

Pick-Your-Own Fruit And Nuts

Red Fern Farm became a “pick-your-own” operation against the will of owners Tom Wahl and Kathy Dice. Once they gave in to customer demand, they are glad they did.

“We just mow the grass around our chestnut trees before the nuts mature and collect the money from our customers,” says Wahl. “A mature stand of chestnuts will generate about \$10,000 per acre a year.”

Wahl and Dice planted their first chestnuts in 1990 and added to the stand in 1992 and again in 2007 and 2008. The first trees started producing in 2000.

Initially the 2 harvested the nuts themselves. Sales were by word of mouth.

They also sold their chestnuts through Prairie Grove Chestnut Growers (Vol. 42, No. 5). That all changed in 2013.

“We had a call from a family who begged us to let them come and pick,” says Wahl. They found out the father was dying of cancer and wanted to pick chestnuts one last time.

“Within two days we had 20 others who wanted to pick,” says Dice. “By the next harvest we had a list of 70, and that has grown to 250 this past harvest.”

People enjoy picking chestnuts so much that Wahl and Dice offer to buy anything picked in excess of what the customers want to take home. In 2018 take home prices ranged from \$2.50 to \$2.75 per lb. Customers could earn back 50¢ a lb. for nuts picked and not taken home.

Two other markets have developed, again seemingly of their own accord. They include

seedlings and scion wood.

“One year I saved back a batch of nuts from 2 highly productive chestnuts,” says Wahl. “I exposed them to cold temperatures over winter and planted them in the spring. That fall a guy asked if he could buy them all.”

Soon Wahl was not only starting seedlings to sell, but also experimenting with grafting one or more varieties on to a single seedling. He has grafted 2 heartnut strains onto a single black walnut and did as many as 27 Persimmon strains on a single tree. Grafted trees produce earlier than a standard seedling. But it’s a lot more work than selling seedlings.

“People still wanted the different varieties so we started offering scion wood so people could do their own grafting,” he says. “It was another accidental sideline.”

“After we updated our website to offer the scion wood, it has really taken off,” says Dice. “This past season we had almost \$1,000 in sales of pawpaw, persimmon, Asian pear, European pear, chestnut, heartnut, apple, plum and walnut.”

They also offer tree shelters and stakes on their website, but their 10 acres of chestnuts is still their main source of income. In fact, the past 2 years Wahl and Dice have had to send overflow customers to other chestnut growers in the area.

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Tom Wahl and Kathy Dice are growing chestnuts as part of a “pick-your-own” operation. They also market seedlings and scion wood so customers can do their own grafting.

Co-Op Finds Markets For Nuts

Get better tasting black walnuts, oil rich northern pecans, and tasty hickory nuts from Heartland Nuts ‘N More. The co-op processes and markets nuts from member producers in Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri.

“Our co-op is an outgrowth of the Nebraska Nut Growers,” says Larry Martin, a longtime member and executive director. “They were planting trees and producing nuts with no way to market products, so they started the co-op about 40 years ago.”

The co-op promotes members’ production as premium nuts. Trees are grafted for faster production and higher quality nuts. Members select scion wood from trees based on production and taste, preferring nuts with thin shells and large lobes for bigger nutmeats. This selection and grafting is especially important with the black walnuts the co-op markets.

“We use only the finest improved varieties of grafted black walnuts with delicious, larger nutmeats,” says Martin. “The nuts are harvested at their peak and carefully processed for a sweeter and lighter tasting nutmeat than traditionally grown black walnuts.”

Martin explains that most producers let the nuts fall from the tree, and the husk turns black before harvest and selling. This turns the nutmeat darker and often gives it a bitter taste. Heartland nuts are harvested on the tree, hulled, washed and dried.

“We have 46 member orchards,” says Martin. “We have commercial producers with 500 trees or more and smaller producers who are in nut production for the fun of it.”

Grafting is a preferred production method by members, explains Martin. It shortens the time needed to get a tree into production. Using scion wood from a proven, premium nut producing tree also ensures the grafted tree will produce the same.

“If we plant a pecan or black walnut from seed, it can take 15 years to produce a nut and a hickory takes 25 years,” says Martin. “If you graft scion wood from a tree that is producing nuts to a seedling, it starts producing much sooner.”



Heartland Nuts ‘N More co-op processes and markets nuts from member producers. Nutmeat packages are available online or at their store.

Walnuts are grafted only to walnuts. However, pecan and hickory scion wood can be grafted to each other, as well as to themselves.

Martin explains that the co-op members also produce a superior quality pecan. Over a 25-year period, southern cultivars were acclimated to member orchards.

“Our pecans mature in about 3 months versus 6 months in southern areas,” says Martin. “As a result, the nutmeats retain more oil.”

“We get quite a few calls from people interested in planting a tree line or orchard,” says Martin. “It takes time to establish, and grafting can hasten that.”

Martin has information on nut tree grafting available to share. He recommends prospective grafters go to A.M. Leonard as a source for equipment.

“We sell nutmeats in packages from 4 oz. of pecans or 8 oz. of black walnuts to 30-lb. bags, as well as other related products,” says Martin. “You can buy them online or at our store. If you stop by, you can see displays of nutcrackers in our nutcracker museum.”

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Horse Biscuits Are Chock Full’a Chia

Thanksgiving sweet potatoes inspired Mary Hartman’s journey to create healthy biscuits for horses. Her original idea, which was to mix chia seeds into potatoes, proved to be a bit messy, but it was the beginning of finding just the right blend. After more than a year of experimentation, research and setting up her kitchen and processing area to meet code, she began selling her patent-pending Chock Full’a Chia biscuits in 2017.

“Feeding chia to horses is becoming a trend. It has high protein and the oil is easy to digest for horses. Chia is loaded with B vitamins and Omega 3s and is an amazing little seed,” Hartman says.

Equine nutritionists say chia is anti-inflammatory, supporting healthy skin, hair and bone growth, and is a hydrophilic to help prevent dehydration and electrolyte imbalance.

It is also expensive. So when Hartman tried to add it to her horse’s feed, much of the seed got wasted or ended up gummy up in the water bucket. By mixing chia with ingredients such as sweet potatoes, figs, blueberries and prickly pear, a horse gets the recommended 1/3-cup of chia daily in 3 biscuits without any waste.

Through research, Hartman has developed seven variations that provide benefits for specific conditions. For example, Sea Biscuit includes Spirulina, a blue green algae that may reduce respiratory stressors, and Manuka honey, an antimicrobial biscuit with lots of flavor. She is also working on pelletizing Spirulina with defatted chia, as some horses don’t like the taste of Spirulina.

Currently Hartman makes each biscuit by hand, compressing and shaping each



Horse biscuits are made by mixing chia seeds with ingredients such as sweet potatoes, figs, blueberries, and prickly pear.

in a mold, and then processing them.

“Our customers vary from a 75-year-old with an elderly horse to Olympic riders who have done their own research and understand what you feed your horse matters,” Hartman says. “They see visible changes once they start feeding chia biscuits.”

She sells the patent-pending biscuits through her Pure Form Equine website, starting at \$22.95 for 45-count bags to \$59.95 for 90-count bags. She also offers volume discounts and ships anywhere in the U.S. and Canada.

“There’s nothing like this in the world with chia,” Hartman says. “I love what I’m doing. It’s pretty fun.”

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