



## Hammerand Organic Farm Produces High-Quality Eggs For Healthier Eating

If you're like most Americans who dutifully make New Year's resolutions at this time of year, you've probably got "eat healthier" right up near the top of your list. Fortunately, improving your eating habits can be done with convenience and great taste thanks to the abundance of local producers in southwest Wisconsin who make healthy organic foods readily available.

One such producer is the award-winning Hammerand Organic Farms, located in rural Lancaster on Scenic Rivers Energy Cooperative lines. There, Walter and Dorothy Hammerand keep two barns full of chickens that produce approximately 3,000 dozen organic eggs each week, give or take a few 100 dozen depending on the time of year. These top-quality eggs are marketed through Organic Valley, of which the Hammerands are also members, and can be found on grocery shelves sometimes as far away as the West Coast.

But plenty of eggs stay right here in the area. Nothing on the Hammerand farm goes to waste; eggs that are too large or small for Organic Valley cartons are sold directly to customers at farmers markets or through special orders by local restaurants or individual customers. Some of these eggs also go directly to Dorothy's

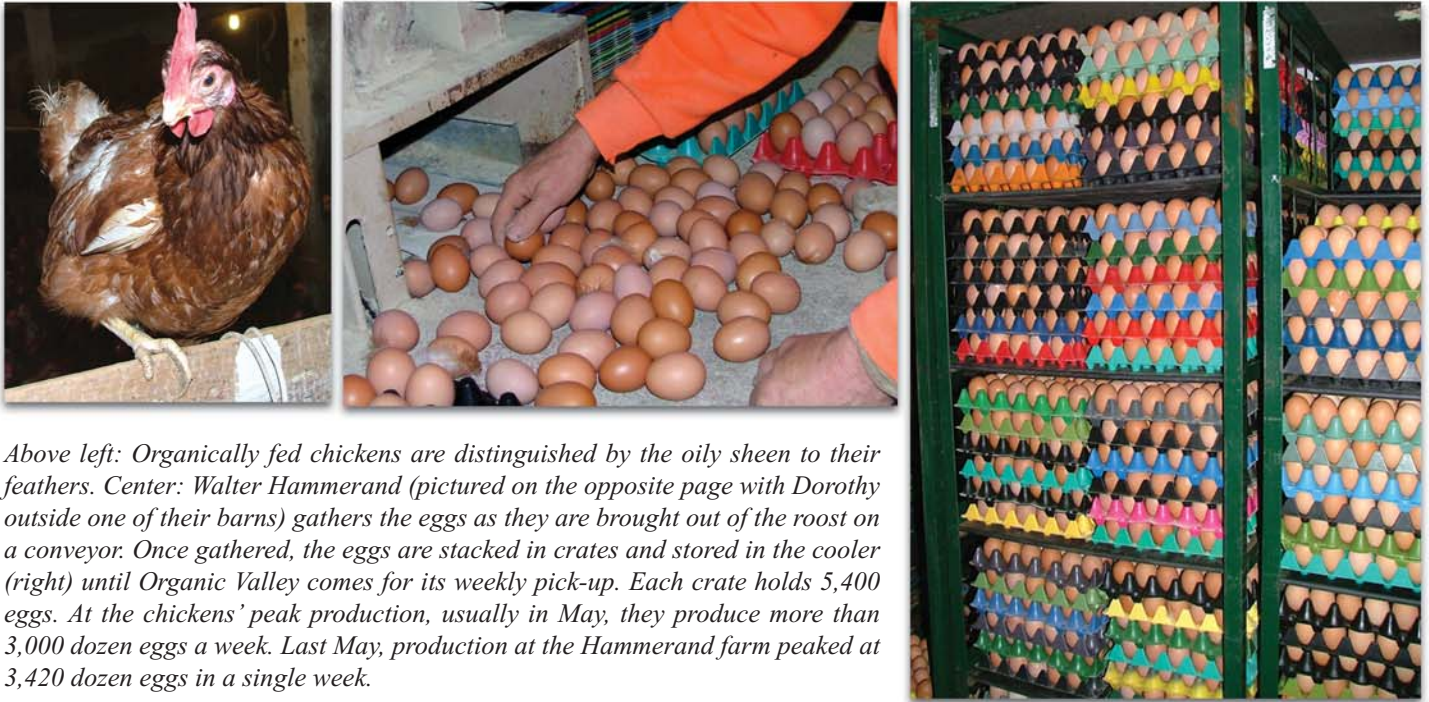
licensed kitchen in the basement of the Hammerand home to be used in delicious baked goods. Dorothy makes pies, breads, cookies, and cakes with as many organic ingredients as she can find — her baked products are 75 to 90 percent organic. These food items are also big sellers at farmers markets.

