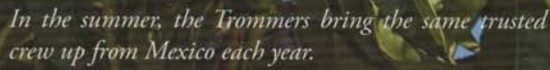


In the summer, the Trommers bring the same trusted crew up from Mexico each year.

NEW LEAF FRUIT: *Orchard Transformation*

A Colorado couple finds their calling tending 20,000 fruit trees

SUSAN J. TWEIT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM STEINBERG

Getting to Rosemerry and Eric Trommer's New Leaf Fruit orchard on Colorado's West Slope means leaving the pavement behind 26 miles south of Grand Junction, and heading downhill on a dusty gravel road toward the Gunnison River in Dominguez Canyon. At the river bottom the route turns downstream, passing two orchards encircled by tall fences, and then winds along between the silty river with its thickets of invasive tamarisk and Russian olive trees, and a heavily used railroad track. The road gradually narrows, pinched by cliffs, rails and river, and finally passes through an open gate with a sign proclaiming "New Leaf Fruit," and into an Eden of sorts: row after row of neatly pruned trees, the fenced enclosure of a vegetable garden bursting with tomatoes, squash, and corn, and a cluster of weathered buildings next to the tracks.

If the route to the orchard isn't easy, neither was the journey that Rosemerry, a poet, performer, and teacher, and Eric, a builder and project manager, took to becoming stewards of some 20,000 to 22,000 fruit trees. (The exact number varies from year to year, notes Eric, because trees live—and die.)

"When we bought the orchard," says Rosemerry, "we thought we were making an investment. We were so wrong." She laughs. "We were making a complete lifestyle change. But it's how we live; we eat organic food, we support local farmers, we love the land. Now we *are* them."

We sit drinking tea in the small farmhouse while the couple's five-year-old son, Finn, plays Legos with much crashing and smashing, and daughter Vivian, just over a year old, naps. Out the open door, a canyon wren trills, the descending notes liquid as flowing water. A tractor grumbles by, hauling a cart with huge crates filled with just-harvested peaches. The hot air smells of sunlight, dust, and the green fragrance of life.

When they first saw these 184 acres tucked into a bend in the muddy Gunnison River, the Trommers had no intention of becoming farmers. They were simply looking for a fixer-upper property to rehab and sell. The location was remote, but the place boasted prime agricultural water rights and a spectacular setting, with red sandstone cliffs rising out of the earth to enclose the bellying arc of fertile bottomland.

The Trommers didn't plan on becoming farmers, but once they saw their future in the trees, they knew becoming certified organic was the way they wanted to go.

It also came with three very dilapidated houses—between them, only one toilet worked—a weathered wood and corrugated tin packing shed filled with junk next to the railroad tracks, the usual compliment of non-functioning vehicles and rusting farm and irrigation equipment to be found on any semi-neglected agricultural property, and 75 acres of trees: peach, cherry, pear, apple, apricot, and nectarine.

