Summer 2021

Backbone

STORIES OF PEOPLE IN AGRICULTURE

Diversity on the farm

Thriving!

Hundred Hills Vines takes pride in Nebraska roots

And more stories from Platte, Colfax, Butler, Dodge, York and Saunders counties

A Lee Enterprises publication

Hundred Hills Vineyards co-owner Kara Sousek walks through the vineyards on May 28, 2021, in Prague, Nebraska.

ELSIE STORMBERG, WAHOO NEWSPAPER

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Backbone is a Lee Enterprises publication produced by The Columbus Telegram, The Fremont Tribune, Schuyler Sun, David City Banner-Press, York News-Times, Wahoo Newspaper, The Ashland Gazette and Waverly News.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Celebrating diversified agriculture

When other states think of Nebraska farmers, they usually think of corn. After all we are the Cornhusker state with almost 10 million harvested acres of corn in 2020, according to the state agriculture overview.

VINCENT LABOY

But, we are much more than corn. And I'm not just talking about soybeans, hay or wheat. Nor am I talking about the cattle, hog or milk industries.

Instead, take a look at our university and college offerings and you will see a growing amount of offering in diversified agriculture. The goal of a diversified agriculture option is combining curriculum in agronomy and animal science. It's about keeping our economy growing.

With this latest edition of Backbone, the newsrooms at The Columbus Telegram, York News-Times, Fremont Tribune, Schuyler Sun, David City Banner-Press, Wahoo Newspaper, The Ashland Gazette and Waverly News dig into some diversified agriculture farms and families.

In York County, we found a pheasant farm and hatchery that is doing quite well. We also came across Buck's Hollow Ranch, which is home to goats, alpacas and llamas.

In Dodge County, Susan and Gordon Miller mainly grow corn and soybeans but have also dedicated about 12 acres of their land to growing other produce, which they sell at area farmers' markets. They grow a variety of produce including: asparagus, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, peppers, sweet potatoes, beets, broccoli, cauliflower, lettuce, cabbage, kohlrabi, Brussels sprouts, squash, watermelon and cantaloupe.

In Saunders County, Hundred Hills Hops and Vines is a family operation that is absolutely thriving in its fourth year of operation. The hop yard and vineyard is this issue's cover story, and inside you'll find more stories about diversified agriculture operations in other areas of Nebraska.

We appreciate the local farmers who have trusted us to share their stories with this and every issue of Backbone so far. We also greatly appreciate our advertisers across Northeastern Nebraska for supporting our mission to help better promote the people in agriculture.

Who knows, maybe this issue inspires more students to pursue owning and operating diversified farm/ranch careers.

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BUTLER COUNTY

SOMETHING'S ALWAYS POPPING

Hilger stays busy with popcorn business and more

Butler County Farmer Daniel Hilger poses for a photo holding a bag of Hilger Agri-Natural Popcorn he and his family grow and package.

MOLLY HUNTER, THE BANNER-PRESS

BUTLER COUNTY

MOLLY HUNTER
The Banner-Press

Butler County Farmer Daniel Hilger makes his living off the land but he won't farm more than about 150 acres this year — roughly 20 acres of corn, 50 acres of full-season soybeans and another 80 acres of rye for seed, which he'll double-crop into a short-season soybean.

Daniel, 75, lives with his wife, Mary Jane Hilger, about 4 miles east of Bellwood in Butler County. The Hilgers have been married for 53 years.

"We don't farm a whole lot but I do more custom work," Daniel said. "…We do quite a bit of seed cleaning through the summer and then…we go out and custom seed in the fall."

Daniel is also the CEO of Hilger Agri-Natural Popcorn. And, right now, he has plans to partner with someone in North Platte for a study on growing continuous corn.

This will be the sixth year in a row Daniel has raised non-GMO, non-insecticide corn on the same 20-acre plot of land.

"It's something I've known I could do for 30 years," Daniel said.

Please see **Hilger,** Page 6

MOLLY HUNTER, THE BANNER-PRESS

Daniel Hilger, left, gets more cardboard boxes to package bags of popcorn inside a workshop at his farm in Butler County on May 15. Daniel grows and packages his own brand of gourmet popcorn, with the help of his wife Mary Jane Hilger, center, and son Marcus Hilger, right.

