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**Deep Root Organic
Cooperative**
*Builds a Warehouse to
Control Their Destiny*

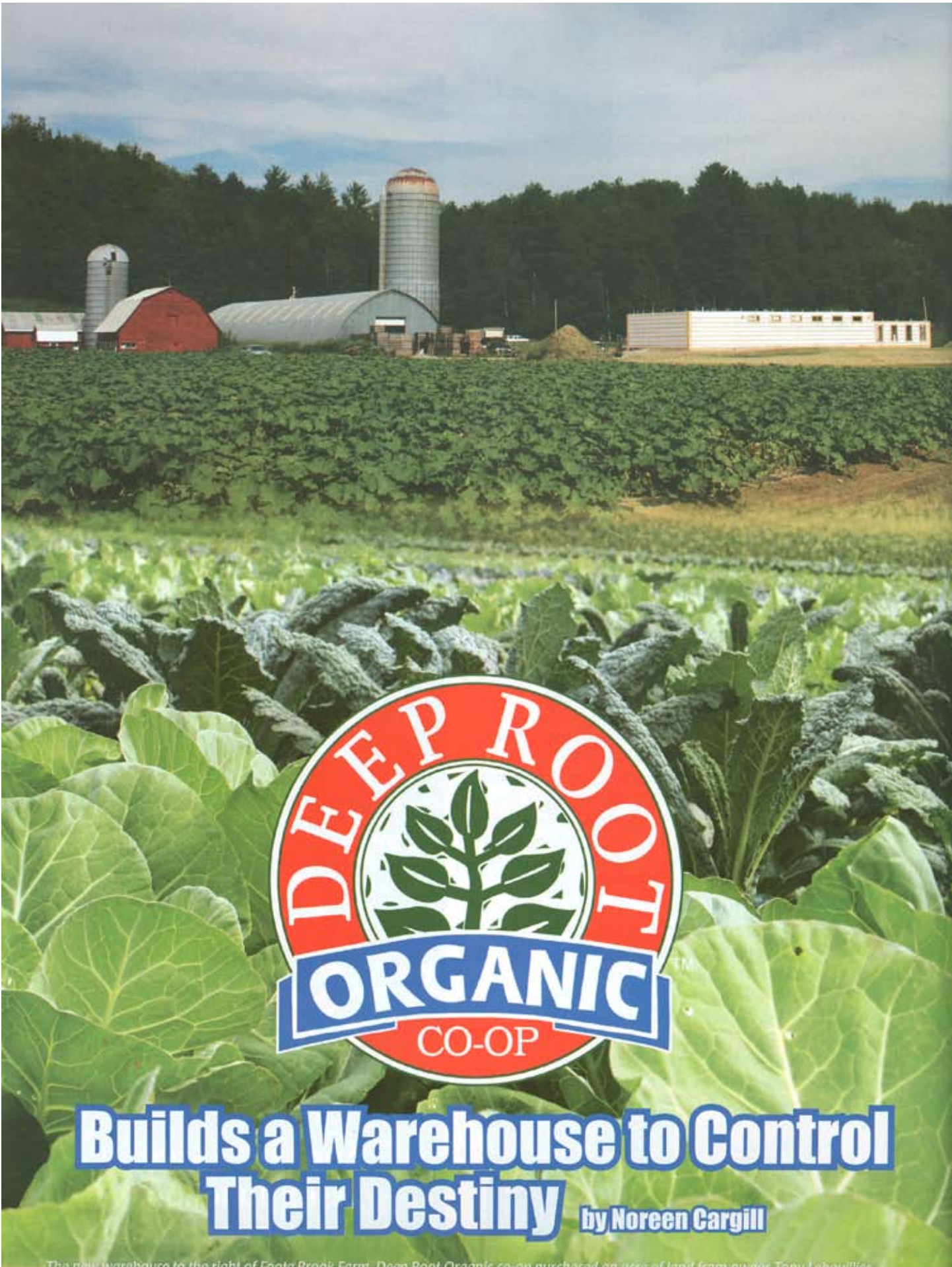
Maple View Farm Alpacas

Millborne Farm Drinkable Yogurt

Vermont Flower Farm

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Caledonia Spirits and Honey Gardens Winery



Builds a Warehouse to Control Their Destiny

by Noreen Cargill

The new warehouse to the right of Eagle Brook Farm, Deep Root Organic co-op, purchased on acre of land from owner Tom Lehoullier.