"It's definitely grown," Walter said of the interest in organic foods. "We can definitely see a difference."

### Filling a Need...and a Barn

The Hammerands began producing and selling organic eggs mostly because Organic Valley had a need and Walter had an empty barn. The farm was already certified organic for vegetables, which the couple sold through Organic Valley and at farmers markets. Walter, who had operated a dairy farm for 30 years before selling





*Above left: Organically fed chickens are distinguished by the oily sheen to their feathers. Center: Walter Hammerand (pictured on the opposite page with Dorothy outside one of their barns) gathers the eggs as they are brought out of the roost on a conveyor. Once gathered, the eggs are stacked in crates and stored in the cooler (right) until Organic Valley comes for its weekly pick-up. Each crate holds 5,400 eggs. At the chickens' peak production, usually in May, they produce more than 3,000 dozen eggs a week. Last May, production at the Hammerand farm peaked at 3,420 dozen eggs in a single week.*

his herd and working off the farm for a while, also had equipment on hand that could be put to new use with just a little tweaking, so he was open to new ideas.

“The old barn was just sitting there empty and it needed work, but you don’t want to put a new roof on a barn that’s sitting empty,” Walter explained. “Then I had a guy from Organic Valley out here one day and I asked him if there was anything else they needed, and he said what they really needed was more eggs. So I thought I could use the barn for chickens.”

Walter fixed up the old barn and filled it with pullets; the couple began selling eggs in 2004. A year later, they added another barn and expanded their flock; the old barn currently has 2,800 chickens, and the new one houses 3,900 chickens. Their efforts were almost immediately rewarded. In 2005, Walter and Dorothy were presented with Organic Valley’s “Egg”cellence Egg Quality Award for the Midwest Region, which comprises about 70 producers.

The Hammerands continued seeking ways to improve their operation. In 2006 they purchased the feed mill that allows them to grind and mix the feed themselves.

“The whole secret to farming nowadays, I think, is adding value,” Walter said, “and the whole organic farming thing just adds value.”

Not only have the organic eggs added value to the Hammerands’ farm, but they’ve also added value to their meals. As connoisseurs of organic foods themselves (Dorothy fixes Walter a four-organic-egg omelet for breakfast

each morning, accompanied by a glass of organic orange juice), the Hammerands are sold on this way of farming.

“There’s better egg production in organic farming, and they’re better quality eggs,” Walter said.

## Organic Standards

Walter explained that to qualify as organic, eggs must meet three basic criteria during production.

First, the chickens producing the eggs have to be fed purely organic feed from the time they are one day old. Walter purchases his chickens as pullets, so the farmer he buys from must also be certified as an organic producer.

Second, the chickens must be free of cages, with at least 1-3/4 feet of floor space per chicken.

Third, there must be an outdoor exit in the henhouse so the chickens can roam outside whenever weather permits. These standards, Walter said, make for better eggs.

“If you go to the store to buy eggs and you get a runny one, you know that’s from a chicken that never saw any sunshine,” he said. “An organic egg is nice and firm.”

The farm is inspected annually to see that it adheres to organic standards, and the Hammerands also get a monthly “report card” from Organic Valley.

“We always get A’s,” Dorothy said.

## A Powerful Helping Hand

Walter and Dorothy operate their chicken farm themselves, all the while keeping up with year-round

*(Continued on page 28 ►)*

## Hammerand Organic Farm

(Continued from page 5)

farmers market sales. Walter acknowledges this is possible partly because of the electric equipment that makes the farm run smoothly.

“We do a lot of things with electricity here,” Walter said. “Electricity feeds the chickens and even brings the eggs out.”

