

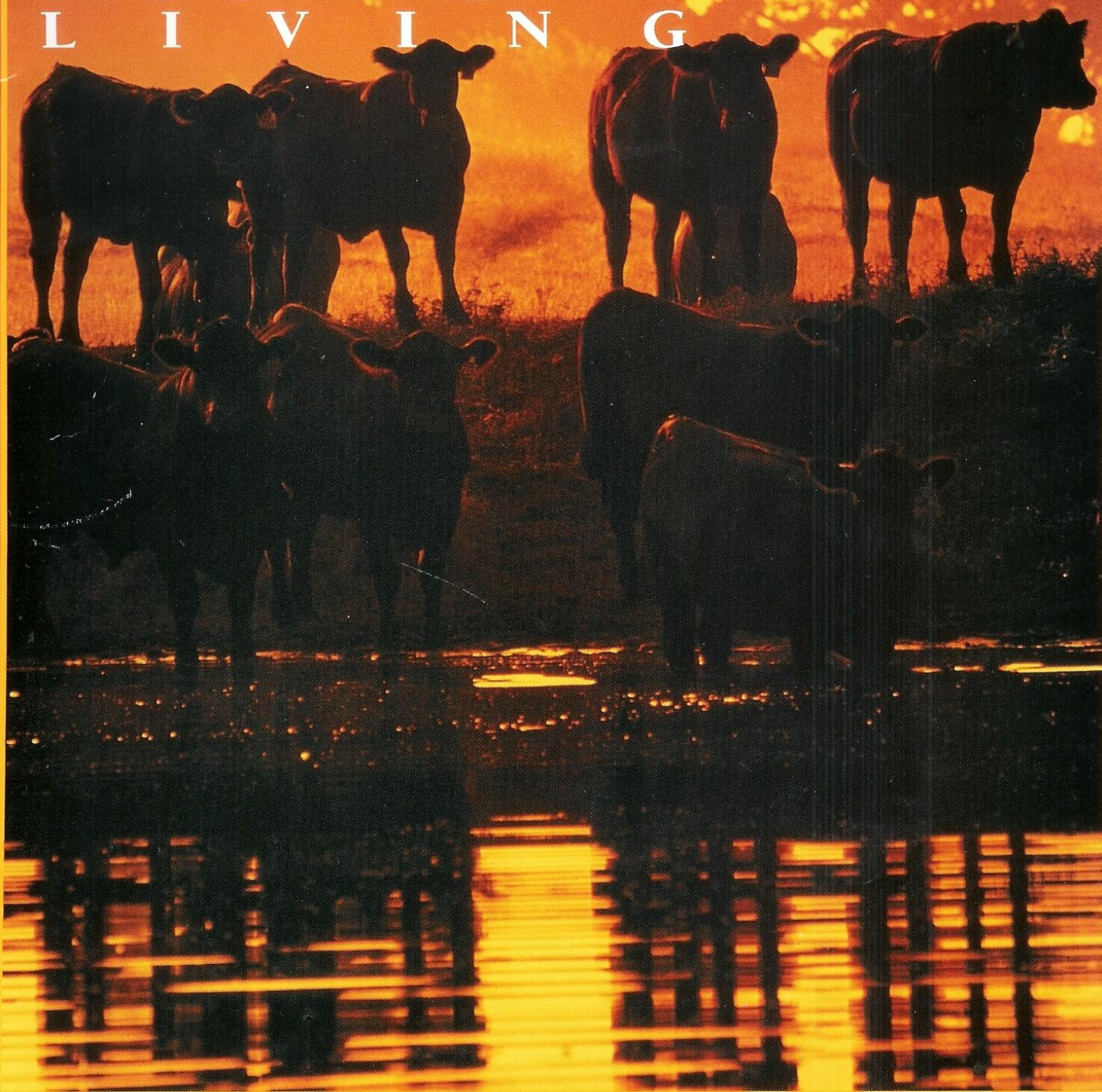
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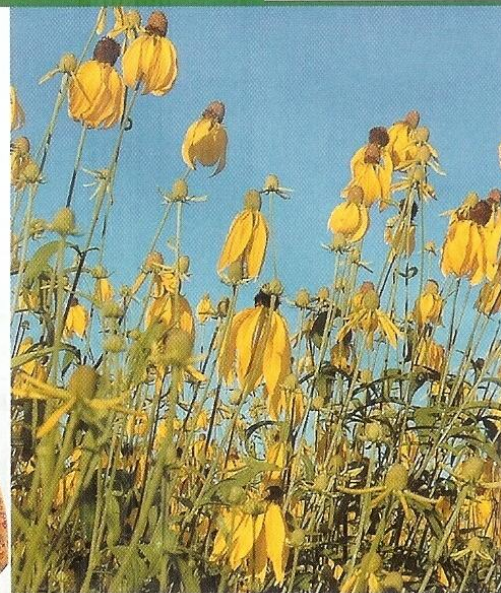