BUTLER COUNTY

Hilger

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When GMO corn was on the rise in the 1990s, Daniel predicted insects and weeds would eventually get resistant to the insecticides and herbicides the GMO products were engineered to withstand.

“Some of the weeds are getting resistant to the herbicides of today. That’s getting to be a major problem and it’s going to get even worse in the next few years,” Daniel said.

That’s part of the reason he’s interested in non-chemical control methods like double cropping and cover cropping, which he’s made a business.

Daniel said double cropping and cover crops reduce weed pressure and improve the health of the soil. He does seed cleaning and cover crop planting for about 15 or 20 producers in Butler, Platte and Polk counties.

A lot of big farmers want to seed cover crops, Daniel said, but they’re not going to get off the combine to do it.

“I can come in and follow behind their combine and get it seeded for them,” Daniel said.

Then, of course, there’s Hilger Agri-Natural Popcorn, Daniel’s gourmet popcorn brand. He grows the popcorn and packages it, with help from Mary Jane and their

Marcus Hilger operates a device his father, Daniel, constructed to funnel exact amounts of popcorn kernels into each bag of gourmet popcorn before they are sealed. Daniel used part of a washing machine and an old center pivot to build it.

Marcus Hilger, right, catches kernels in a plastic popcorn bag before passing it to his mother, Mary Jane, to be heat sealed. The Hilgers have the popcorn packaging process down to a science.

MOLLY HUNTER PHOTOS, THE BANNER-PRESS

Daniel Hilger stands to the left of the large machine his family uses to funnel specific portions of popcorn kernels into the plastic bags consumers will buy. His wife, Mary Jane, sits at a machine sealing the bags after their son Marcus fills them.

BUTLER COUNTY

son, Marcus Hilger, at their home in Butler County.

Daniel said he's coming to be known as the 'popcorn guy.'

The Hilgers used to raise chemical-free potatoes, but after doing that for seven years in the 1980s and 1990s, the price got so low they had to stop.

The first year the Hilgers did popcorn, they only grew one acre.

"And we hand-bagged it here in the kitchen," Mary Jane said, chuckling.

These days, Daniel doesn't even raise popcorn every season, since about 15 acres last him two or three years.

The Hilgers store most of the popcorn in a grain bin on their property, though they keep several 2,000-pound tote sacks of it in a workshop attached to their home.

When it's time to start bagging popcorn, Daniel uses a forklift to hang one of the tote sacks upside down from the top of an I-beam in the workshop. From there, the kernels drain into a funnel and into one of four rotating chambers in a dispensing machine. Each chamber contains exactly the right amount of popcorn for one bag.

When Daniel got the machine from another popcorn company, it was rusted shut.

Mary Jane Hilger seals a bag of popcorn before handing it off to her husband, Daniel Hilger, to be placed in a box for shipment.

Marcus said he spent three or four months getting it back in working condition.

"It was at least six years ago," Marcus said.

Daniel, Mary Jane and Marcus gathered on a spring day in the workshop, where Marcus sits at the base of the I-beam and, using a foot pedal to rotate the chambers, drops 2 pounds of popcorn into a plastic bag.

Marcus then handed the bag to his mom, who runs it through a heat sealer.

After each bag is sealed, Daniel places them into waiting cardboard boxes, which he stacks on a forklift.

"We do about 2,000 pounds in about three-and-a-half hours," Daniel said.

And they do that about three times a

Daniel Hilger grabs a freshly-sealed plastic bag of popcorn from the heat sealer's conveyor belt before packaging it.

month, he said.

About every two weeks, Daniel will take a pallet-full of popcorn — about 64 boxes — to his distributor in Lincoln.

"I've got another distributor in Omaha and they don't go through nearly as much," Daniel said.

The distributors bring the popcorn to quite a few stores in eastern Nebraska and as far west as Kearney, including some Whole Foods Markets in Lincoln and Omaha and Russ's Markets and Super Savers, as well as Didier's Grocery and Dale's Food Lion in David City.

