



RURAL RETIREMENT AND PASSION PROJECTS FROM THE LAND

By Katherine Burrows

RETIREMENT VISION

About twenty years ago, Marian and Peter started to think about what they wanted their retirement life to look like. The couple hoped to find a property where they could combine their interests. Marian wanted a garden to grow herbs, vegetables, and other natural ingredients and Peter was very interested in keeping honey bees.

Moving out of the GTA when Peter retired in 2013, Marian continued her work in health care as a consultant, which required proximity to airports so that she could travel easily for her work.

In early 2013, Marian and Peter purchased their current forty acre property, in the Township of Tyendinaga, near Roblin, which includes fifteen or so acres of forest as well as some pasture fields, an apple orchard, and a creek. The house is a renovated 1860's log home with a shed on the property that dates back to the 1840's and was the original homestead, occupied while building the original home.

On a beautiful, sunny day, the location seems the very definition of idyllic and pastoral. Time seems to slow during my visit as we chat over freshly brewed herbal tea and homemade tarts on the screened in porch.

But this wasn't always the case ...

RURAL REALITIES

The couple recall the rude awakening to the realities of rural living they received from the very beginning. On Friday, April 12, 2013, ahead

of the moving truck, and in the wake of a bad ice storm, Peter arrived at the newly purchased property for the first time, to discover that the house was without power or water. Wells don't run without hydro for the water pump.

He phoned Marian to ask where the flashlights and candles were. She replied, "On the moving truck." After loading their belongings that day, the moving company had parked the truck in a secured area overnight before heading out to the farm the next day. "Peter had to buy bottled water and flash lights," recalls Marian.

Peter adds, "We now have a generator, which has saved us quite a few times." A backup power source is especially important when relying on a septic tank and well.

He continues, "With no cell service, we rely on internet for communications. We had to put up a 50-foot tower to get decent internet out here!"

"My Mom made everything look so easy when we were young. She had a garden and kept chickens for both eggs and meat," Marian shares. "When we discussed getting chickens, Peter asked me who was going to pluck and clean them. That was not something I wanted to do, so we didn't end up getting chickens."

"Not everything has worked out the way we expected," Peter confides. "It looks beautiful here now but come out during the last week of February or first week of March and you'll often find a foot of snow on the road. Two years ago, we had three feet of water by the shed."



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RURAL RESILIENCE

Despite the challenges of weather, nature, and isolation, the couple have persisted on the adventure to achieving their initial retirement vision.

Marian remembers her mother using a lot of herbs. Later, as she completed her formal education in science and health, she continued to be interested in how herbs interact with the body and how herbs can be used for healing.

She started to garden and found her efforts thoroughly appreciated by the local deer and groundhogs. A six-foot fence around the garden was added to protect the plants.

At each corner of the garden are four large black walnut trees. Explains Marion, "Black walnuts are the kiss of death for nightshades - your potatoes, tomatoes, peppers. So, we had to put in raised beds to prevent the roots of our vegetables and herbs from touching roots of the black walnut trees." The raised beds also add more space and depth to the garden.

TEAS AND BEES

Marian and Peter started Teas and Bees soon after, combining their two loves. Initially, they packaged up what they produced and gave it away to friends and family. Many of these gifts were sent to family in B.C. for feedback. "We tried out the products on them first. It's a different climate, so it gave us a good idea of any problems we might encounter with a larger market. We continued testing and refining the process until we found a formula that worked in both provinces." The number of inquiries about products increased and Teas and Bees started selling.

HERBAL TEAS

"Our herbal teas are all based on research into nutrition and holistic benefits. I've created my own blends, starting with what I grew up with and building on that knowledge," notes Marian.

Nettle Ti, is a blend adapted from an Indigenous recipe, which includes stinging nettle (vitamin A), rose hips (vitamin C), and peppermint (digestive aid). The Mohawk word "Ti" (for tea) is used in homage to the recipe's origins.

Marian recommends Revival Tea for when you're feeling that afternoon slump. It's a combination of lemon balm, German chamomile, gotu kola, oat straw, and stinging nettle for a gentle lift without caffeine or calories.



Drive Away the Winter Cold is a blend created for warming up on long, cold winter nights. The combination of lemon peel, turmeric, ginger, and cinnamon feels cozy amid winter's chill. It's also great as a spice mix to mull red wine.

BEES&HONEY

Currently, Teas and Bees has three hives. A couple more from New Zealand were planned, but COVID interfered. This year they will increase the number of hives and use local bees.

Peter explains, "All beehives have to be registered. We are members of the Ontario Beekeepers' Association and have permits for all our hives.

"We've been selling between fifty to seventy five kilos of honey each year. Before COVID, we sold at fairs, markets, and shows, as well as from our farm gate. In late 2020, we were able to participate in the Tyendinaga Township Holiday Market Trail, a drive-thru Christmas market."

The couple plan to keep between three to six hives. Peter explains, "We want to avoid the need to go mechanical, which happens if you get too large."