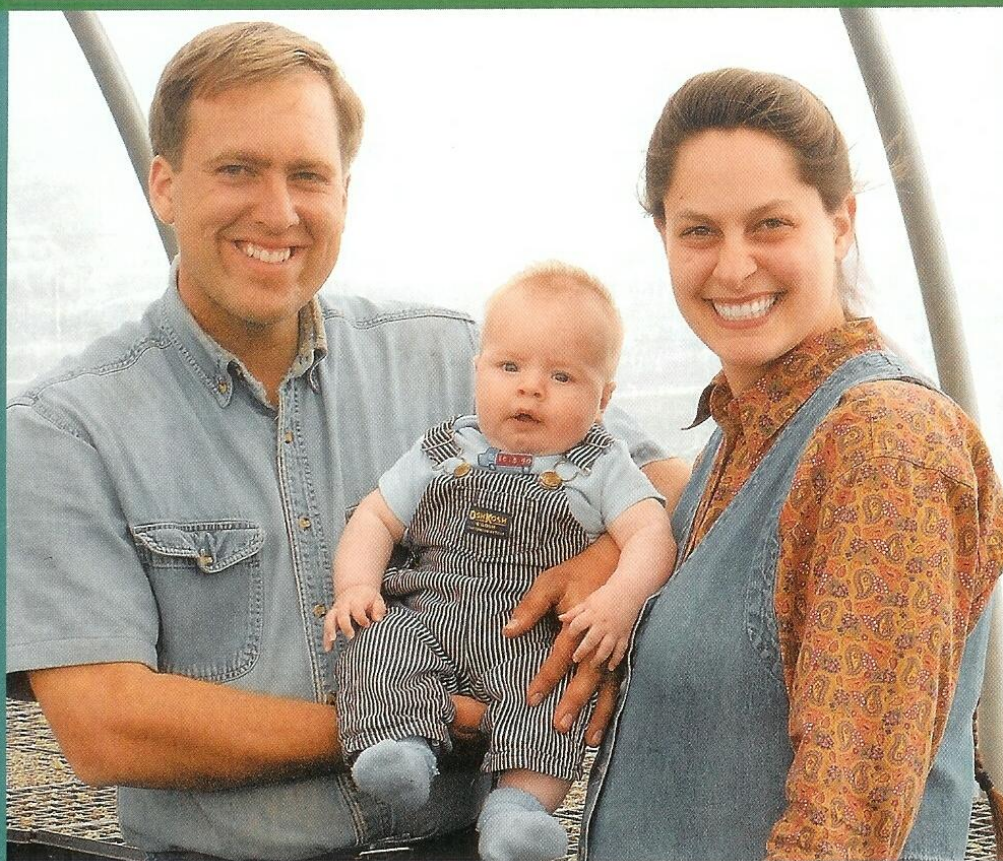
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FOR FAMILIES WHO LOVE THE LAND