Daniel is very particular about the popcorn he grows.

A box of popcorn awaits more bags before Daniel Hilger tapes it closed and places it with other boxes on a forklift beside him.

"It's a yellow popcorn and it's what they call a butterfly," Daniel said. "There's butterfly and there's mushroom."

Daniel said most specialty bags of popped popcorn are mushroom style.

"It's more like a round ball so it doesn't break up. The butterfly's got wings on it," Daniel said. "…I prefer the butterfly for eating any day. Plus, with the growth system we're using, I feel it gives us a better flavor. We also found a variety that has a very thin hull so it doesn't stick in your teeth."

Molly Hunter is a reporter for The Banner-Press. Reach her via email at molly.hunter@lee.net.

COLFAX COUNTY

DOING THINGS HIS WAY

Cada proud of his family's organic farming operation

CAROLYN KOMATSOULIS
Schuyler Sun

It's all about tradition for Tim Cada. His farm, mostly nestled in rolling hills between Schuyler and Clarkson, has been in his family for decades.

But the way he raises his crops is anything but traditional. In the early 1990s, Tim transitioned to organic farming. He grows white and blue corn that are made into corn chips. That's in addition to more typical crops he grows, such as alfalfa and soybeans.

"I moved back to Grandpa's farm in 1982," Tim said. "(I was) 23 … (I had) wanted to be a helicopter pilot but I ended up here."

At that time, his grandfather was growing corn and beans and raising cattle.

"They wanted help and let me join right in," Tim said.

Tim sat on a wall in front of the main house in early May, pointing out different pieces of land and his family history. Two dogs and two cats milled around, sitting close to him and occasionally swiping their paws at each other.

Before working for his family, he grew up by farmers and worked for farmers.

"We walked beans," he recalled. "That's the way you made money in the summertime as a teenager."

In 1986, he pretty much ran the farm. In 1994, the farm went organic.

"Some years it works really (well), some years, you know, it's a challenge," he noted. "We only farmed about 400 acres at the time. Ground is hard to get. You just make more money per acre … why give a lot to the chemical companies when you can kind of keep it?"

Tim Cada, an organic farmer located between Schuyler and Clarkson, stands on a field of newly-planted corn in early June.
HANNAH SCHRODT, SCHUYLER SUN

COLFAX COUNTY

Clarkson area farmer Tim Cada rests on farm equipment while talking about his operations and the organic focus of it.

Matt Cada with his horse on his family's farm located between Schuyler and Clarkson. The farm is all organic.


HANNAH SCHRODT AND CAROLYN KOMATSOULIS PHOTOS, SCHUYLER SUN
Colfax County farmer Tim Cada looks out across his pasture, which is filled with cattle and his dog, in early May.

It's a free country, he added. Anyone can farm the way they want. But, there's a market for both options.

"Grandpa knew how to farm. Dad came along and changed it, or that generation came along and changed it," Tim said. "(The organic market) grows and it grows."

And when it comes to the market for his corn? Tim is one of the many that eats the corn chips made with his crop.

"You always look for the brands," he said. "We've actually had corn at the White House. It was in 2008 — corn off of our farm was being served in the White House."

Some of them (the brands) are really good, he said, and some not as much. But it's not his recipe.

"It's the freedom of choice thing," said Tim, who also grows winter wheat.

In addition to his organic farm operation, Tim has aided others in getting into that line of agriculture. One person he's helped is Amy Bruch, who got in contact with him when starting to transition her family's farm to organic.

"He spent about an hour with me answering questions over the phone and just telling me some of his trials and tribulations with organic farming," Bruch said. "It really resonated with me, so I considered him my mentor actually."

She's known Tim for about six years now.

"Tim has still been a great, great contact and resource and friend," Bruch added.

"You only get one time to do the farming per year so getting as much information and insights, the better, in comparing those and sharing stories."

Despite the familiar, there have been changes coming to the farm with others coming in the future, though Tim is keeping those plans under wraps.

Across the dirt road that day this spring, several cows milled around water. It was a short walk across the road.

