

Small Farms Finding Success With Specialty Crops and Agritourism

For Joe and Jay Schwinn, learning how to make farming profitable was so easy, and so successful, that it was like taking candy from a baby. At the time, they were practically babies themselves. Joe was six and Jay nine, but they had a fairly good idea of how it worked—you grow produce (in their father’s case, cantaloupes), you deliver it to the customer, the customer pays you money. It was stupid easy, and their first foray into direct marketing only reinforced the belief. They cobbled together a sign, set up a small stand out by the road in front of the farm, and waited: one big shade tree, one folding table laden with fresh-picked sweet corn, two young boys with unassailable expectations.

That first season they netted \$40. Split fifty-fifty, it was an incredible bounty, and though they blew it all at the county fair, important lessons had been learned—production must align with customer demand, marketing is as important as production. Having the right location doesn’t hurt, either. For the Schwinn brothers, there was one other lesson to be learned: it would never again be that easy.

“Finding our way, or everything happens for a reason,” the story of how they beat the odds to create a successful produce farm and agritourism business, was shared at a specialty crops workshop held March 9 at Schwinn’s Produce Farm near Leavenworth, Kansas. This was one of five similar workshops hosted by the Kansas Rural Center across Kansas in March, with funding by the Kansas Department of Agriculture through the USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant program. The workshops were designed to link experienced and beginning Kansas specialty crop farmers to share information for establishing successful enterprises.

In addition to Jay Schwinn, other speakers were local producers Jacob Thomas, founder and owner of JET Produce and Meats; Stuart Shafer, owner of Sandheron Farm and professor of sociology and sustainable agriculture at Johnson County Community College; Jerry Wohletz, co-owner of Wohletz Farm Fresh; Kerri Ebert, Kansas Center for Sustainable Ag and Alternative Crops Coordinator at KSU, and David Coltrain, KRC Specialty Crops Workshop Coordinator.

Specialty crops and diversity were keys to the Schwinn brothers’ success. Joe Schwinn manages vegetable production, which includes asparagus, strawberries, sweet corn, tomatoes, pumpkins, peppers, melons and cut flowers, while Jay Schwinn manages the Barn, a wedding venue. By hosting vegetable festivals, you-pick strawberries and pumpkins, a pizza garden, a corn maze, weed-pulling

days and pumpkin smashing, they're assured of constant streams of customers coming to their farm.

Increased consumer demand for locally grown produce is the driving force behind the spread of specialty crop production, according to the Kansas Department of Agriculture. For producers, however, it presents a number of challenges, not the least being the relative lack of growing history in the region. It also requires different approaches to production and marketing, with emphasis on marketing.

"Marketing is as important as production," David Coltrain said. "Before you plan production, you have to know where it will be marketed. You can take the grain harvest to the elevator, but you can't take a load of ripe tomatoes to the elevator."

Coltrain, who was a member of the State's Local Food and Farm Task Force 2015-2017, and is an experienced grower himself, said that now is the time to get into specialty crops. Consumer demand is high, USDA has assistance programs to promote specialty crops, and USDA NRCS has funds available for high tunnels, which extend the growing season for many types of vegetables.

Educational programs for beginning specialty crop farmers are also on the rise. Stu Shafer is involved in a project that will build a collaborative network of educators across Kansas with an emphasis on sustainable agricultural practices including specialty crop education. Johnson County Community College now has a three-acre vegetable farm on campus and offers coursework in horticulture, sustainable agriculture and marketing, all based on small-scale farming. Students get both theoretical and scientific training at a one-year college level, he said, and they also get their hands in the dirt.

Students come from a variety of backgrounds, but increasingly he sees an influx of students who come from existing family farms. Some want to expand their farm operation to a specialty crop basis while some commodity farming with cattle. Some want to start their own family farm, and others are interested in urban farms, he said. And because the college offers a culinary program, a good number of chefs are enrolled, included several who own farms associated with the program. "Chefs want to know about local foods, and embrace that aspect of the industry," he said.

Higher education for beginning farmers is an attempt to mitigate the threat posed by the increasingly advanced age of farmers in the Midwest, he said, which in 2017 stood at 58.3 years of age on average, according to the USDA.

"Who's going to do the farming, and how are they going to do it?" Shafer asked. "More schools are offering vocational training in farming, but education in general has challenges with funding. We need to develop a larger scale

collaborative curriculum with programs that currently don't exist in Kansas.” The bottom line, he said, was this: “We need to have agriculture. We need to eat.”