L I V I N G





Steve and Janelle Sykora pose with 6-month-old Jesse in the greenhouse at Jubilee Nursery, the farm where they harvest native wildflower seed in Bloomer, Wisconsin. Above: Coneflowers in a photo taken last year at the nursery. Right: A close-up of a Royal Catchfly blossom. Far right: The greenhouse and few of the fields.

'I Wanted to Be A Farmer, and Fields of Flowers Intrigued Me'

ALL STEVE SYKORA HAD WAS A POCKETFUL OF CHANGE. NOW HE OWNS A WILDFLOWER NURSERY.

Welcome to Jubilee Nursery in Bloomer, Wisconsin, where my wife, Janelle, and I grow seed for native wildflowers.

Our brand name is Everwilde. My name is Steve Sykora. Our story is probably somewhat different than many in *Farm & Ranch Living*.

We do not have a lot of land or a farm that has been in the family for generations. My grandfathers were both dairy

farmers, but my folks found employment off the farm. Now I am farming again, starting from scratch.

When I graduated from high school in 1995, I had nothing but a pocketful of change, a John Deere A and a desire to farm. Shortly after this, my parents purchased 50 acres to build a house. I used some of the open ground to experiment with wheat, clover hay and honeybees.

I failed miserably. By 1997, I was flat broke and began working for a surveying company. In 1998, I joined an agricultural engineering firm to do drafting and design for dairy farm expansions

all over the state of Wisconsin.

While at these jobs, I investigated ways to make a living on only a few acres, without much equipment. I found a nursery in Minnesota that was looking for people to grow native wildflowers for seed.

The idea of having fields of flowers intrigued me, so I began growing four or five different native species on 1/10 of an acre. In 1999, I experimented with about 20 species.

In the spring of 2000, I was ready to leave my job and launch into wildflowers. Single and living at home, I'd saved up money to put into the venture. I built a 30-by-60-foot greenhouse, where I started about 25,000 seedlings of about 15 species. I planted them on 2 acres. The second year I had 30 species on 4 acres. Pretty soon I had 70 species on 6 acres. We've just kept growing from there.

Janelle and I were married in the summer of 2002. Janelle, from Idaho, had dreamed of marrying a farmer. We found a little house to rent a few miles from the fields. The house is an original settler's cabin from the 1860s.

In the last few years, Janelle and I have



PHOTOGRAPHY BY
Rick Mooney

worked together out in our fields. One of the main reasons I wanted to farm was to be with my family. Together, we have expanded the farm to 12 acres and about 100 species. The seeds we harvest are sold all over the Midwest to people interested in native plantings.

Last January, we started a different kind of nursery when our son, Jesse, was born! He is our greatest joy.

It's hard to know where we will be in 10 years. We'd love to have a home of our own, but predicting the future is difficult when you're new and growing.

Today I got up early as usual and went to the fields. The first thing I do is walk the fields checking things over and preparing my mind for the day. Then I



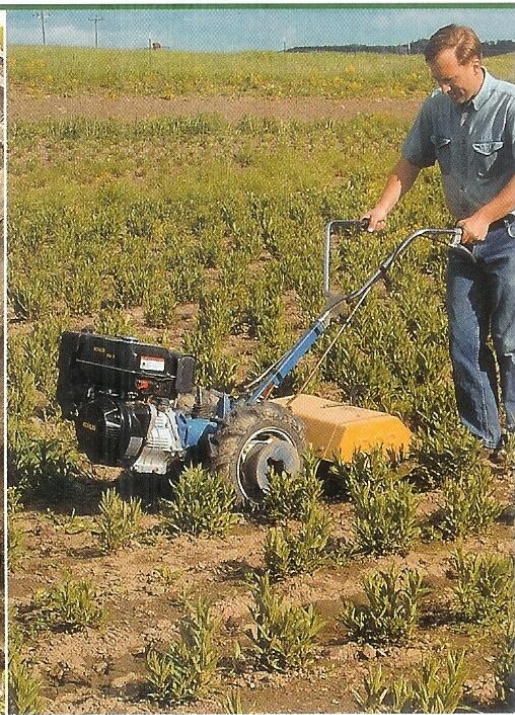
work until breakfast.

After breakfast, we read the Bible and do some singing. Then I take off for the fields again. Janelle usually brings lunch out around 1 p.m., and we have a picnic. I work until around 7 p.m., when I come home for supper. We spend some time together as a family, say our bedtime prayers and hit the hay.

The temperature was in the 70s today. I hoed the fields with my two sisters,

Carolyn and Catherine, who work for me in the summer. We concentrated on the Wild Hyacinth, Cream Gentians, Royal Catchfly and a few others. There were buds on the Wild Hyacinth that I planted 3 years ago. This is the first time they will bloom. Most of the things that we grow are perennials and take several years to bloom.

After lunch, Janelle helped hoe while Jesse took a rare long nap. We love to hoe



together and visit. We had a supper of chicken potpie, homegrown asparagus and homemade bread.

■ **MAY 11**—It was in the 40s today, with gusty winds and rain. I hoed the Royal Catchfly for most of the morning, then came home for lunch because it was so cold. Afterward, I researched weed barrier fabric via the Internet. Weeds take more of our time than anything else, so I am looking at ways to control them.

