



# HORSE DRAWN FARM

## *Horse Powered Produce*

By Katrina Hays Photos By Steven McBurnett

**D**ust announces their work as soft haze plumes over a field on Lopez Island in Washington state. There comes a creaking clatter and rattle, oddly muted, as one expects a mechanized roar to emanate from an area in the process of being ploughed. Then they appear: four massive horses side by side, gold coats sweating under brown harness, flaxen manes flapping as heads bob rhythmically in time with their slow steps.

"Ho," the man on the harrow behind the team speaks calmly at the end of the long row. The horses stop. There is a pause, and in the quiet one can feel cool air and notice birds lift from the surround of nearby trees.

"Team."

His hands on the lines seem motionless, but some invisible cue whispers to four equine mouths and, as a single unit, 16 equine legs begin a deliberate crossing sidestep to the right,

dragging heavy machinery 90 degrees. The driver carefully aligns the team on the big square section and the equines step forward again. They are patient in their work, and the driver is patient in his. The scene speaks of a great and patient wisdom—that of human and horse working land to create food: slowly, deliberately.

### MARKET FARMING WITH DRAFT HORSE POWER

Ken Akopiantz and Kathryn Thomas, both in their late 50s, have been farming on Lopez Island with draft horses for almost 30 years. Their farm sits on 80 acres, and six of those acres are dedicated to growing food for humans.

"We produce about 80 fruits and vegetables, plus we offer pig, goat, sheep, and cow meat," says Kathryn. "We run from about March to November, and all our produce stays on the island."

"It's great brand image," says Ken. He laughs as he pulls a heavy padded collar over a big head. "People love our horses."

In all things, Ken is quiet and thoughtful. He works steadily as he talks, removing harnesses and hanging them on the barn wall. His movements are rhythmic and calm as he passes between thousands of pounds of draft horses that dwarf him

in their bulk. Although the end of the work day and a pasture to graze are just minutes away, the Belgians are also quiet and calm, displaying no impatience or fuss.

A pig suddenly sends up a roar of demand, and goats begin bleating complaint. Wind bangs the sides of the 1914 barn, and two cars clatter up the gravel driveway towards the Horse Drawn Farm farmstand before it closes. Clearly it's feeding time for both people and animals.

"If I had to ride a tractor all day, I probably wouldn't farm," says Ken. "I got into horsepower farming because I had this whole idealistic thing going as a young farmer in my 20s—don't use petroleum, have a low carbon footprint. You could produce your next teams on your farm, and that fit in with the whole organic concept, what we now call regenerative agriculture."

He lifts four lead ropes and begins the trek out to the pasture. Bright hazel eyes glint out from under a battered ball cap, and teeth gleam briefly within a prodigious beard as his grins. "A tractor can't regenerate itself."

## PRICELESS POOP

A "market garden" is a small-scale farm, usually just a few acres, that produces vegetables, fruits, and maybe flowers, honey, and jams as cash crops to be sold directly to consumers. You typically find market-garden products at farmstands, farmer's markets, or in little kiosks by the side of a country road next to a driveway that disappears into the distance.

When asked what horses bring to the farming equation, both Kathryn and Ken pause and then give the same answer: fertility.

"Energy consumed as fodder is recycled," says Ken. "The horses provide both compost, which enhances the soil, and also the 'animal energy.'"

That animal energy means a lot, especially in a time where the earth is reeling and heating under the pressure of massive amounts of carbon released daily into its atmosphere—carbon which is produced by burning fossil fuels. Horses do not burn fossil fuel, but instead run on hay and grass. And the 10 to 15 piles of dung each one deposits daily provide perfect nutrients for farms. Horse manure is full of nitrogen, which makes plants grow really well.

"One of the things that's so great about having horses is they just make lots and lots and lots of compost," says Kathryn. "I mean, we're exporting a lot of vegetables. We need a lot of fertility. [They are] like a fertility engine from the farm."

Ken points out that farming with horses is not just climate-friendly. The practice also reduces noise pollution. Horse-drawn farming results in vastly less soil compaction, which allows for better bacterial growth and decay of organic matter. And pulling a harrow with horses means less power will be required to till the soil year after year, as the dirt won't be mashed by a zillion-pound combine running over it.