As an instructor, Shafer takes the long view about the future of farming. Jacob Thomas, a young third-generation farmer outside of Leavenworth, also takes the long view; only his view is related to the location of the family farm. “We’re at about the highest point in Leavenworth County,” he said. “One reason I love farming so much is the view.”

That view used to encompass a more conventional form of farming, with fields of soybeans, corn, and cattle. It now includes high tunnels and acres of vegetables. The transition to specialty crop production began when he asked his father for a small area to start a garden. Instead of small he got large—ten times larger than he’d wanted—but even at age 14, he filled it up.

He’s still trying to fill every square inch of acreage he can, and by using high tunnels he not only maximizes his yield through intensive planting, but also is also able to extend the growing season. Diversity also plays a key role in the business. In 2014 Thomas expanded into the meat market with high quality grain-finished Angus beef, followed by cage-free chickens and lambs. “In farming,” he said, “you expand when you can.” In small-scale farming, however, care must be taken to ensure that there are enough resources to manage expansion. “You have to plan ahead,” he said. “Our farm is primarily myself, my wife and my dad. Three people doing everything.”

They’ve kept labor costs down through investing in more efficient equipment and by learning new skills when necessary, but communication and meticulous record keeping are equally important. Thomas uses spreadsheets to track sales, tasks both finished and unfinished, spray schedules, seed planting and emergence sequences for the greenhouse—in short, for every aspect of the business. He also keeps a daily log of everything that happens on the farm, and another for everything that didn’t turn out as expected. “That way, I can go back next year and know what actually happened rather than what I planned for,” he said.

For Jerry Wohletz and his family, adventure starts with the season’s first ripe strawberry. That initial bright splash of scarlet makes all the hard work of preparing and planting the beds worthwhile. “It’s an exciting time,” he said. “Our parking lot holds 80 cars, and on Saturdays it’s filled all day.”

Their 80-acre farm, Wohletz Farm Fresh, currently has about four acres devoted to vegetables, but that number keeps growing. They began growing produce when they moved to Lawrence in 1996, and by 2003 they were selling their produce at the Downtown Lawrence Farmers Market. In 2009 they shifted focus to a you-pick strawberry patch. Rather than delivering strawberries to the market, customers began coming to the farm and picking everything themselves. While in

many ways it is more efficient and less labor-intensive, it came with its own complications, one of which was drainage. “People from the city don’t want to walk in the mud,” Wohletz said.

After getting off to a rocky start water-wise—they used about 18,000 gallons of water the first year—the family turned to plasticulture farming, a conservation practice that uses plastic ground covers rather than mulches. Besides reducing evaporation and retaining soil moisture, the plastic prevents weeds, reduces insect predation and conserves electricity and fuel for irrigation.

It’s still a lot of work, he said. Each autumn they prune the runners back to the mother plant and cover them with row covers. Every two years they rip out the plastic, disk down a cover crop and rebuild the beds. For all the labor involved, strawberries are a highly profitable crop. They’re also risky. “This is a one-shot deal,” Wohletz said. “Our entire crop is dictated on what happened last fall. We’re solely reliant on Mother Nature, and so far she’s taken pretty good care of us. It’s a challenge, but it’s a challenge we’ve always taken.”

Getting customers to the farm and getting their hands dirty can be equally profitable, Schwinn said, with caveats. “You can afford to spend money in agritourism because there’s a return on it if you’re willing to work for it,” he said.

He cautioned, however, that it’s totally different than conventional agriculture. “You have to be a people person,” he said. “When you deal with the public, you have to deal with the public. A news article from several years ago said that 60 percent of Americans think that chocolate milk comes from black cows. With ‘agritainment’ and ‘agrieducation’, we’re teaching people where their food comes from.”

That simple concept must never be overlooked, he said, for the heart and soul of agritourism is agriculture. “We have to keep the ag in agritourism,” he said.

Because of his success at the Barn, Schwinn commonly fields questions from people seeking advice on starting their own agritourism venues. Many of them are full of detailed plans and creative ideas, but to Schwinn those are merely secondary considerations. He wants to know the depth of their connection to working the land and enabling others to experience that connection firsthand. “I’m passionate about agritainment and agritourism as long as it has ag in it.”