Beekeeping has been another journey in getting to know the environment and the land, as well as learning ways to work with Mother Nature. The hives have been moved further away from the house to the north and on higher ground. Reflective covers are used during winter to increase the bees' chances of survival. Beekeepers need to stay up to date on mite control and other diseases. "You've got to be very diligent in watching them through the seasons and knowing what to look for that indicates the health of the hive," says Peter.

He continues, "Urban bees are known to thrive because of all the biodiversity in cities. People plant beautiful gardens with a diverse combination of flowers and trees. Here, we live mostly in monocultures. Many municipalities spray for weed and pest control, which can kill plants the bees would normally use."

Marian adds, "Right now, we're not even cutting the grass to leave the bees access to the dandelions until the next flowers are in bloom." When lawns and pastures get cut, bees need other food sources.

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BLACK WALNUT SYRUP

Resilience comes from continued openness to learning, growth, and new opportunities, as well as a willingness to persist despite obstacles and setbacks with a determination to focus on long term gains and future goals. Another example of this couple's rural resilience is the way they've turned the black walnut trees into a blessing.

With a little research, and some information from OMAFRA, they discovered that walnut trees can be tapped. Black walnut trees only produce about twenty percent as much sap as maple. Sugar maple requires forty litres of sap to make one litre of syrup, the ratio for black walnut is seventy five litres. But that was not a deterrent.

While sampling their black walnut syrup, they discovered it has a mild, butter pecan flavour. "When I tasted it, I was immediately transported back to my childhood, eating butter pecan ice cream - that natural flavour it used to be before they started using all the artificial ingredients," Marian says, her eyes lighting up at the memory.

Fuelled by her recollection of that flavour Marian set out to make walnut syrup. Despite her enthusiasm, the first batch thickened to jelly. With more research, she discovered that walnut sap contains a large amount of pectin. Adjusting for that, she tried again.

Eventually, Marian and Peter had a delicious maple walnut- syrup which was the right consistency and flavour. "Many companies that make maple walnut syrup add stuff," says Marian. "Our syrup comes from boiling down the sap, we don't add anything."

RESILIENCE RESULTS IN GROWTH AND DIVERSITY

As Marian and Peter continue to learn and try new ventures, it's clear that they're having fun.

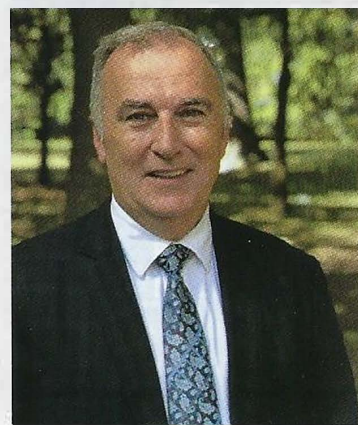
The couple comments that they find the temperature on their property is typically about five degrees cooler than Belleville. They estimate they're about five weeks behind Southern Ontario for weather, flowers, and birds. And those few weeks of extra time are critical for the gardens and bees.

ADDING MAPLE SYRUP

With several sugar maple trees on the property, Marian and Peter decided to try making maple syrup and maple sugar. They are members of the Ontario Woodlot Association and the Ontario Maple Syrup Producers Association.

"There's an art to making maple syrup," Peter says with a wry grin. "We're had some great advice, but when you get back to your own trees, you're really on your own. You've got to learn what looks normal and what works for your property."

Despite several years of experiments and experience, and the addition of a refractometer to measure sugar content, Peter estimates it will take another twenty years to know everything.



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Not only undeterred, but inspired by adversity, the couple and the company have flourished.

Further product additions include candles made with beeswax sourced from their own hives, honey soaps, made with natural glycerine, and tea baths...sachets of herbs to add to the water when bathing.

The next venture is soap dishes, currently in the development phase. "The addition of woodworking is complementary and for presentation only. Right now, we're looking for a way to ensure the wood stays protected from water damage," reveals Peter.

All products and ingredients are either organic or sustainably sourced. When business returns to some semblance of normal, the couple plans to host open days at the farm, including a demonstration hive. They look forward to attending local markets again.

RURAL RETIREMENT REFLECTIONS

After eight years, what do they think of their retirement plan now? I wondered.

"We love Eastern Ontario," says Marian with a warm smile. "The people are great, the area is fantastic, there's a lot to do. We love this lifestyle. It's the perfect triangle for us between Kingston, Toronto, and Ottawa. We're close to major airports and excellent health care. It's quiet and beautiful. We love sitting out here, listening to the peepers."

Peter adds, "We love the farm, is so peaceful. It's hard to leave to go anywhere."

Marian continues, "We do this because we love it. It's not business, it's our retirement project. And we don't want to turn it into a business. If it gets too big, you worry about keeping on top of everything or losing it all. We want to keep it as something we love and enjoy."

Peter jokes, "It turns out we didn't really retire, we just changed careers." As he laughs, they share a look that speaks to their strong connection and shared experience.

A career born out of passion for what they do, where they are, and working together. That does sound ideal.

To connect with Marian and Peter, visit the teasandbees.com website or Facebook page @teasandbeescanada. Please contact them first to arrange safe pickup of products. ♦