Later, Carolyn and Catherine helped me transplant in the greenhouse. I get the greenhouse going in late March or early April. Most of the seeds spend 3 months in the refrigerator in damp sand before being planted in germinating trays. This helps break their dormancy. When the seedlings are big enough, they are

transplanted into individual cells called “plugs.” Today we transplanted Mist-flower and Pearly Everlasting.

■ **MAY 12**—The weather kept us inside again today. We transplanted Pearly Everlasting, which is part of a seed increase project that we are doing for the U.S. Forest Service. Last summer, seed was collected in the Superior National Forest and sent to us. We germinated it this spring. Over the next few years, we’ll hopefully harvest seed from these plants and send it back to the Forest Service.

■ **MAY 13**—Saturday. I checked out a fanning mill and a pickle picker listed for sale in the paper. I use a fanning mill to clean flower seeds, and am always looking for more screens or parts. The pickle picker is a motorized cart you can lie on and pick or weed.

Normally, I transplant plugs every other year. This is an off year, but we have the Forest Service project. Last year, we started more than 100,000 plants—they are growing in the fields now. Today my sisters and I finished transplanting about 20,000 plugs for the Forest Service.

■ **MAY 14**—Sunday. This was Mother’s Day—Jesse’s gift to Janelle was to sleep more than 6 hours in a row! This morning I took Jesse out to pick

a bouquet of lilacs for Mommy. When we gave her the flowers, Jesse wasn’t so sure he wanted to part with them.

We do not work on Sundays, keeping them as restful as possible. We go to a small nondenominational church about 20 miles away where the fathers take turns giving the message. Today was my turn, and I spoke about how much influence for good a mother can have on her children.

■ **MAY 15**—No wind this morning, so I sprayed the Obedient Plant and Monkey Flower. I have a special sprayer that allows me to kill weeds between the rows without damaging my plants.

Afterward, I cultivated Pasque Flower, Tennessee Coneflower, Harebell and Wild Petunia with the rotary tiller. I have a 12hp BCS that I use on smaller, more delicate plants that the big cultivator might damage.

■ **MAY 16**—I cultivated grasses and sedges, some of which are developing seed heads and will probably be harvested in July. I use an old front-mounted cultivator on my John Deere A. It’s a pain to get on and off, but I like being able to look ahead while I’m cultivating.

■ **MAY 17**—One of the A’s front tires went flat. Jesse came with me to the tire shop and was very helpful—he stayed asleep most of the time.

It was warm and windy so Janelle



While Steve was dating Janelle, he painted "John L. Deere" on his tractor (far left). If you say it fast, it comes out, "Janelle Dear." Left: Steve with the rotary tiller. Opposite: Steve's mom, Barb, hoeing the garden.

hung laundry on the clothesline. After I finished cultivating, I took off the cultivator and hooked up the disk, then disked the old Swamp Marigold, an annual that finished last fall.

■ **MAY 18**—Got up early and went out for a long walk, which was good for the soul. Then did some book work. It seems any enterprise always has "the books" to take care of. Then I studied historic plant data, trying to see if weed barrier fabric would be feasible. I may get a little this year and try it out.

Used the rotary tiller in the Wild Columbine field. It's one of my oldest and where I proposed to Janelle 4 years ago! The plants are just coming into bloom.

■ **MAY 19**—Finally got back to hoeing with Carolyn and Catherine. They have hoed about 2-1/2 acres this week. It might sound monotonous, but they listen to books on CD. I like to listen to the Bible on my MP3 player.

Today we hoed Path Rush, Obedient Plant and Rice Button Aster. The Obedient took the longest because it had spread, and weeds were everywhere.

■ **MAY 20**—Saturday. This was my parent's 34th wedding anniversary, so we went there for a hearty brunch of eggs, pancakes with maple syrup, yogurt, granola, sausage, cinnamon rolls and more. Mom always makes sure that nobody goes away hungry!

Afterward, I tilled Mom's garden to get it ready for planting, then went home and tilled our garden, and mowed the lawn.

■ **MAY 21**—Sunday. Awoke to a pretty hard frost. It won't hurt our plants because they are perennials. Had a meal at church after the service, which we usually do two Sundays a month. We then spent a very relaxing afternoon at home.

■ **MAY 22**—I ordered weed barrier fabric to use on an acre I'll plant soon. Spent the rest of the day hoeing Wild Columbine with Catherine. Carolyn left this week to work at a Bible camp.