"I do know I'm way more familiar with my dirt than someone up on a tractor," Ken observes. "I see every plant we grow pass under me. The dirt has a different look and feel, it will be harder or easier to pull, and that tells me a lot about the soil."

"Horses make farming a sustainable cycle," he says.

"It's actually pretty efficient," adds Kathryn

## CREATE A SYSTEM OF GOODNESS

Ken has strong feelings about the best path for a human to get into farming with an equine as partner and engine.

"Horsemanship before farming!" he exclaims. "Everybody wants to drive, but literally that is the last thing you should think about."

Ken had been farming for several years when he decided to get into horse-powered farming. But he shakes his head when he recalls his younger self, who had zero experience with horses. Ken bought a team, and then had to spend years figuring out how to unravel the challenges of working with sentient, sensitive, massively powerful beings who were vastly different than humans in how they live and act in the world.

"Don't do it like I did it," he says ruefully. "I was stubborn and did it all backwards."

A farmer is, by nature, unafraid of taking time and Ken recommends taking a long time to learn correct groundwork and how to handle horses softly and consistently.

"Get help. Work at a stable. Take lessons," he stresses. "Learn to work with horses before you try to farm with horses. I can't emphasize that enough."

Kathryn has a long history with horses. She evented as a child and worked as a farrier for years before joining Ken in full-time farming. She says, while she initially helped her husband with basic horsemanship, he really developed his own path with their horses.

"Ken likes to figure things out for himself," she says. "He read a bunch, studied up, and then went and worked with a woman on learning natural horsemanship. He got some support, a little mentorship, which really helped."

To watch Ken with his drafts is to watch someone for whom consistency and calmness are the basis of a good relationship.



Getting ready for a day's work.



## PROFILE

His hands are soft on rope and rein. He talks about “creating a system of goodness” for the horses, and it’s clear the equines are comfortable with that system.

“He’s totally quiet,” says Kathryn. “He has all these little things to just remind them all the time that it’s okay and he’s in charge and they don’t need to worry.”

She says laughing and shaking her head, “If we didn’t have the horses, I’m pretty sure Ken wouldn’t be farming any more. He’d have found something else to do.”

### HANDS, LINES, VOICE

Another fall morning and this time only two big horses are at work at mowing a cover crop under a low sky. Ken wears a vest against the wet chill air and bounces gently on the seat as Jake, 20, and Sol, 3, pull a small, red mower, which clatters and creaks. The green smell of cut peas and winter rye drench the nose.

“Ho!” Ken’s voice is loud.

The younger horse missed the cue, and the team walked a few feet past the corner. Ken pauses, then asks for the team to back with a cluck. Sol fidgets, turns his head against the gentle pull on the lines. Older Jake gently leans towards him and the youngster hitches a bit, then they find their rhythm and step back and then sideways in tandem. Off they go, dragging the mower along the next pass. Ken’s face is relaxed. The horses are relaxed. The work goes well.

While he appreciates all those island visitors who drive by and stop and take pictures and want to talk with him, Ken won’t stop to chat.

“When I’m driving, nothing else exists,” he says. “It’s a meditation and a conversation at the same time. Horses know what you are thinking from your hands on the lines and the tone of your voice. What I’m thinking affects the outcome of the work. If I miss the release because my mind isn’t with them, it’s on me, not them.”

On that fall day, the farmer has multiple jobs to accomplish with his horses before sundown. This field needs to be cut, another to be disced, and there is manure to be moved. He will work hard. The horses will work hard. So he doesn’t linger, but when asked his favorite thing about farming with horses, the little grin appears again from within the beard. He turns back to the great golden equines, who come to attention when he lifts the lines. Ken clucks, and as they all move away he says over his shoulder, “It’s magic.”



Ken and his horses making magic.



For more information on how to approach learning to farm with horses Ken Akopiantz recommends contacting Doc Hammill Horsemanship. Based in Montana in the United States, Doug “Doc” Hammill offers driving, training, and horsemanship clinics, as well as personalized coaching and learning resources. Part of the horsemanship revolution, the former veterinarian’s approach to working with horses is grounded in natural or gentle horsemanship and relationship. Visit: [dochammill.com](http://dochammill.com)

To purchase produce and proteins, visit their farmstand on

**Lopez Island:**

**Horse Drawn Farm**

**2823 Port Stanley Rd.**

**Lopez Island, WA 98261**