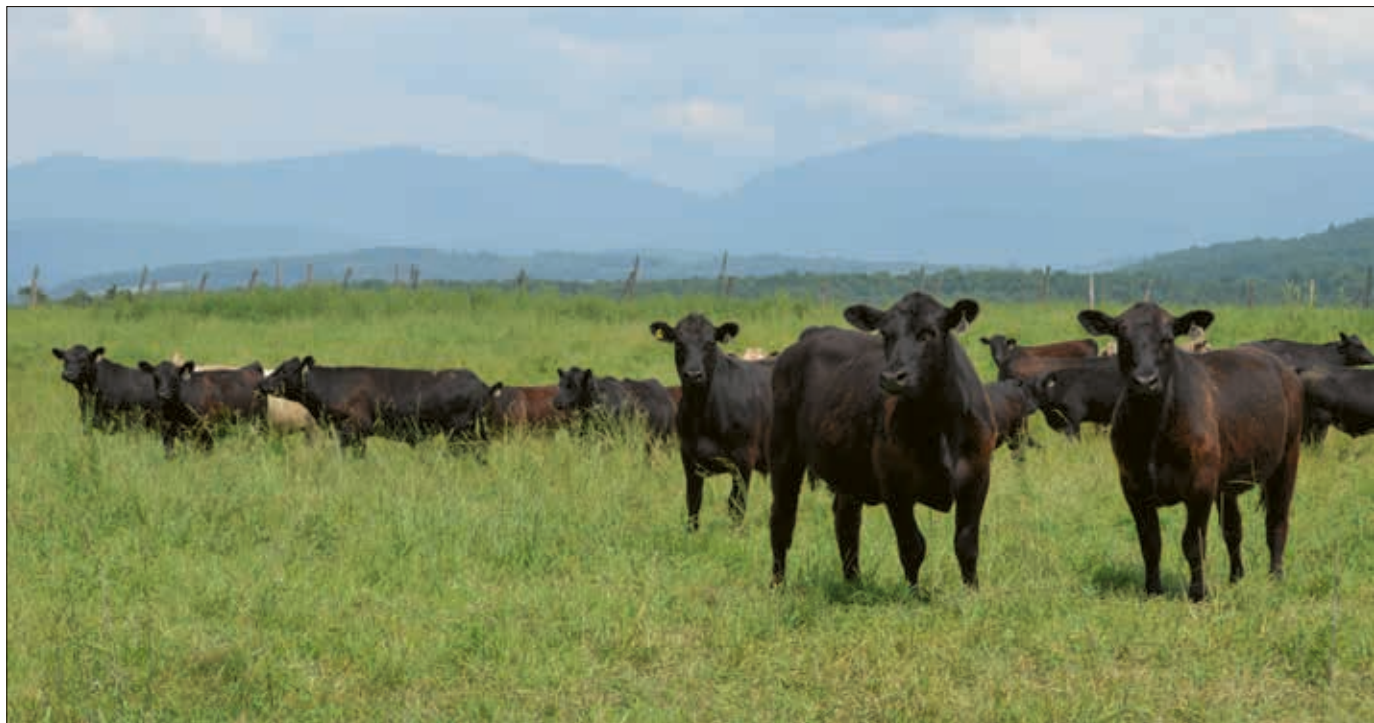
Meadows was one of seven regional cattle operations from across the country to be recognized by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) as an Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP) winner. Presentation of the award was made during the recent 2013 Cattle Industry Summer Conference in Denver, Colo., with Mountain Meadows representing NCBA Region 1, the most highly populated of the association’s

seven regions. The ESAP, now in its 23rd year, recognizes beef producers who make environmental stewardship a priority on their farms and ranches while also improving production and profitability.

Working closely with local agencies such as the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), University of Vermont Extension, the Environmental Protection

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Agency (EPA), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Vermont Department of Agriculture, the farm not only maintains awareness, but carries out stringent practices to secure the quality and sustainability of the land, water and air.

A major environmental project included creating buffer zones for the Lemon Fair waterway, fencing cattle away from the streams that trickle into Otter Creek, which in turn flows directly into Lake Champlain. Buffering nearly 100 acres with 10 miles of fencing now helps to secure the future of one of Vermont's most treasured natural resources.

To replace this source of water on the farm, Mountain Meadows cattle grazing multiple pastures along the Lemon Fair are watered by gravity flow from a deep Artesian well powered by solar panels.

Through sustainable practices such as these, Mountain Meadows provides a constant supply of certified organic beef to Whole Foods Market, the world's leading natural and organic foods supermarket retailer, which, in turn, distributes the beef to 20 stores scattered from New York to southern New England.



► Amiel Cooper (right) is quick to praise the efforts of farm manager Brian Kemp (left), shown with his family. "Brian's coming on board in 2006 was a major event, and we've made enormous progress," he says.

"Selling to Whole Foods Market has enabled us to concentrate on the production and wholesale marketing of our organic beef," Cooper adds. "We don't have to worry about advertising and sales in the regards that most beef producers do, and we have an enthusiastic market. A vast amount of our time and resources are put into enlarging, perfecting and improving our operation."

### Feeding calves

While 95% of the feed source at Mountain Meadows is their own pasture, haylage, baled hay and corn silage, calves are started on a small amount of mixed organic grain at weaning and receive increasing amounts until they reach optimum slaughter weight. The mix of grass-legume haylage and certified

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## Researcher values beef's high-quality protein and the joy of a good meal

Avoiding the potential of known hazards is just common sense for Amiel Cooper who, in following his dream of becoming a cattleman, chooses to raise organic beef on what has become an award-winning Vermont farm.

