



Barbara and Lorne Ebell - David Morrison photo

NANOOSE EDIBLES FARM:

Incredible Edibles

by David Morrison

At the tail-end of my high school years with the world of work looming on the horizon, I remember a lad named Mervyn voicing a strong desire to become a farmer. Mervyn's professional ambition saw him mercilessly mocked, because rather than aim to be a soccer player, guitar hero or fighter pilot, he wanted to grow vegetables and tend livestock. A distinctly un-rock 'n' roll, ridiculous way for a man to make a living, we superior mockers thought!

Four decades later and thankfully much wiser, for the first time in my life I have a backyard with rich soil, so have

been attempting to grow my own vegetables in a modest plot occupying 75 sq. ft. At the end of a day turning over the earth, weeding or sowing seeds, every muscle aches like billy-o, and my thoughts unavoidably turn to those that do this, or similar, for a living. As I soothe away my aches in a steaming tub of bath salts, I have often wondered if Mervyn fulfilled his dreams, envisaging his days if he did, and I ponder how easy it is to give little thought to how food ends up on our dinner table.

Farmers everywhere deserve maximum respect. Their dawn-'til-

dusk days are – to say the very least – hugely physically demanding, rife with challenges from the unpredictability of the weather to the frustrations of machinery malfunctions, and much more. I am certain such a life would do me in, so imagine how rugged a person must be to continue farming deep into their ninth decade on earth!

To this end, meet Lorne and Barbara Ebell, the extraordinary octogenarians at the helm of Nanoose Edibles Farm. Born in 1925 and 1931 respectively, this inspiring, apparently indefatigable

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couple recently gave my wife and I a fascinating tour of their farm. As we wandered around sections of its fertile twenty-three acres with the Golden, BC-born Barbara – Lorne joining us later - I could not help but wonder at their advanced ages how hands-on the Ebells are these days:

“Well, we’re always trying to stand back, but because we don’t have a market that’s big enough, that doesn’t return the farm enough money, it’s difficult to keep the long-term staff,” explains Barbara, seemingly more from a pragmatic perspective than out of resignation. “So, you’re always taking up that role again...having given it away, you get it back!”

After a lifetime of nose to the grindstone, popular retirement pursuits might include golf, a little cruising, pottering about in the garden, or generally taking life at a leisurely pace, finally finding the time to get those things on the to-do list done. Not the Ebells: they purchased a farm as a retirement enterprise in 1982, and have continued to work like Trojans ever since. “We totally knew what we were planning to do,” says Barbara. “Buying the farm just seemed like a good idea! We were living very peacefully in Victoria, and somehow or other we ended up farming, but it has been grand! It’s wonderful working with all these young folk, and it’s a lovely kind of life.” Lorne concurs, especially enjoying the fact that there never seems to be a typical day. “Every day is completely different,” he chuckles, “and you can rarely accomplish what you plan to do. There are other things that come up, always.”

I liked Lorne a lot. He did not speak much, quietly observing as Barbara led us around with an informative narrative, but on the few occasions he did speak it was either fascinating or simply killer-funny. For example, when I inquired as to his age, he dryly quipped, “When people ask how old I am I say I’m old enough not to know better.” When the tour was briefly interrupted by an employee voicing concern over some apparently minor technical issue, Lorne quietly ushered the fellow away with a gently dismissive, “Well, that shouldn’t be insurmountable.” Hilarious.

Although not your average retirement plan, moving into farming was a natural step for the Ebells, who both have farming in their blood. Lorne grew up on a mixed grain and cattle farm in Manitoba, helping his father steer it through the latter years of the Great Depression. Generations of Barbara’s father’s family had farmed in Sweden, and her English mother grew up on a farm in Derbyshire.

Certified organic in 1997, Nanoose Edibles’ produce is locally revered, and rightly so. At the end of our tour we picked up bags of mixed salad greens, spinach, broccolini, and a delicious plant I had somehow not encountered before. One common name for my new find is Miner’s Lettuce (officially *Claytonia perfoliata*), which one of the Ebells’ staff informed

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us grew wild all over the farm. Intrigued, especially as to its name, I was interested to discover after the fact that it was eaten by the miners of the California Gold Rush as a source of Vitamin C. It seems you learn something every day, but I actually learned two things this day with an introduction to marionberries, a 'super blackberry' that had also somehow passed me by all these years.

Currently boasting approximately ten cultivable acres, Nanoose Edibles Farm grows an amazing range of vegetables, herbs and fruits. Full advantage of this cornucopia of fresh produce can be taken by subscription to the 'box program' with an option of one, two, or three seasons of eight weeks each. This takes subscribers from spring through fall, offering a seasonal variation of produce according to availability. The program is certainly a budget-conscious way to purchase fresh organic produce, obviously supporting a local independent farm in the process: win-win. Barbara estimates that around a third of their produce goes out via the box program and farmers' markets, whereas "a third goes to local restaurants and so forth, and the other third we sell on the farm."

While they may have been retiree farmers for the past thirty-three years, Barbara and Lorne have led an adventurous, fun life since first meeting on a tennis court in Duncan! "We were engaged for just sixteen days!" laughs Barbara. "We fished, and hiked, and traveled around, and as both of us are outdoors people we've never been at a loss for things to do with our time."

Barbara used to work for the British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture, while Lorne has worked for Federal and Provincial Forest Services, and for eight years as an employee of the Firestone Plantations Company. His research work for Firestone took the couple to Brazil, and Liberia in West Africa, where - at 185 square miles - the largest rubber plantation in the world housed, Barbara estimates of their time there, in the region of 15,000 people in the company's village.

And Barbara could have become a professional singer! "I studied at the Victoria Conservatory of Music, she tells me, "but because I had small children and an interesting life I didn't work as hard at it as I could have, but it was sufficient to give me a whole other life of my own. For many years I sang in Victoria, mostly classical, oratorio. I'm pretty sure I could have pursued a career as a singer if I'd have wanted to."

Barbara, Lorne, Mervyn if he made it, and the farmers of the world, I salute you. Your efforts are perhaps generally taken for granted in the grand scheme, but certainly not in our household. As a Nanoose Edibles Farm leaflet states, 'everyone deserves quality food,' and it does not get any higher quality than that grown by Barbara and Lorne Ebell and their crew.

Nanoose Edibles Farm is located at 1960 Stewart Road, Nanoose Bay. For further information please visit www.nanooseediblesfarm.com, or contact Barbara and Lorne Ebell by telephone on (250) 468-2332, or email at neorg@telus.net.