Please see **CADA,** Page 10

COLFAX COUNTY

Grain elevators and farm equipment sit on farmer Tim Cada's land, which is located between Schuyler and Clarkson. Cada organically grows blue and white corn that are made into corn chips.

A cow wanders the pasture on land owned by Colfax County farmer Tim Cada. Cada grows his crop organically, including white and blue corn that are later made into corn chips.

Tim, left, and Matt Cada are pictured on their family farm located in rural Colfax County.

Cada

From 9

Past a red gate, Tim's son lowered a wire to keep the cows from getting out.

Having the cattle was the idea of his sons, Matt and Ethan. Visible on that spring day were four ponds on the pasture. The pasture is managed organically, Tim said.

Matt, who's one of five of Tim's kids, originally thought he would be a nurse. After graduating from high school in 2019, he was all set to enroll in college.

"The day I was supposed to send in my money to do it … I kind of backed down and decided this is what I wanted to do instead," Matt said. "So I bought cows instead of going to school."

The decision was motivated in part because Matt said he hates living in town "more than anything." He had liked the job shadowing in the medical field that he did, but said there were no windows.

"You're stuck in a room all day," Matt said. "That just wasn't me. I needed to get out and be outside and do something different every day."

On the farm, he works on tractors and in the field. He gets to plant, sometimes. One of his brothers, Ethan, also helps him with the cattle.

Looking forward, he said he wants to specialize in organic cattle if there's a market for that.

At the end of the day, Tim didn't get his helicopter's license, but he did get his pilot's license. So he is a pilot, but also a proud organic farmer.

"It's the path that we ended up on," he said.

Carolyn Komatsoulis is a reporter for the Schuyler Sun. Reach the Sun's news editor at hannah.schrodt@lee.net.

YORK COUNTY

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE ..

Goats, alpacas, llamas and more at Buck's Hollow Ranch

Geri Rutledge of Buck's Hollow Llama and Alpaca Ranch near Waco seals a container of alpaca feed, as the wooly diners finish their snack.

JESSICA VOTIPKAPHOTOS, YORK NEWS-TIMES

YORK COUNTY

JESSICA VOTIPKA
York News-Times

RURAL WACO – Even a spacious pen can't keep the cute little goat contained, the tiny horns and soft coat following Geri Rutledge around Buck's Hollow Llama and Alpaca Ranch.

Rutledge's fuzzy friend is a type of goat called a "Pygora" – a cross between a Pygmy goat and an Angora goat. The resulting cross is a small goat with a luxurious coat. Pygmy goats have soft, downy coats; Angora goats produce the fiber known as "mohair." Angora goats produce long, luxurious coats themselves, but partnered with Pygmy's fine fuzz and pint size, a manageable animal with precious fiber results.

Rutledge said Pygoras are relatively popular in other midwestern states, namely Kansas, but the breed has yet to catch on in Nebraska. Buck's Hollow is a member of Pygora Breeders Association (PBA), which serves as a vehicle to register Pygora's and Pygora products, as well as promote the cute – but functional – animals. A relatively newly-recognized breed, PBA was established in 1987. Since then, careful records have been kept on registered animals.


At Buck's Hollow Llama & Alpaca Ranch, where there's food, there's probably an animal. This tiny Pygora goat chows down outside its pen.

Pygora fiber can make more than a soft sweater. Rutledge opened a trailer filled with goat, alpaca and llama products made from the ranch's occupants and items inspired by them. Indoors, a booth filled with yarn, plush llama toys, handmade gnomes with goat-fiber beards (made, fittingly, with fiber from goats' "beards") and other items related to goats, alpacas and llamas. Draped over one door of the trailer, in an effort to keep the door from flapping in the strong wind that day, was a woven rug of natural, undyed fiber from Buck's Hollow fiber in shades of natural beiges and earthy browns.


Little gnomes sporting handmade caps and goats'-fiber beards are already being packed up for April's Mid-Plains Fiber Fair in York. They are made at Buck's Hollow Llama and Alpaca Ranch, which has a bevy of creatures used for fiber, show and companionship.


Whether spun in natural tones or dyed, the fiber animals at Buck's Hollow Llama & Alpaca Ranch produce high-quality, super soft yarn.