We had a wonderful supper of parmesan chicken and potato dumplings. The dumplings are an ethnic food from my Bohemian heritage. They are made with potatoes, flour and salt, and are formed into a ball about the size of a baseball, then boiled. We eat them with salt and butter.

■ **MAY 23**—Shortly after breakfast, the weed barrier fabric came—that sure was fast! I tinkered with it for a while to see what it was like and how I could best plant into it. This afternoon, Janelle and I hoed the Lead Plant field with Catherine while Jesse took a nap nearby.

Lead Plant is very long-lived and is one of our few shrub-like plants. Cream Wild Indigo is another very slow-grow-

ing plant. Ours are in their sixth year and just giving good yields now. They are starting to bloom this week.

■ **MAY 24**—This morning, I drove to Chippewa to sign papers for an FSA program our land is in. I also bought parts to make a tool for cutting holes in the weed barrier fabric. Back home, we hoed the Cardinal Flowers and Winged Loosestrife. All of the fields are looking very good, though they're kind of dry.

■ **MAY 25**—I worked on a tool for cutting the holes. I need about 20,000 of them, and hope to come up with something that's fast, simple and easy on the body. I haven't got it figured out yet.

This afternoon, we hoed Common Hop Sedge and Rattlesnake Master. I al-





The Sykoras farm in Chippewa County, which...

- is sloping in the west, flat in the center and gently rolling in the east with sandy loam soil in the west and silt loam in the east; produces dairy cows, beef cattle, alfalfa, corn for silage, and grain and soybeans
- gets 30 inches of precipitation/year
- averages late-May temperatures between 42° and 65°

so began harvesting Pasque Flowers. These were blooming at Easter and now have formed fuzzy heads similar to those on dandelions when they go to seed. As with most wildflowers, the seed is never all ripe at the same time, so harvesting requires going through the field every few days and collecting whatever is ripe.

I collected about an ounce of seed.

■ **MAY 26**—I added boxes to two of our beehives. The bees aid in pollination and produce honey. I also put mothballs in bee boxes stored in the barn to keep wax worms from eating them out. (To see photos Steve and Janelle took of bees and flowers, visit www.farmandranchliving.com.)

We rent some fields 1/2 mile from the home fields so I can plant similar species far enough apart to avoid hybridization. Today, I fertilized the rented fields.

While playing peek-a-boo with Jesse this evening, he surprised us by pulling his blanket on and off his head!

■ **MAY 27**—Saturday. If I hadn't harvested more Pasque Flower this morning, the wind later in the day would have

Jesse gets an early lesson from Janelle in growing wildflowers (far right). Right: Steve his dad, Paul, confer at the fanning mill that's used to clean seeds. Although Steve Janelle are considering selling retail, they presently sell only wholesale. Below: Steve's sisters, Carolyn and Catherine, plant wildflowers.

blown them away! I also began harvesting Pussytoes, then spent time on the phone and Internet looking into selling some seeds retail. Right now, we sell only wholesale.

■ **MAY 28**—Sunday. On the last Sunday of the month, we have only an evening service. It's a little different than a morning service, with more singing and testimonies, and a shorter message.

■ **MAY 29**—My brother and his wife had a little girl that they've named Alice Ann! Janelle phoned her family in Washington...it's hard for her to live so far away, but phones and E-mail sure help! I worked on the hole-cutting tool and finally have something that works!

■ **MAY 30**—Finished harvesting Pasque Flowers and Pussytoes—the fluff is now drying in the greenhouse. After it's dry, the fluff will be removed from the seeds by machine. Then the seeds will be cleaned and ready for sale. A sample is usually sent to a lab for purity and germination tests.

I saw a large bug land in the Cream Wild Indigo field and ran over for a closer look. There were hundreds of metallic green beetles eating the blossoms off the plants. The beetles are very fast workers and can consume an entire field of blossoms in a day.

I looked over by the chicken coop, and sure enough, the Wild Lupines that were there this morning were gone! I grabbed the sprayer and quickly covered the field. I was praising the Lord that I saw that

beetle—by morning one of our most valuable fields would have been in shambles!

■ **MAY 31**—Hi! I'm Janelle, and I'm writing today to give you an idea what my days are like. I didn't wake up until Jesse did. I fixed breakfast for Steve—scrambled eggs, granola and homemade yogurt. We ate and had a nice time together as a family. I'm so happy to be a wife and mom!