When Vermonters think of local organic vegetables, they're not likely to imagine a refrigerated tractor trailer full of pallets of produce motoring down Route 89 or 91. This is, however, an accurate picture of a day in the life of **DEEP ROOT ORGANIC COOPERATIVE** as they ship their vegetables to various out of state locations.

Based in Johnson, Vermont Deep Root sends out hundreds of boxes of produce at a time: pallets of cucumbers, kale, tomatoes, and squash that their farmer members have grown.

Deep Root offers their members access to wholesale markets in New Hampshire, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C., and customers include grocery stores such as Whole Foods Market and Albert's Organics.

Comprised of eighteen farms in Vermont and Quebec, Deep Root is one of the oldest organic vegetable cooperatives in the United States. Formed in 1986, the cooperative has been in business for over twenty years. As the twist ties on their produce note, "The co-op exists to promote local, sustainable, and organic agriculture through its small, family owned farms."

"At one point we had as many as fifty farms and at other times as few as six," says Chris Poshpeck, general manager of Deep Root. These days the cooperative membership has



Board president Tony Lehouillier of Foote Brook Farm.

been steady with about eighteen farms, he says. A complete list of member farms is noted on the Deep Root web site (deeprootorganic.com).

Originally in southern Vermont, the Deep Root office location has gone through more than a few changes, having been in Westminster and Waterbury before moving to its current location in Johnson.



Organic green swiss chard bundled and ready to be shipped. The twist tie notes the mission of the co-op. Members also get a discount on necessary items like boxes because they are buying collectively.

Currently Deep Root operates out of the general manager's home there, but that won't be true for much longer.

"We're excited to have our new building," says cooperative member and current board president Tony Lehouillier of Foote Brook Farm. He's talking about a new warehouse that the cooperative is in the process of building in Johnson. Tony is the largest U.S. grower in the co-op, and he generously sold an acre of his farmland to the cooperative for this project.

The 4500-square-foot warehouse will feature offices, a docking area, and a cool space for the produce. Outside there will be room for up to three tractor trailers to maneuver, an essential requirement when the busy season arrives in the early fall. For members the building is more than a space to sort produce and manage the business. "We will be able to control our destiny," Chris explains.

Deep Root had been working with a local Vermont company for years, using its warehouse space and distribution service, until that company was bought by another business in October 2009. Suddenly Deep Root found itself homeless at their busiest time of year. This change prompted Deep Root to develop their plans for the warehouse, something the board had been talking about for years. They even considered creating their own trucking service, but in the end they decided use the services of a local shipper, helping him to develop his own business.



Joe Tisbert of Valley Dream Farm. Joe and his family were featured in the 2009 winter issue of Vermont Fences.



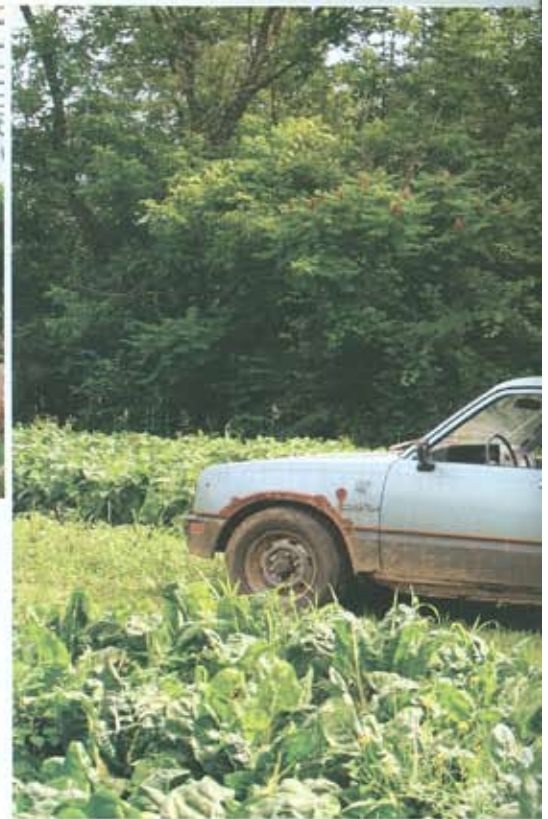
Deep Root is building the warehouse without the help of government grants, Chris points out. "We're doing it on our own with the strong support of the Cooperative Fund of New England. They are doing all of the financing and a seasonal line of credit." He adds, "As members of the Vermont Farm Bureau, we use our discounts for insurance and travel."