YORK COUNTY

Buck's Hollow had an outdoor space at the last fiber fair with adult Pygoras and young Pygora "kids" to help educate visitors – whether fiber-inclined or just curious – about the unique breed. The pens of Pygoras were especially popular with the youngest fair-goers, as the cute little goats were treated to many strokes of their soft coats. The gentle breed, often as friendly as the little friend following Rutledge around the farm, seemed to love the attention.

As fiber animals – including goats and sheep – age, their coats become coarse; Pygoras, however, were developed to combat this sign of age. The animals come in a variety of colors; a male goat with impressive horns in one of Buck's Hollow's spacious pens sported a glowing coat of golden-amber. He made himself known as the boss of the group, his lady-friends paying attention to his every move – even when the male goat became a little bossy.

Bloodlines are important to being named as a true Pygora goat; first-generation Pygora's parents must be registered to the American Angora Goat Breeders Association (AAGBA) and the National Pygmy Goat Association (NPGA). Only these offspring and their subsequent generations can be truly considered Pygoras. Additionally, these offspring must fit the standards of PBA in terms of confirmation, fleece characteristics and color and pattern. Colors include white, off-white, black, different tones of greys, caramels and deep browns. One of Buck's Hollow's Pygoras has facial coloring similar to that of a badger.

Much like sheep, Pygora goats are sheared. If their coats aren't maintained, matting can occur. According to PGA, one shearing (depending on the quality of fleece) can result in as much as 3 pounds of raw fiber.

If the fine fiber and friendly disposition aren't enough, Pygoras can also produce about 1 quart of milk daily.

As the name indicates, Buck's Hollow Llama and Alpaca Ranch includes a healthy group of llamas and alpacas – one aging over 20 years, who has been with the ranch since its inception. Rutledge clearly has a soft spot for the fuzzy creature; as she and her husband approach retirement, she said it will remain with them – as well as other Buck's Hollow occupants. This past year's nasty winter had Rutledge paying extra-close attention to who is obviously her "favorite;" the building was tightly structured to keep wind and cold out, and her "favorite" was checked on frequently.

Buck's Hollow's alpacas and llamas are well-trained, even participating in sanctioned shows. The farm has a bevy of ribbons and trophies to show for it, some shows

One of Buck's Hollow Llama and Alpaca Ranch's residents, an elderly Basset Hound, lovingly gazes at Geri Rutledge as she gives him some gentle scritches.

taking the endeavor well out-of-state. At one show, one of Rutledge's young alpaca campers was stubborn, not wanting to show the favorite beast. Still, he followed the child through the ring, lead rope dragging on the ground. Both judges and shower were surprised at the showcased animal's docile nature and obedience.

Rutledge, however, was not.

In addition to fiber, breeding and sanctioned shows, Buck's Hollow Llama and Alpaca Ranch hosts llama camps, which have been assisted in organization by the Nebraska Llama Association (NLA) and the Rocky Mountain Llama Association (RMLA). Kid-participants – some with troubled pasts – learn about fiber arts and crafts, llama care and – of course – the ins and outs of showing the gentle beasts. Felting (creating felt by bonding fibers together, most often natural fibers), dyeing fiber and handling the animals are covered, along with forged friendships and personal growth. As Rutledge recalls anecdotes of camps past, it's clear she has a special place in her heart of the dozens of children who have been given the opportunity to learn from the herd – and Rutledge herself.

Llamas can get talkative when predators like coyotes come around. The beasts are sometimes used as guardian animals for herds of smaller livestock. Rutledge said when coyotes or foxes come near the property, her llamas make it well known.

In addition to llamas, other areas of the farm host alpacas. The two main breed of

A special part of Buck's Hollow Llama and Alpaca Ranch's collection of beasts gazes out.

alpacas (a species) are Huacaya (pronounced "wah-KI'-ya") and Suri (pronounced "surrey"). While Huacayas are more common, both breeds are treasured for their rich fleeces. Huacacyas fleece is shorter than Suris, who have long, straight silky locks. Much like llamas, alpacas are gentle and friendly – especially if food is involved.