The Hammerands keep the chickens for about a year, after which point their egg production drops enough to make feeding them the expensive mix less worthwhile. Then the chickens are sold, either for meat or for a smaller-scale laying operation, and Walter buys a new batch of pullets. Since the chickens are divided between the two barns according to age, they need different feed mixes. The electric mill can be programmed to mix the feed according to each barnful’s needs. The individual grains are pulled into the mill as programmed from bulk bins outside the barn, and the ground mix is then sent through a pipe to a bin in each barn, from where a feeder does the mix out to the chickens on a conveyor. The feeders are set on timers, as are the lights in the barn, which turn off automatically at night to encourage the free-roaming chickens to move to the roost and enter the boxes to lay their eggs.

### Keeping their Cool

Twice a day, Walter and Dorothy gather the eggs that are brought out from the boxes on a conveyor system and pack them in crates that are stacked in carts in a chilled room until Organic Valley picks them up each Monday. Organic Valley has a thermometer installed in the cooler to constantly monitor the temperature at which the eggs are stored.

“If it’s over 60 degrees in here for over 12 hours, the eggs are ours,” Walter said. “That’s why you need electricity.”

The Hammerands have a standby generator to keep their farm operating if the power should be off for any length of time, but Walter said he only had to use the generator once last year.

Among the mill, feeders, cooler, fans, and lights, the Hammerands depend on 30 motors to keep their organic egg production operating. They’ve taken any steps possible to save energy, such as installing compact fluorescent bulbs in their barns, but Walter said all things considered, he finds his power bill to be reasonable.



*Eggs that are too small or too large for Organic Valley packaging, such as those pictured here, are sold separately at farmers markets or by direct order. Jumbo eggs in particular have their own market; a restaurant in Fennimore purchases them regularly.*

“If you had to carry all that corn to feed the chickens, I think I’d be paying a lot more than I pay right now to the co-op,” he chuckled.

### Keeping it Local

The Hammerands believe in eating organic and buying local, and they practice what they preach. Walter buys organic corn and wheat from a grower near Platteville for the chicken mix. Dorothy’s baked goods are chock full of local products; the apple cider used in one of her signature foods — apple cider donuts — is purchased from Turkey Ridge, an organic orchard in Gays Mills and another co-op member. Apples for her fresh apple pies also come from Turkey Ridge. Produce for her popular pickled vegetables come from the couple’s own organic vegetable gardens.

The Hammerands’ eggs are mostly sold through Organic Valley, but their products can also be found at farmers markets in Cassville and Viroqua during the summers and Dubuque in the winter, with occasional visits to Harvest of Hope in Madison during the winter. Kickapoo Exchange in Gays Mills also sells jumbo organic eggs from the Hammerands, and they are regulars at the Kickapoo Country Fair, scheduled this summer for July 26-27 in La Farge.

With producers like the Hammerands right here in our backyard, eating healthy is not much of a challenge at all. In fact, it’s a pleasure.—*Mary Erickson* ■

# ELIMINATE ELECTRICAL HAZARDS

## A New Year's Resolution That Makes Sense

**T**ens of thousands of fires are caused each year by electrical problems inside the home, but most can be prevented with a few simple steps. Taking a few minutes to check for electrical hazards is a New Year's resolution that makes sense!

- **Electrical outlets** — Check for loose-fitting plugs, which can be a shock or fire hazard. Replace missing or broken wall plates so wiring and components are not exposed. If you have young children at home, make sure unused outlets are covered.
- **Plugs** — Never force them into outlets. Don't remove the grounding pin (third prong) to make a three-prong

plug fit a two-conductor outlet. Avoid overloading outlets with adapters and too many appliance plugs.

- **Cords** — Make sure they are not frayed or cracked, placed under carpets or rugs, or located in high-traffic areas. Do not nail or staple them to walls or floors.
- **Extension cords** — Use them on a temporary basis only. Make sure they have safety closures to protect young children from shock and mouth burn injuries.
- **Light bulbs** — Check wattage to see that light bulbs match fixture requirements and are screwed in securely.
- **Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters (GFCIs)** — Make sure GFCIs are installed in your kitchen, bathrooms, laundry, workshop, basement, and garage as well as on outdoor outlets. Test them monthly.
- **Electrical wiring** — Wiring defects are a major cause of residential blazes. Check periodically for loose wall receptacles, wires, or lighting fixtures. Listen for popping or sizzling sounds behind walls. Immediately shut off, then professionally replace light switches that are warm to the touch and lights that spark and flicker.—Source: *Safe Electricity* ■



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