After he left, I did the morning basics: washing Jesse's dear little face and his hair, and clearing the table. Jesse fell asleep, and I scurried out to plant in the garden. We have tomatoes, cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower that we started from seed in the greenhouse.

I'm also trying some of the weed barrier fabric. This morning, I put in six rows of corn before the dear little man awoke. I fed him, changed his diaper and brought him out to sit in his bouncy chair by the garden. Then I planted five more rows of corn as well as peas, cucumbers and carrots. I also planted my gladiola bulbs.

I got lunch ready to take to Daddy, who was hoeing in the Plains Oval Sedge with Catherine when we pulled in. We had a nice picnic on our blanket.

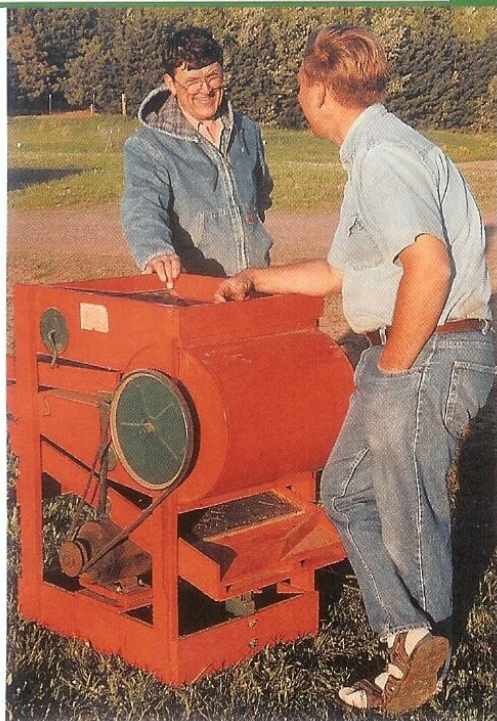
Back home, Jesse napped again and I did the dishes. After Jesse got up and was fed and changed, he and I had a good time playing together. It's so much fun to make him laugh!

I fixed up leftovers for supper. Our dear Daddy pulled in around 7 and we had a nice meal together. Steve said he sold an old baler to a friend this afternoon. This evening I thanked the Lord for a wonderful day!

■ **JUNE 1**—It's Steve again. Catherine and I hoed the Harebells this morning. Harebells are a beautiful, delicate flower with a seed count of 900,000 per ounce! As far as I know, we are the only Midwest farm growing Harebells. They are just beginning to bloom now, and in a week or so will be a lovely periwinkle color. We'll harvest the seeds in July.

The smallest seeds we work with are the Monkey Flower—2,300,000 per ounce!





