

## September Sentiments from The Honeyberry Farm

By Carla Weideman

With visions of elderberries dancing in my head, I packed up my car with all my necessities and a good pair of hiking shoes and drove four plus hours northwest from Minneapolis 'til I reached a little gravel driveway leading to The Honeyberry Farm. I was off on a great farming adventure! After graduating from college in 2014 and working for a couple of years in retail and arts administration, where I often felt an aching restlessness for kinesthetic labor, now in 2017 I was more than ready for a change. Ready to submerge my hands in the dirt. Ready to discover that food doesn't originate from grocery shelves but from the labor of eager farmers and from the warm bed of the earth.



From the moment I was greeted at the door of the Honeyberry home with the invitation to join Bernis and Jim for a dinner of garden fresh potatoes and corn, I felt at home. The Honeyberry homestead is a small, thoughtfully built log cabin, nestled next to a stand of birch trees and wild berry bushes. Inside the cabin, you are engulfed in an old-fashioned sense of warmth that seems to have been preserved from Minnesota's pioneer era. Jars of canned, dried, and

dehydrated fruits and vegetables decorate the wall shelves, and bottles of homemade berry wine line the staircase to their loft.

The couple moved onto their 2.5 acre homestead in 2005 and they later acquired more land a mile east where their main orchard is located. Five acres of fruit await u-pickers in the warm summer months when their honeyberry, cherry, saskatoon, raspberry and currant bushes are ripe and ready for plucking and in the autumn when the tart and bountiful elderberries ripen along with seaberrries and aronia.

How did I find this peaceful haven, you might ask? And what was I doing there? You maybe have heard of WWOOF-ing before, but you probably thought of it as just another word for a dog's bark. WWOOF is also an acronym for an





organization that draws volunteer workers from all over the world. For a modest membership fee, you can peruse more than 120 international websites of farming hosts to find the one that best fits your interests and skills, which is how I stumbled upon Bernis and Jim's berry farm in Bagley Minnesota. Having very little farming experience other than a previous WWOOF-ing experience at a wildlife

sanctuary in the Shetland Islands of Scotland, The Honeyberry Farm seemed like the perfect place to dip my toes into the great wide world of agriculture and acquire some berry knowledge.

That first day at the farm was a myriad of new experiences; from waking up in the morning to dew on the country fields, to the sound of cows conversing, to their weekend tradition of hot rice with fresh cow's milk, to the outdoor ramble with Bernis. Everything we saw and touched was like newfound treasure - from the astringent hawthorn berries, to the rose hips growing next to their driveway, to the wild hazelnut tree and gooseberry bush we discovered in the neighbor's cow pasture. Bernis showed me their first rows of berry bushes: raspberries, honeyberries (which could be compared to an oblong-shaped blueberry), currant bushes, and an elderberry bush standing next to their high tunnel. There was a love and a reverence in the way Bernis wandered her land. Facts fell from her mouth like nuts from a tree, and like a little woodland creature, I was eager to gather and store them.



In the afternoon, we had our first elderberry pickers of the season. After loading up the car with picking buckets and harnesses, we drove over to the u-pick site where I beheld my first elderberries – clumps of small berries on a dark red stem. Ripe specimens are a dark blue and stain your hands a bruise hue. The bushes are a pleasure to pick from, and other than the occasional surprise visit from a curious beetle, the process is meditative and calming. The speediest method for elderberry picking is to grasp a clump of berries in one hand, and use a kitchen shears to snip off the clump (also known as the umbel). For storage, you can freeze the stems whole and later shake off the individual frozen berries, or you can remove all the berries while still fresh. There is almost nothing as satisfying as picking (and then consuming) food with your own two hands. With the rise of kitchen gardens and urban community garden plots, more people are discovering the singular joy of not only becoming more self-sufficient, but also of falling in love with the wonderfully edible natural world. In my time at The Honeyberry Farm, I discovered the many virtues of the elderberry!

The rest of my September in the Minnesota northland went by in a berry and nature filled whirl; from exploring the Bagley area (including swimming in a not so

secret gravel pit pond), to hiking at the nearby state parks, to attending the semi-weekly knitting group at the local senior citizen's center, to golden rambles down the country roads, to riding my first tractor, to learning how to use a drop spindle, to peasant bread baking, to braiding hardneck garlic, to my daily elderberry-related kitchen experiments including cordial and syrup making, dehydrating (for later use in granola), canning, juicing, scone and muffin baking, and winemaking.

From my first day in the north country, feeling rather out of place and foreign, to my last dewy morning walk along the sun-touched roads, it was a steady adjustment. The city has the tendency to overwhelm and even numb your senses with constant stimulation so it takes time to allow your body to adapt to the gentle pace of the earth. It begins with rising with the sun for a hearty farm breakfast and tucking yourself in at night when the moon shows her glowing face. With your hands engrossed in some physical task, like shredding zucchini, shaking elderberries, or removing the skin from cloves of garlic, you begin to peel back those layers of outer fluff that daily interaction in the



metropolis builds up. During my month at the Honeyberry Farm, in addition to learning valuable homesteading skills and adaptability, I also began to feel both my physical and mental selves harden a bit. Maybe I didn't need to apologize quite as frequently. Maybe I didn't even need to be as verbally enthusiastic. Maybe it was okay to grow quiet and more methodical. To work and let nature do the talking. So I listened to the cows... I listened to the bees... and I listened to the geese honking

their way south above the swiftly turning maple trees.

If you are feeling slightly lost or if you have the itch to break out of your normal routines, maybe you could find a place to WWOOF as a volunteer farmer for a week. Or, maybe you could plant your own berry bush and experience the joys of harvesting your own fruit. Or, maybe your restlessness could be remedied simply by visiting vibrant and knowledgeable Bernis and calming and wise Jim at their Honeyberry Homestead, where time seems to slow, and the birds are somehow louder and nature is more wildly entrancing.

For more info on Bernis and Jim Ingvaldson's mail-order nursery and u-pick orchard please visit [www.honeyberryusa.com](http://www.honeyberryusa.com) [www.facebook.com/honeyberryusa](https://www.facebook.com/honeyberryusa)  
PO Box 512, 19736-350th St. Bagley, MN 56621 \* 218-694-3071 \* [info@honeyberryusa.com](mailto:info@honeyberryusa.com)



*At the Honeyberry Farm at Bagley, Carla Weideman learned how to use a juicer/steamer to extract elderberry juice. Adding some cinnamon and cloves to the process produces a delicious, healthy drink which can be served hot or cold.*