As Rutledge moves from pen to pen, Pygoras, llamas and alpacas all pay her more attention when they see her dip into the buckets of feed strategically placed throughout the farm. Rutledge said that after heavy snow, she has come up with a system to keep her from lugging heavy containers of feed around the acreage.

Rutledge's little short-horned, on-the-

A badger-faced goat is only one occupant of Buck's Hollow Llama and Alpaca Ranch, which specializes in fiber and show animals.

loose friend is particularly interested when Rutledge dips a scoop into the bucket. The Pygoras flock to her if she even touches the container. The farm's greying old Basset Hound lumbers about the farm, the little goat as free to roam (at least in Rutledge's presence) as he is.

As the farm tour continued – including a well-executed improvised chicken shelter (also occupied by one talkative guinea) – it became clear that all of the friendly critters have a special place in Rutledge's heart. At the same time she spoke of retirement, her voice was filled with passion for her unique herd's diversity and usefulness.

And their many personalities.

YORK COUNTY

HATCHING, A PLAN

Pheasant farm and hatchery thrives in York County

Every egg going through Double Barrel Game Farm and Hatchery is carefully inspected for any flaws that could compromise the hatching process.

JESSICA VOTIPKA PHOTOS, YORK NEWS-TIMES

YORK COUNTY

Chukar scatter in their wide-open space at Double Barrel Game Farm and Hatchery.

JESSICA VOTIPKA
York News-Times

RURAL McCOOL – It's a complex system of buildings, pens and shelters covering acres – miles – of rural McCool, with much of it housing live pheasants, quail and chukar in various stages of growth – including eggs.

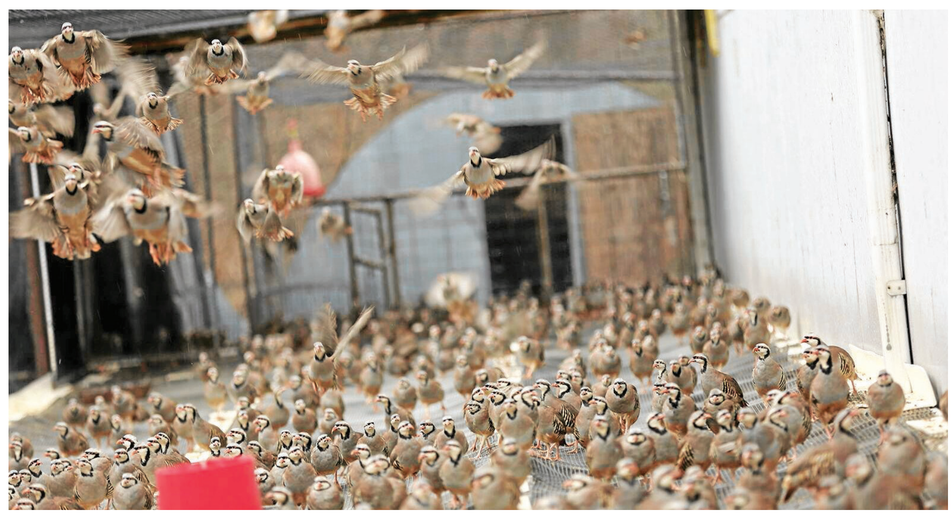
The incubation facilities at Double Barrel Game Farm & Hatchery are farm supply store tabletop incubators on steroids, large chests taller than the average person rotating eggs of varying tones of pale brown. Each incubator holds over 21,000 eggs. The impressive network of carefully-organized facilities custom-fitted for different stages of growth at last count produced 800,000 chicks and 160,000 of the game birds to maturity.

It all started over two decades ago. Dustin Chrisman, even as a youth a farming entrepreneur, started dabbling in the hatchery business. Only a freshman in high school, Chrisman started learning ways to supplement his herd of cattle (among other endeavors). The result? Decades later a thriving farm and hatchery supplying game birds for myriad uses, including hunting reserves. Some of Double Barrel's feathered specialties have been used for hunting dog field trials, including those sanctioned by the American Kennel Club.