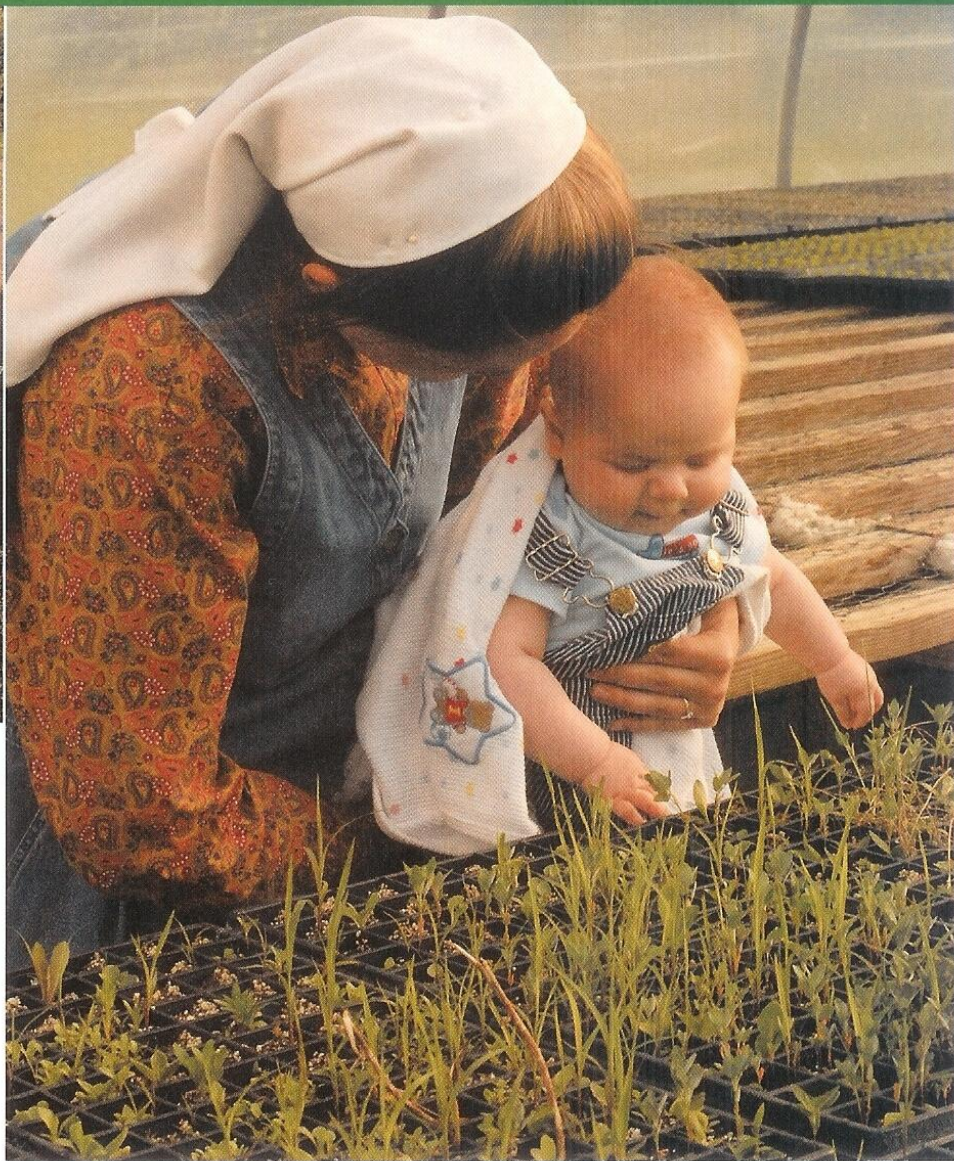
■ **JUNE 2**—Prepared a seed price sheet for a buyer. It's hard to know how to price seeds because they require so much time, knowledge, effort and risk. Catherine came over for supper this evening and stayed overnight with us. She likes being aunt to Jesse.

■ **JUNE 3**—Saturday. This morning I cultivated Crested Oval Sedge, Butterfly Weed and Culver's Root. This afternoon, we went to a park and took some walks, grilled and talked. We even tried putting Jesse in one of the baby swings—he did pretty well!

■ **JUNE 4**—Sunday. Because just about everybody was out of town, our church service was canceled this morning. Janelle and I had our own service at home, reading the Bible and singing hymns.

■ **JUNE 5**—I put together a proposal for doing seed increase projects for a company in Indiana, then E-mailed it to them. Afterward, I hoed Sand Coreopsis and Hairy Wood Mint until Janelle brought Jesse over at lunch. He giggled just watching me hoe. He probably won't think hoeing is so funny a few years from now.

■ **JUNE 6**—It rained last night—we were so glad! The plants that I was hoeing yesterday were starting to wilt and the lawn was turning brown. Because of the rain, we began transplanting out of the greenhouse into the field. Before now, the



dryness made transplanting risky.

■ **JUNE 7**—Janelle brought Jesse over and helped plant into the fabric. We did not finish until after 8:30, but got all of the Pearly Everlasting in. The field looks a little different with weed barrier fabric everywhere, but anything that saves hoeing is beautiful.

■ **JUNE 8**—We're already dry again. Today, we put plugs into dust—not a good feeling. It's so late in the season, so the plugs really have to go out.

The Wild Sweet William and Harebells are in full bloom now. The Sweet Williams are so fragrant!

■ **JUNE 9**—Rain was falling all around us this morning, so we hurried to plant Prairie Smoke, New Jersey Tea and Prairie Lily. Janelle helped while Jesse took a few really long naps. About mid-afternoon it started to rain. By 7 p.m.

I was wet and cold, but very happy—we finished our spring planting!

■ **JUNE 10**—Saturday. Well, today ends our diary. We learn so much from working with our flowers. They remind us daily how all things subsist by the loving care of the Lord.

When bright and beautiful flowers fade in a short time, we are reminded how transient this life is. Farming allows us to be with our family, so that our children can see and learn these things as well. We were glad to share a month of our life with you!

Stephen Sykora

Editor's Note: To visit Steve and Janelle's new Web site, go to www.farmandranchliving.com and click on "Links."