Viewing many of today's nutritional beliefs as subject to dramatic swings and overemphasis by the media, and the consumption of good beef as a joy, the researcher says the combination of common sense and moderation is the best way of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

As for his choice to raise organic beef at Mountain Meadows, Cooper explains, "I wanted to eliminate external chemical influences in the food we eat," paralleling his love for beef with 22 years of breast cancer research. With that being said, Cooper also realizes the need for other means of production.

"I'm a moderate type of person. I don't have strong radical ideas," he says. "I'm proud of raising beef my way, but I'm not carrying a flag for any particular cause. There are different approaches, and I honor each one."

Attributing good nutrition to his recent successful recovery from a serious illness, the 77-year-old cattleman is also quick to note the importance of high-quality protein found in beef as crucial to healthy living. Noting

that his mom and dad lived to be 101 and 97, respectively, Cooper is a strong proponent of using common sense and a balanced diet of nutritious foods for creating a strong and happy lifestyle.

"There's way too much faddism based on studies that aren't definitive," says the researcher, who spent 90% of those 22 years at the microscope looking at breast cancer cells and tumors. "I don't know of any natural food substance that will cause or cure cancer or any disease."

Instead, the researcher-turned-cattleman looks back to the 1930s and 1940s, when there was no use of herbicides, pesticides and hormones in production agriculture, to discern that the intrinsic value of all food is only as good as the production processes that bring it to the table.

Operating Mountain Meadows under the precautionary principle that one should try to avoid exogenous chemicals or processes when there is a possibility or probability they will cause harm, Cooper encourages consumers to know their food source rather than follow a dietary fad.

Most of all, he encourages people to "eat what is delicious" through balanced meals, emphasizing that the best meals

are those shared with family and friends, and occasionally enriched with a glass of good wine!



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organic grain from Canada is working well.

"We are currently feeding a mixed grain ration of field peas, wheat and barley or oats, which gives us a more affordable blend of feed," says Kemp, noting the cost for organic corn and wheat has more than doubled during the past few years.

Most of the cropland is in high-quality grass-clover-alfalfa, which performs well in the clay soil with Vermont's high 36-inch rainfall average. Corn silage or, in a really good year, corn snaplage is harvested from 140-150 acres of corn planted annually for feeder calves and to supplement fall-calving cows when extra energy is needed.

"Currently, our finishing group, which has access to pasture during the grazing season, is eating 12 to 14 pounds of grain per day along with silage/haylage," adds Kemp, noting that winter months require the amount of grain to be increased. The fed steers and heifers "finish with good marbling and good fat cover that we would not be able to get with 100% grass-fed beef."

"We average a 750-pound hot-carcass weight," Kemp says of the beef harvest, which usually comes at 18 to 24 months of age. "Calves are finished and then transported about 45 miles to a small USDA-regulated and organic-certified packinghouse in Vermont. Amiel takes care of where the product goes, whether it is boxed primal or quartered, and it is then delivered to the Whole Foods Market Distribution Center in Cheshire, Conn."

While following organic growing practices that withstand stringent inspections across all areas of production, Cooper and Kemp agree that utilizing quality genetics is one of the single most important factors in their success.

"Genetics have been as much a concern as



► **Left:** Solar panels power a 700-foot-deep artesian well that supplies water to surrounding pastures and enables exclusion of cattle from farm waterways shedding into Lake Champlain.

► **Below:** "Currently, our finishing group, which has access to pasture during grazing season, is eating 12 to 14 pounds of grain per day along with silage/haylage," says Kemp.



all of our other production techniques," says Cooper. "We chose to have crossbreeding, using Angus bulls on Charolais females and vice-versa. We like this cross very much, and the vast majority of our female breeding stock is registered. We especially pay great attention to our selection of Angus and Charolais bulls based on enhanced EPDs, fertility indications and structural features required for working longevity. We are very proud of the group of bulls we purchased from the National Western, other national auctions and private-treaty sales, including Trowbridge Angus of New York and Knoll Crest Farm in Virginia. It's not cheap, but we feel genetics are terribly important and pay for themselves through excellent mothering, growth and carcass quality."

"The Charolais-Angus are very durable and prolific animals," says Kemp. "They hold up a little longer in the breeding program and are phenomenal animals themselves. Heterosis is very important in an organic program, where antibiotics and many other medications cannot be used, and we rely on natural hardiness and an excellent immune

system, often enhanced in crossbred calves."

Noting the cross results in cattle that feature a good balance of frame, great temperament and high-producing mothers with rich colostrum, Kemp and Cooper are looking at retaining  $F_1$  females with the goal of producing more of their own replacements.

"Some of the nicest calves we wean each year are from these  $F_1$ s," says Kemp.

Always looking forward to learning from others and sharing their own experiences, Cooper and Kemp welcome visitors to their little portion of Vermont near Lake Champlain where Mountain Meadows and a robust herd of Angus-based cattle thrives, doing its part daily to ensure the future of agriculture.

"We try to become better and better," says Cooper, who also notes a long "wish list" of things to do. "We're certainly not going to rest on our laurels."

Increasing the cow herd to 450 tops the list of farm goals, along with the possibility of branding their beef. One thing is for sure, all will be done with the ultimate concern and care for the land and those that partake of its bounties.



**Editor's Note:** Linda Eck is a freelance writer and Angus breeder near Sarcoxie, Mo.



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