A LIFE-CHANGING DECISION

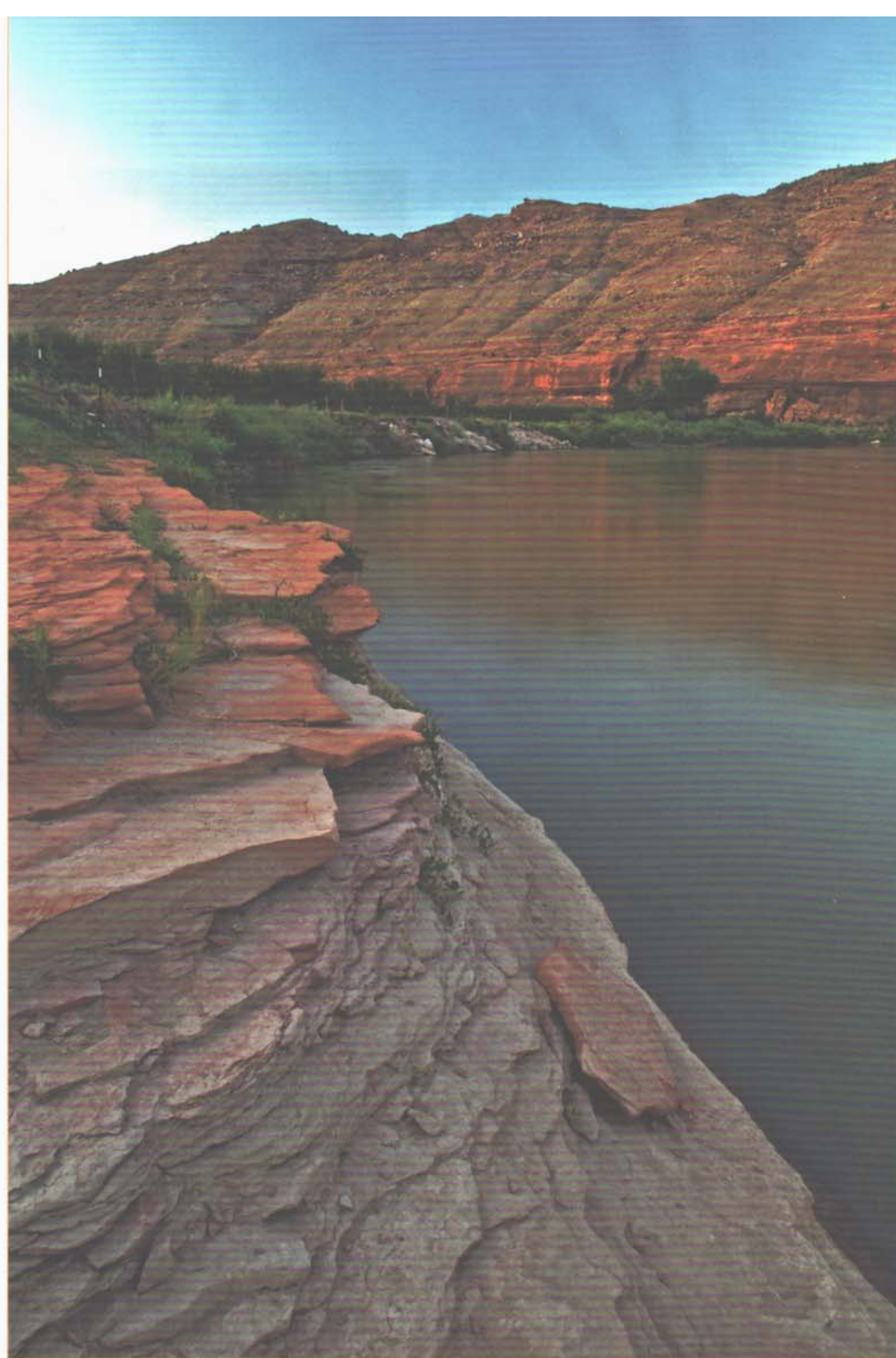
The couple loved the land, but the prospect of taking on the orchard frankly scared them, so they went in search of other projects. A year later, they looked at the orchard again. The land still called to them, and this time, they made an offer. Eric set to work securing a right-of-way from the railroad and the water rights, while Rosemerry dove into research on orchard-care. The place became theirs in March 2007, when the apricots were just coming into bloom.

They figured they'd hire a manager and run the orchard from their home in Placerville, near Telluride, a two-hour-drive away. Rosemerry remembers then-owner Harold Broughton's response to their plans. "He was kind," she says, "and didn't say, 'We'll see about that.'" (Broughton's family planted the orchard that is now New Leaf Fruit in the 1940s; he still owns and runs a conventional orchard upriver.)

"That first year was insanity," says Rosemerry. "Back then, we couldn't tell a pear tree from a peach tree. But we knew we needed to go organic."

