

Retired Couple Starts Thriving Tomato Business

After 25 years of farming in Brazil, Dennis Loewen and his wife Vera moved to northeastern North Dakota and began a new career as tomato growers. “We knew nothing about tomatoes or greenhouses, but a relative offered to sell us a 4,300 sq. ft. greenhouse and we learned the business through trial and error,” says Loewen, owner of Meadowlark Garden in Park River, N. Dak.

The Loewens grow Beefsteak and several other varieties of cherry and cocktail tomatoes. After harvesting, they’re packed in boxes and delivered to restaurants and retailers in Fargo, Grand Forks and other communities in eastern North Dakota.

“Growing and selling vine-ripened tomatoes is a good retirement job because it requires no heavy work,” Loewen says. “Plus, I just enjoy working with plants and figuring out what nutrients and nurturing the tomato plants need to produce to their genetic capability.”

The Loewens buy six-week-old tomato seedlings in February and plant them in bags of soil that are watered with drip tubes. The plants begin setting fruit by the end of April and bear fruit all spring, summer and fall. Bumblebees in the greenhouse aid in pollinating the tomato flowers.

Because indeterminate plants continue to grow vertically, the plants are pruned to optimize production, with some vines stretching out to 25 ft. “We let the vines grow horizontally and vertically and the vines keep flowering at the top through the



Parallel pipes above greenhouse floor deliver hot water heat, and also serve as rails for a rolling cart that holds picked tomatoes.

fall,” Loewen says.

The greenhouse employs a heating system that doubles as a work saver. Parallel pipes positioned a few inches above the floor deliver hot-water heat and are also used as rails for a rolling cart to hold picked fruit. They also hold workers as they roll forward or backward to pick ripe tomatoes twice a week.

The greenhouse doesn’t have auxiliary lighting, relying totally on sunshine that passes through the greenhouse glass. Overhead radiators supply heat in early spring and winter.

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“The biggest benefit from crossbreeding Holsteins is longer survival and a full lactation,” says Amy Loeschke, Creative Genetics.

Crossbred Holsteins Boost Milk Production

Holstein dairy herds can be more profitable if crossbred with select European breeds, according to a group of California dairy farmers. The farmers worked with Creative Genetics of California and University of Minnesota researchers to evaluate the use of crossbreeding to solve declining health, fertility and longevity problems in their Holstein herds. The end result was ProCROSS International, a 3-breed rotational system using VikingRed and Montbéliarde semen on herds that had been pure Holstein.

“The biggest benefit from crossbreeding a herd is longer survival, as much as a full lactation,” explains Amy Hazel Loeschke, ProCROSS Aps and Creative Genetics.

Hazel Loeschke notes that the average productive lifespans of today’s Holsteins are 2 years 2 months, or roughly 2 lactations once they enter the dairy herd. Adding a lactation is significant in terms of return on investment.

“Adding a lactation reduces replacement costs,” says Loeschke. “The probable reason the ProCROSS cows live longer is lower health costs. Over a 10-year study,

ProCROSS cows had 26 percent lower health costs.”

Selecting the breeds they did was not an accident. The California dairymen and what is now Advanced Genetics considered and evaluated 25 different breeds. After the first lactation of crossbred animals, they saw the best results with the VikingRed and the Montbéliarde.

VikingGenetics developed the VikingRed by combining Swedish and Danish Red breeds and Finnish Ayrshires. The Montbéliarde is a dairy breed from the Alpine mountain region of France, maintained by the Montbéliarde co-op Coopex. The 2 companies responded to the research by forming ProCROSS to promote the concept internationally, selling semen from their respective bulls. Creative Genetics is the national distributor for ProCROSS semen in the U.S.

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They Offer All Natural Tanning

The 3 women who started Driftless Traditional Tannery use all natural tanning techniques. It’s a slow and labor-intensive method that uses minerals, tannins from trees, natural oils, and smoke.

