

Tractor Business Grew From Nothing

Gary Brown has sold close to 6,000 machines, 90 percent of them tractors, over the past 40 years, all because of a bad housing market.

He was a contractor in the late 70's when high interest rates and fuel prices took their toll. When his dad suggested he start a used tractor business, Brown gave it a try. He bought a vacant lot for \$5,000 down and a 90-day balloon. Then he bought 4 used tractors and put a for-sale sign on them with his phone number. "I sold the first 4 and another 3 in the first 30 days," says Brown. "I had made \$2,500 in 30 days at a time when \$30,000 a year was a good income."

With a loan from his bank, he paid for the lot and put up a building. Once the building was up, he secured a supply of implements from a wholesaler in Bristol, Tenn.

"He gave us prices that let us double our money and still sell at 1/3 the price of our competitors," recalls Brown. "He also suggested I put my wife Brenda on a local television station to announce a sale. We had people lined up at the front door and into the parking lot."

Before long Brown had added wholesalers and a line of new small tractors. He also started restoring and repowering tractors and pickups (Vol. 33, No. 1). The business

grew from there, with his wife and younger brother as partners. He even wrote a book for tractor buyers with the knowledge he gained over the years. "Your First Tractor, Purchase, Operation and Service" (Vol. 42, No. 1) is loaded with great information.

"A guy called me about the book and said, 'You're a genius,'" laughs Brown. "I told him it cost me several million dollars to learn it, and you got it for \$19.95. You're the genius!"

In addition to more traditional farming equipment sales, Brown also took in trades like a "truck-hoe." It was a 1 1/2-ton truck with a flat bed body. The rear 10 ft. of a school bus body had been turned around and mounted backward behind the cab. A 15-ft. backhoe attachment was mounted to the rear end of the bed.

"I gave the man \$2,000 for the trade of a Deere 310 loader backhoe, which I figured was the value of the truck," recalls Brown. "My brother said we would never sell the contraption, but the next day we sold it to a man who repaired underground drain pipes."

Brown has no end of similar stories, including selling a bucket truck with a boom to a guy who used it for a deer stand. Throughout his years in the business he has followed his father's advice when the



Gary Brown has been buying, restoring, and selling used tractors since the 1970's.

business began. "Don't ever sell anyone else something you wouldn't sell me."

Brown is quick to credit the many folks who've helped him along the way. That includes the bank vice president who gave him the loan and the first wholesaler to deal with him. It also includes his relationships with FARM SHOW magazine and its readers.

"I wanted the thousands of readers who've gotten in touch over the years to know we've got a new address," says Brown in a recent email to FARM SHOW. "We just moved across the road."

As he once put it, "FARM SHOW is people helping people. It's like having 100,000 friends telling you the good and bad about products you are considering."

Brown says it has been a great trip that continues today for he and his family and his brother Rudy and his family.

"It's nearly 40 years later, and we've sold nearly \$12 million dollars worth of equipment, thousands of tractors, loader backhoes, bulldozers, trenchers, trailers and implements," says Brown. "We didn't get rich, but the thousands of friendships we've made with people from mid-Georgia to Canada and Central America are worth more than all the gold in Ft. Knox."

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Saffron Taking Root In North America

Growing the exotic spice saffron evokes images of the Middle East, not Vermont or California or Quebec. But those are areas where growers are excited about the potential of saffron as a new high-value crop. Actually, Saffron has been grown since the 1700's in Pennsylvania in Amish communities.

Considering saffron sells for \$20 to \$100 per gram, its minimal growing needs and late fall harvest time, there seems to be plenty of potential. But the labor intensive hand-picking that's required means it's not for everyone.

The recent uptick in interest started in 2015 with a trial at the University of Vermont by Margaret Skinner and Arash Ghalehgholabehbahani, the husband of a grad student from Iran.

"We started by growing it in high tunnels," Skinner says.

Saffron was planted in milk crates that could be moved out of the greenhouse when tomatoes were grown through the summer. Then, after the tomato plants were removed, the crates were put back in the greenhouse. It blooms in the fall and by late October and November, the three stigmas in the flowers are reddish/orange and ready to harvest. When dried, they are the saffron spice.

"I still think there are advantages of growing them under some sort of cover - such as added heat, and no rain on the flowers to affect quality," Skinner says. "But we were surprised that grown in the field, yields have been better than Iran. Maybe because of higher organic matter and more moisture."

Sarah Salatino, owner of Full Circle Gardens in Essex, Vt., planted saffron in raised beds in 2017 as part of the trial.

"I have a perennial nursery and do some annuals as well on 1 1/2 acres," Salatino says. "I got into saffron because it comes in the fall when we're not as busy."

She planted saffron corms in September and some of the stigmas were ready to harvest by late October 2017. She dried some of the small crop on paper towels in sunny windows and others in a warm oven for a couple of hours and has used the saffron in cookies,

rice, chicken and other dishes.

"Saffron is such a subtle flavor, kind of like a floral spice," Salatino says.

She notes that harvest is labor intensive, but the plants require little care through the summer. Her biggest challenge is rodents that chew on the tender green shoots. She placed 1/4-in. hardware cloth in the beds and uses rodent-proof covers in the spring.

As part of the North American Center for Saffron Research & Development group, she sees plenty of demand for saffron and plans to continue to grow it after she phases out of the nursery business.

Customers who buy saffron include high-end restaurant chefs and people with culinary uses for everything from maple syrup to beer. Saffron is also known for medicinal properties.

More research is necessary, Skinner says, to see where it can be grown (now recommended for Zones 5 and 6, though there's been much success in Zone 4), and to set standards for the quality of saffron. Part of that is determining the best corms to buy. They currently range from 25 cents to \$5/corm. Many growers, like Salatino, buy the largest ones, up to 4-in. diameter, from Roco Saffron in the Netherlands (www.us.rocosaffron.com/shop), which requires orders of 1,000 or more corms.

Skinner encourages gardeners interested in saffron to search local sources and start small with just 50 corms or so. The corms multiply and need to be divided after about five years.

The key thing to remember, she says, is that they are fall-bearing. Though they may appear dead during the summer, they are just dormant and will bloom in the fall.

The North American center that focuses on saffron research offers good information about growing saffron.

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An exotic spice, Saffron has potential as a new high-value crop in North America. It blooms in the fall. Photos by Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist



Mounted on an old camper frame, a couple of 250-gal. tanks and 2 Rain Bird sprinklers are a handy way for Craig McMillan to water his garden.

Water Wagon Irrigates Garden

Craig McMillan uses a water wagon to irrigate his garden with creek water. Plastic totes on an old camper frame transport up to 500 gal. at a time.

"I like to eat, so I raise a lot of vegetables," laughs McMillan. "I have a 2-acre garden down by the creek and my small one on a hill near my house."

While McMillan can irrigate the large garden directly from the creek, he wanted a way to get creek water to the smaller one.

"I had a big, old, Holiday camper that my uncle and I stripped down for scrap," says McMillan. "It had a good frame, which I floored with treated lumber I had been given." McMillan found one 250-gal. tank and a

friend gave him a second. He mounted both, along with 2 Rain Bird sprinklers, on the trailer bed. He also mounted a 5 hp. Pacer irrigation pump.

"I dammed up a spot on the creek for a place to drop a water line," says McMillan. "Using the pump, I can fill the 500-gal. tanks in about 15 min. and pull the water wagon to the garden. I turn a valve, and I can use the same pump to operate the sprinklers. The tanks give me enough water for 1 to 2 hrs. of irrigation, depending on how I set the throttle."

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