While Rosemerry boned up on organic practices and certification requirements (see the sidebar, "How Organic Certification Works"), learned bug cycles, and made contacts with scientists and other organic growers, organic fruit marketers and packing sheds, and companies that help locate agricultural workers, Eric, who can, in Rosemerry's words, "fix anything," began commuting to the orchard daily to tackle the formidable to-do list of repairs and ongoing work. The four-hour-round trip quickly became too grueling, so he took to staying in a motel in the nearest town, half an hour away, and then to sleeping on the floor in the house, unoccupied for five years but in the best shape of the various dwellings.

Back at home, Rosemerry had her hands full with their toddler, and writing and teaching. "It took me months to realize he was gone," she says of her husband. "First



New Fruit Farm is located south of Grand Junction, on the Gunnison River, which provides water for irrigation.

his clothes disappeared from the closet. Then his tools, and finally his computer. That's when I grasped the obvious: the orchard wasn't an investment, it was a total lifestyle change."

OFF-SEASON, YOU PRUNE, AND PRUNE SOME MORE

"The orchard cycle goes all year round," says Eric. "You'd think the orchard would sleep during the winter. But here, trees don't." Pruning begins around Thanksgiving, and continues all winter. "Every single tree must be pruned back," he says, "so that they are stimulated to grow and fruit. That continues until first bloom, and sometimes beyond."

The apricots bloom first, between mid-March and the first week in April. "That's when we know whether we'll have a crop or not," says Eric, as they begin evaluating winter bud-damage throughout the orchard. A little bud damage is okay, he says, because you've got to thin the fruit anyway in order for it to grow to marketable size. Unfortunately, says Rosemerry, "Mother Nature doesn't always thin the way we would." For example, winter cold snaps may freeze all the buds on the lower branches when the coldest air sinks to the ground, leaving the buds on the tops of the trees undamaged.

[*Southwest Colorado is in zones 6-7. Folks living in zone 4 realize having apricots bloom in mid-March is a pipe dream. If their trees bloomed that early, there would most certainly be no fruit, as the blossoms would freeze. USDA hardiness zones speak only to average lowest winter temperature and not to season length. Some areas within the Rocky Mountain region have much longer growing seasons than others. Peaches require an average of 128 frost-free days, and apricots even more. Peaches are wood-hardy to -25°F and apricots to -15°F; it's the short growing season in much of the Rocky Mountains that limits fruit production—Ed.*]

Once the trees come into bloom, the fans—tall towers with propellers rising above the orchard—stir the air, mixing the lower layers of cold with warm air above, and mitigating frost damage.

After first bloom, it's thinning season. "On a peach tree, for instance," says Eric, "you want a fruit about every 9 or 10 inches. Apricots, you thin to 4 inches apart. Overall, you take off 80 percent of the fruit." Thinning the entire orchard takes four to six weeks, and at New Leaf Fruit, it's all done by hand because the orchard is organic. Eric prefers to use hand-labor for thinning, rather than to spray chemicals approved for organic use.

The biggest headache in running the orchard, says Eric, is labor. Organic orchards need a lot of handwork. New Leaf Fruit relies on a mix of local and imported labor—agricultural workers from Mexico brought up on special H2A visas. In winter, local workers do much of the monotonous pruning work. Each spring the Trommers request the same crew from Mexico they've had for the past three seasons. "Once you train them, you don't want to lose them,"

New Leaf Fruit tends more about 20,000 fruit trees on its 75 acres: peach, cherry, pear, apple, apricot, and nectarine.

'It took me months to realize he was gone. First his clothes disappeared from the closet. Then his tools, and finally his computer. That's when I grasped the obvious: the orchard wasn't an investment, it was a total lifestyle change.'

says Eric, noting that local people rarely stay long. "They don't see this as a career. The guys from Mexico, on the other hand, are professional farm workers; they're happy with the work." The four-or-so-person Mexican crew usually arrives by May and stays into the fall.