“We did a lot of reading, a lot of research and had a lot of trials and failures,” says Bethany Edmond Storm, Driftless Traditional Tannery. “We tried using brains and eggs, but they were too labor intensive. We eventually settled on using alum because it matched our ability to do tanning at scale.”

Storm and her partners Brandi Bonde and Danielle Dockery met through an organization called Soil Sisters. The group encourages and supports women farmers and ag entrepreneurs.

“The idea of a tannery came to us because we didn’t like the process used on our animals’ hides,” says Storm. “We wanted hides tanned without bleaches or peroxide and other dangerous chemicals. We didn’t want to put anything into the waste stream that could do damage.”

Once they had the concept in mind and had identified a possible process, they went to work using hides from their animals and from local butchers. One area farmer gave them 5 hides to experiment with.

They built much of the equipment they now use, including a small tumbler that has since been replaced with a larger unit. Other items include a smokehouse, buffing table, and a vat with paddles. Bonde set aside space in her barn for a controlled environment.

“The biggest challenge was funding to get us up and running,” says Storm. “We received a personal loan from one supporter and held plant sales this past spring to raise money.”

Prospective customers are encouraged to study and follow the tannery’s web page on hide processing. It provides detailed instructions on the do’s and don’ts of preparation.

“Because we don’t use pesticides or heavy chemicals, it’s important that hides come to us in the best possible condition,” says Storm. “If we get hides that are warm or with excess



Driftless Traditional Tannery uses all natural hides tanned without bleaches or peroxide.

amounts of offal or meat, we risk hair slippage due to bacteria. If our customer does everything they can with the hides, we will do all we can.”

Currently the tannery charges a flat rate of \$75 for tanning services. Cured sheepskins on the website are priced from \$200 to \$300 or more. Goatskin drums range from \$180 to \$200.

While they are satisfied with the process they now follow, Storm says they continue to refine it and explore new recipes such as one that uses bark from a mimosa tree. They are also upgrading equipment when they can.

“We would love to have a facility open for training people,” she says. “The local fibered movement is huge, and there is a great need for tanneries like ours.”

“We make no promises on when we can get a hide back to the owner,” says Storm. “When we sent hides out, it commonly took a year and a half to get them back.”

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They Grow Pumpkins With No Seed Hull

The Pie-Pita F1 pumpkin from High Mowing Organic Seeds makes great pies and good snacking thanks to its hullless seeds that can even be pressed for oil. University trials suggest the 2 to 3-lb. pumpkins can produce in excess of 500 lbs. of seed per acre.

“People love them,” says Paul Betz, High Mowing Organic Seeds. “It is a high-quality, sugar pumpkin for pies, custards and such, and the seeds are really nice roasted. Unlike with hulled seed, you can eat them without getting hulls stuck in your teeth. Plus the pumpkin stores really well.”

Betz explains that other pie pumpkins often don’t store past Christmas. The Pie-Pitas store into March, which can extend sales for market gardeners growing them.

The Pie-Pita is a relatively new pumpkin. Developed by Dr. Brent Loy at the University of New Hampshire, High Mowing Organic Seeds chose select lines to try producing them. The company first grew them on their farm in 2017. An ad ran on the web in 2018, and they were offered in the print catalog for 2019.

“This past year we sold a lot of the Pie-Pita seed to commercial growers who had sampled it in 2019,” says Betz. “We expect to sell even more of our 2,500-seed packs to them this coming year.”

Sales were good to home gardeners as well, adds Betz. “It’s a real high-quality



Pie-Pita pumpkins make great pies and are easy to snack on, thanks to their hullless seeds.

eating pumpkin, and is exceptionally easy to work with when baking,” he says. “It is not as smooth as a Kabocha type, but easy to manage.”

The high level of seed production in Pie Pita pumpkins raises the potential for a third use. Oil from pumpkin seed is exported from Austria and Slovenia. Known as Styrian oil, it is made from a hullless seed from a local variety. The oil has a nutty flavor, is high in polyunsaturated fatty acids and is used in salad dressings.

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