The cooperative is proud of the success the new warehouse represents, but it is the functionality of the building that is most important. Finally they have the proper space in which to work. Everyone does whatever is necessary to get the produce on the truck as quickly and efficiently as possible. "The warehouse is not a storage facility," Chris says. "The product arrives and it leaves. If it stays there, I'm not doing my job. We need to move it as quickly as possible."

The cooperative brings in produce from the eighteen member farms and consolidates the pallets. "The buyers won't accept a mixed pallet," Tony points out. "All the romaine lettuce is on the romaine pallet; parsley is on the parsley pallet; and summer squash is on the summer squash pallet," he explains. Moreover, each vegetable has certain storage requirements; for instance, green beans must be dry, and lettuce needs 100 percent humidity at 32 degrees.

In order to sell wholesale the co-op must meet all USDA and USDA Organic requirements, and this is true for the individual farms as well. The extra effort is worth it in order to have access to Deep Root's out-of-state markets.

David Marchant and Jane Sorensen, owners of Riverberry Farm in Fairfax, Vermont, have been members of Deep Root since they bought their farm in 1992. "Part of the reason we bought the farm was because we knew we could sell through Deep Root," David says. They sell their produce through local stores, as well as at a farmers' market, a pick-your-own stand, and a small retail stand, but they are able to sell a larger volume of produce because of their membership in Deep Root. "One hundred cases of kale were picked up here by the coop this past Friday," David says. He adds that by selling kale locally, the farm might have



Images from Foote Brook Farm. Shane, an employee, stringing cucumber vines in the greenhouse. Workers pick the last of beans. Squash leaves. Red chard. Tony has sixty acres here but it's not all cultivated.



Builder Elwin Stone, Joe Tisbert, Tony Lehoullier and manager Chris Poshpeck.

moved only eight cases.

"Because we are members, we can grow vegetables on a larger scale," David says. "We grow seven acres of cabbage and several acres of kale and collard greens. We couldn't sell that many crops locally."

As Deep Root members David and Jane pay a commission to the sales person. There are trucking costs, plus an additional fee for the new warehouse. The farm earns less per case than when they sell through retail outlets like a farmers' market, but the volume of sales through Deep Root makes belonging to the co-op worth it. "We're selling pallets," David says, "as opposed to selling four or five cases of this or that."

"The cooperative offers access to markets that individual farms would not have," Chris says. "That's the biggest benefit of coop membership for farmers." Members also get a discount on necessary items like boxes because they are buying collectively. He waves a hand at stacks of boxes piled high in a corner of the loading dock. "You pay a premium for wax-covered boxes. Right there, that's \$30,000 worth of boxes."

Nearby are pallets of Deep Root produce. The organic European cucumbers will be sold for \$25 per case. At \$35 per case the pallet of organic tomatoes represents about \$3500 to the cooperative. "We don't have cash on hand; we have cash equivalents," Chris says.

When Chris started working for the cooperative in 1998 their wholesale business did around one million dollars worth of sales annually. Today they do 2.6 million. "We move 90,000 to 95,000 cases a year," he explains.

Deep Root Organic Cooperative and its family of eight farms may not be widely known within Vermont—yet—but outside the state, it's a different story. It is a success story, and with the completion of the new warehouse and the creation of a permanent home for the coop, the picture is changing. Before long Vermonters will more easily make the connection between their farmer down the road and that tractor trailer heading down the highway.

This Vermont license plate says it all. The warehouse in construction will be complete by late summer.