VARIOUS AND SUNDRY CHORES

After thinning is done, says Eric, "there's a little bit of a lull" before the cherries come on at the end of June. By "lull" he means there's time to fix any issues that have come up with the micro-sprinkler irrigation system that waters the orchard from pumps drawing directly from the river. Time to get a handle on weeding, which is mostly done by hand. Or check the traps that hang from trees throughout the orchard to determine if the population of coddling moths—whose larvae will munch their way into the fruit and destroy the apple and pear crop—or spray one of the viruses that keep coddling moth larvae in check, or attach the twisty-tie-type pheromone lures to the branches to confuse male peach twig borer moths and keep them from mating (their larvae "mine" new shoots, destroying, bud, blossom, and branch tips). Or catch up on the recordkeeping for the organic certification…

Once each kind of fruit is ready, it's a race to pick, sort, and get the fruit to market, which in New Leaf Fruit's case is Rogers Mesa Fruit Company, an organic fruit broker an hour's drive east, near

ROSEMERRY'S PEACH SALSA

2 peaches (or nectarines), peeled and diced

½-1 lime, squeezed

½-1 jalapeño minced

¼-½ cup chopped cilantro

Add all the ingredients to a bowl and gently mix. Serve soon. Nice with chips, as a topping for quiches, or um, I admit, by the spoonful.

—*Rosemerry Trommer*

BROILED PEACHES GO SOPHISTICATED

3 whole ripe peaches

3 tablespoons feta cheese

3 tablespoons brown sugar

3 tablespoons Framboise or a good brandy (if you can find a local fruit brandy, that's best)

Blanch the whole peaches in boiling water until the skin turns color (about a minute), then cool and slip the skins off. Halve and pit the peaches, then arrange in a baking dish pit side up. Place 1/2 tablespoon feta cheese in the cup where the pit was removed, add 1/2 tablespoon of brown sugar to each, and then sprinkle with 1/2 tablespoon of Framboise. Broil just until the sugar begins to melt. Remove and serve with a small scoop of vanilla ice cream next to the peach half. Serves 6.

—*Susan J. Tweit*

Eric Trommer, right, makes a point about peaches to a farm visitor. Peaches are wood-hardy to -25°F and could grow in colder areas; it's the longer growing season in southwest Colorado that makes growing them possible.

Hotchkiss, Colorado. The cherries come on in late June. "I try to get them all picked by Fourth of July," says Eric, "because you don't get a good price for them after that." As soon as the cherries are done, the apricots come ripe, and then peaches, apples, and pears. Early ripening fruits bring the best price. That's why New Leaf grows 11 varieties of peaches—their biggest moneymaker. The different varieties ripen in a staggered fashion, so they're harvesting peaches for the longest possible season to hit different markets.

Each fruit is handled differently. Peaches are delicate and ripen quickly, so they must be placed in the crates by hand and taken to the packinghouse the same day or they can't be sold. Apples aren't picked until they reach a certain level of sweetness; Eric pulls a 'Fuji' off a tree, cuts it open and hands slices to my husband and me. "Not quite sweet enough," he says. I munch the crisp and delicious slices happily, oblivious of the subtleties of the carbohydrate-to-sugar ratio. Pears require a device that determines how many pounds of pressure the fruit can resist. When the resistance readings are just right, the whole crop is picked at once and taken to market.

Orchard management requires keeping an eye on the longer cycle, too—the life of the trees. Last winter, New Leaf pulled all of its aging nectarine trees, since they weren't producing enough fruit to pay the cost of their care. Peach and nectarine trees are shortest-lived, lasting about 18 to 20 years. Cherry trees last at least a decade longer, and pears and apples are productive for 50 or more years. "Peaches are the shortest producers," Eric says, "but you make more money off of them. So there's a balance there."

GOING ORGANIC

Keeping that balance on all levels is critical to managing an organic orchard. "You've got to watch everything," says Eric. That's particularly evident in controlling insect pests organically. "It's partly a matter of timing—of observing the insects and knowing their life cycle, and of keeping records. Every day I write everything we do in a book, and that goes into a spreadsheet I have to make available for the Colorado Department of Agriculture organic certification inspectors. That actually helps us from year to year to see what we've done and what works."

