

Top of the Hollow The Steines Family

Decorah, Iowa



**Blackberry Sage
Goat Milk Soap**
*olive oil, coconut oil, palm oil,
goat milk, distilled water,
lye, grapefruit seed extract,
essential oil, borax*

**Lite Sandalwood
Goat Milk Soap**
*olive oil, coconut oil, palm oil,
goat milk, distilled water,
lye, grapefruit seed extract,
fragrance oil, borax*

**Cold Water
Goat Milk Soap**
*olive oil, coconut oil, palm oil,
goat milk, distilled water,
lye, grapefruit seed extract,
fragrance oil, borax*



In 1972 Merle and Cindy Steines planted their first garden as a married couple. Today, more than 40 years later, the Steines are still planting gardens together, albeit much bigger ones, on their 80-acre farm west of Decorah called Top of the Hollow.

Merle and Cindy have long been interested in organic gardening, being self-sufficient and operating with sustainable land practices. They haven't been afraid to try something different or something new. They do research and learn and ask questions. In fact, they were some of the first farmers in Iowa to milk goats. (As Merle puts it, they "opted to do something really strange.") They caught a lot of flak back in the 1980s. People didn't milk goats then. Merle remembers other farmers in the feed store laughing at him and telling him he was crazy. They laughed at him again in the 1990s when he explored certified organic.



Now, after more than 30 years in the goat business, people have all kinds of questions for them. They have become the experts. And even though they don't keep goats like they used to, (ten goats currently reside on the farm), they still offer up their knowledge to visitors and agricultural students from places as far away as Australia, Costa Rica, Chile, Sweden, Norway and England.

The garden has long remained a place of joy for them. They appreciate the nuances of vegetable varieties and love to share the merits of each with shoppers at the market. They grow things that taste good, first and foremost, and "don't worry if it's ugly" because they believe vegetables should be both flavorful and good for the body. Potatoes are perhaps the biggest crop that the Steines harvest. They grow Yukon Gold, Red Gold, Blue Gold, Red Norland, Red Pontiac, Kennebec, French Fingerlings, Elba (a white storage potato), and the Reddale (popular for its lower glycemic index). They are even cultivating their own variety which has dark purple and pink flesh. It's been deemed the "Princess Potato" by Merle's granddaughter. They say most people don't realize how good potatoes can be for you. Most cast them off as being meal fillers, but some varieties (think dark purple) actually rank up next to blueberries for flavonoid compounds that benefit the brain.

Merle and Cindy's daughter Becky has helped to cultivate the seasonal crops since 2005. She also makes cold-process goat's milk soap - a skill she taught herself by reading and experimenting. She says it's "like a great chemistry experiment." Fifteen varieties are available including sandalwood, lavender, rosehip, cucumber melon, patchouli, and - the current favorite - blackberry sage. The soap is gentle and versatile, mild enough to use on your face as well as strong enough for cleaning farm hands.

You can meet Merle, Cindy and Becky at the Decorah's Farmers Market on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Buy eggs, potatoes, tomatoes, squash, onions, dry soup beans, melons, other fresh produce, goat's milk soap and recycled glass garden art.



"For us, our neighbors' positive comments are reward for the hours of labor put into the product."

