

FARM OF THE MONTH

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BRAD PRITCHARD PHOTOS

Alliston woman carrying on tradition

BY BRAD PRITCHARD
 STAFF

Ruth VanderZaag has been passionate about farming ever since her days as a little girl growing up on the family farmstead. However, her big day came about eight years ago at the age of 18 when she took it upon herself to see if she was truly cut out to follow in her parents' footsteps as a full-fledged potato farmer.

Farming has been a long-standing tradition within the VanderZaag family. Originally from Holland, the family made the move to Canada in the late 1940s. Her grandparents began working on farms and eventually entered the potato farming business after purchasing their own land.

Ruth, 26, now owns her own farming operation alongside her parents' business, Sunrise Potato Storage, which is located just north of Alliston on County Road 15. The family has grown potatoes at their Adjala-Tosoronto property since their current farm was established in 1990. Previously, her parents left Canada to work abroad in the Philippines where Ruth was born. At the time, her father Peter was working as a consultant for the International Potato Centre. They returned to Alliston when Ruth was five years old.

In 2003 during her last year at Banting Memorial High School, Ruth said she had to think about whether she would continue the family business as many farm kids do. But with farming being such a pivotal aspect of her life, it was a decision easily made.

"I've always loved being on the farm and helping out," she said. "So in my last year of high school I showed interest, so I grew my first field of potatoes."

Her first foray into the field was quite the undertaking. After securing

a loan from the agriculture commodity corporation and getting crop insurance, she planted 14 acres worth of potatoes to much success

While she learned a lot about the process of growing potatoes, perhaps she learned more about herself. The experience managed to convince her that potato farming was right for her. She then took a one-year hiatus from the farm and enrolled in a two-year business program at Georgian College. The following year she returned to the fields, this time with 75 acres under wing. The year after, she took on 120 acres. And while that may sound daunting, Ruth and her husband Nick Ploeg are now responsible for nearly half of the 1,100 acres at the family farm.

Ruth took her husband's last name when the pair married last year, but because her family name is well associated with potato farming, she continues to use VanderZaag.

There are currently about eight different varieties of potatoes grown at the farm, a portion of which are used for everyone's favourite snack – potato chips.

The farm supplies Lays and a couple other American snack businesses. As part of an ongoing ad campaign with Lays, Ruth is receiving a little more public attention these days. She has been profiled as one of its local farm suppliers from across Canada in the "Behind Every Bag of Lay's Potato Chips is a Great Canadian Farmer" media blitz. The Murphy farmstead, another family of potato growers from Alliston, is being featured as well.

Her family's ties with Lays dates back to when her grandfather and his brother first starting doing business with the company, then called Hostess Frito-Lay, in 1958.

"For Lays we grow their potatoes, so we buy their seed from their certi-

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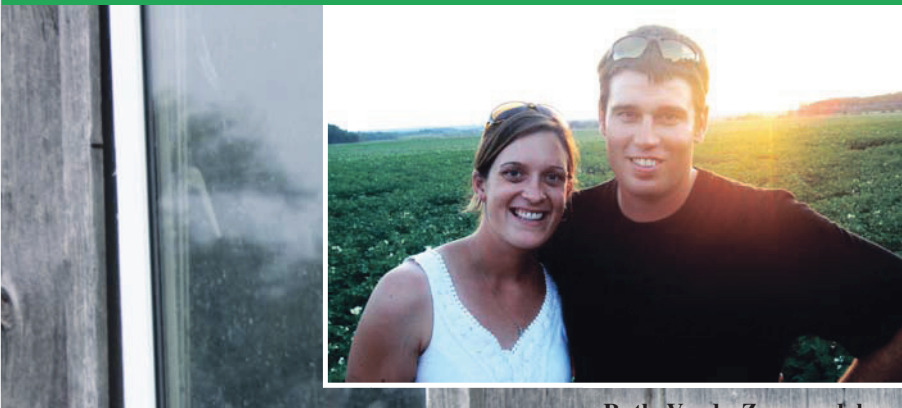
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Potato storage units at Sunrise Potato.

FARM OF THE MONTH



Ruth VanderZaag and husband Nick Ploeg



From left, Peter VanderZaag, daughter Ruth and her husband Nick Ploeg.



Ruth VanderZaag.

Innovation is constant at farm

Continued from Page 10

fied seed growers," she said. "Dad is a potato breeder, so we have a couple other varieties that we grow, plus others that we grow for other chip plants."

Ruth said the potatoes they grow for chip making have very select characteristics.

"For the Lays varieties of potatoes, they are all for potato chips so they all have to fry white or be a colour that people like to eat," she explained. "They also have a certain gravity so you can get the most possible chips out of each potato."

An integral part of the business is storing the potatoes. She rents space at her parents' facility, which helps keep potatoes fresh and allows them to keep the spuds in stock so they can be sold to meet business demands.

Innovation is a constant at the family farms. Her dad is an agricultural scientist and as part of his potato research they try a variety of new plants every growing season to find new usable crops.

"We harvest them into individual bags and then throughout the year we fry them to see if they would fry as potato chips or if they cook well to be used as table potatoes," she said. "From tens of thousands of different varieties, you maybe only come out with one that may be successful."

Ruth's focus is squarely planted on running the farm, but she hasn't ruled out if she will continue down her dad's path as a researcher.

"Maybe I will carry that on in some way, but that's more of dad's passion," she said.



Ruth VanderZaag shows off a machine used to irrigate the fields at the farm.

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