Eric remembers that the first year there were no insects in the orchard. "In a conventional orchard, you won't find a live bug, because of the sprays they work with. It's total control." Now, he says, New Leaf Fruit is getting its insects back. "Some of those are good bugs and some aren't. I want a healthy bug population here to encourage the bats and other natural insect controls." They've put up bat boxes around the orchard, and the workers often see bats roosting in the trees, but the boxes haven't been used yet.

They also tore down the 8-foot fences topped with barbed wire that had surrounded the whole orchard. "It felt like a prison," says Eric. And they tackled the huge task of removing the invasive tamarisk that choked their nearly 2 miles of riverbank, cutting the thickets and spraying the stumps, so now the orchard is open to river and desert alike.

"In the three years we've been here, we've seen more life in the orchard," says Eric.

Back at the farmhouse, Rosemerry summarizes those three years: the first year, that "insane" year when everything needed fixing at the same time as the trees were blooming, setting fruit, and needing

harvesting, and Rosemerry and Eric were madly trying to learn what they were doing; they had their biggest harvest ever, due to a wet winter and mellow spring.

The next year, hail damaged the apricot crop, but the cherries, peaches, apples, and pears recovered. That was the summer Vivian was born, in the farmhouse at the orchard, "During apricot harvest," remembers Rosemerry.

The third year, a late freeze just as the apricot trees were blooming took the entire apricot crop. And they finally got their organic certification, which they hope will allow them to recover some of the additional costs spent in three seasons of moving from conventional to organic practices, by selling their fruit for higher prices.

Still, the Trommers would farm organically anyway. "It's the appropriate way to go," says Eric. "It's kind of a long-term view, or maybe not even that long term. It's what the land needs."

Rosemerry nods and launches into the story of the first time they saw the orchard, "It was about 10 years ago, and we were canoeing down the river. As we paddled by, we looked at each other and said, 'Who would ever want to do that?'"

Later, we walk over to the packing shed/barn to find a box for some peaches. Hanging in the rafters of the porch running along one side of the building is a worn red canoe. I point at it. "Is that the canoe?"

"Yes," Rosemerry smiles. "That's the canoe we were paddling when we first saw this orchard. Things come around."

Rosemerry sets out birthday cake for her kids and crew.

Rosemerry and Finn.

HOW ORGANIC CERTIFICATION WORKS

The process is pretty straightforward, says agronomist Ron Godin of the Colorado State University Extension Service in Delta, Colorado, but it takes time and good recordkeeping.

First, don't apply any chemicals or fertilizers that are not approved for organic crops for three years. For New Leaf Fruit to achieve organic certification in 2009, for example, the Trommers needed to show not just that they had operated the orchard organically from when they bought it in 2007, but also that the previous owners hadn't sprayed anything non-organic on the property within a month before harvesting in 2006...to make up the three years.

It's not just about synthetic pesticides and herbicides, points out Godin. "All of your nutrition has to come from organic sources as well, either cover crops, manures, crop rotation, or composted plant materials."

Second, get certified by an inspector who is certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). (In Colorado, that's the Colorado Department of Agriculture.) This is where good recordkeeping comes in; you must demonstrate that everything you've applied to the property and crops is organically approved. Then, in the third year of the process, the inspector comes out and takes plant samples, such as leaves from the trees. Those samples are tested in the lab to make sure no non-approved chemicals show up. If the tests are negative and your paperwork is in order, you're certified.

If maintaining the records for USDA organic certification seems too time-consuming and the cost, between $750 and $1,200 a year, is too steep, growers sometimes opt to follow organic practices but go uncertified or operate under the "certified naturally grown" label from the independent Certified Naturally Grown organization (naturallygrown.org).

—Susan J. Tweit