The farm and hatchery also keep ties close to home; York High School science teacher Josh Miller, partially inspired by a graduate-level ornithology (bird science) class. Miller was taken under Chrisman and his Double Barrel team's wing (so to speak) to learn the ins and outs of game birds. Getting first hand experience on the farm, Miller was inspired by Chrisman's carefully-planned and researched approach to raising game birds. With the knowledge gleaned by working on the farm – and with Chrisman – Miller was able to establish a flock and receive funding from the York Public Schools Foundation to teach his students hands-on about the class's pheasants' development, as well as predators and animal behavior through a game camera.

Still, while collaborating with local educators, Double Barrel Game Farm & Hatchery is at its very essence a business. The system of buildings were deliberately placed, outfitted and organized to produce numerous high-quality game birds. This includes heated brooder houses, and acres upon acres of netted flight pens, seeded with koisa. The thick plantlife mimicks the natural thickly-vegetative habitat of the game birds, preparing them for life after Double Barrel. Flight pens can measure up to 85 feet wide, 700 feet long with a top net raised 14 feet in the air.

A female pheasant peeks over a stack of lumber. The game bird is one of thousands carefully selected for genetics at Double Barrel Game Farm and Hatchery.



Chukar - a type of game bird - have plenty of room to exercise their wings as they wait for sale at Double Barrel Game Farm and Hatchery.

In a spacious covered breeding outbuilding with plenty of fresh air, grown pheasants flutter, fly and scratch about in a bed of straw and several obstacles, leaving eggs throughout the shelter. Chrisman's three young children — Arianna, Ryah, and Tripp — grab baskets and pick through the straw, under stacks of wood and along the inside perimeter of the building in search of precious eggs. Each egg is like a prize to the siblings, barely missing any. With Double Barrel being in the business long before they came along, the kids are becoming pros and proudly sport caps emblazoned with Double Barrel Game Farm & Hatchery insignias. Eggs are collected three times a day (not necessarily by the siblings), then inspected, washed and carefully placed in a cooler. The cooler system syncs the hatches, which are transferred weekly into the farm's economy-sized incubators.

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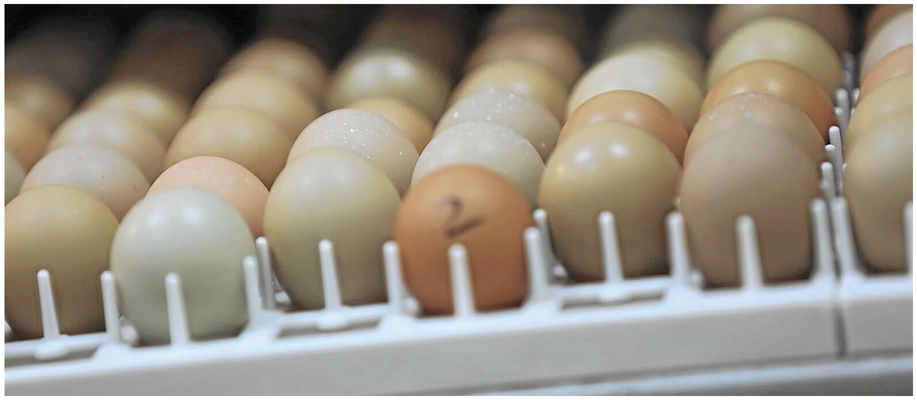
Double Barrel

From 15

The facility hatches about 50,000-70,000 chicks per week with April-August being peak season. Started chicks (six to eight weeks old) are available ("started birds") for customers leery of the stress and hard work of raising day-old chicks. The young birds are raised in order to be ready to take to fields or flight pens. Year-round game bird enthusiasts can get their hands on mature birds like those providing the Chrisman kids their egg hunts. Sizable flight pens encourage behavior like that in the wild: flight development and proper exposure to the elements.

At all stages, details are key, right down to the adult birds' tail quality. In addition to proper housing, carefully-planned feed programs and genetics are paramount to Chrisman and his team's production of quality game birds.

Double Barrel Game Farm & Hatchery is a member of the North American Gamebird Association, which promotes the gamebird industry. The business also adheres to National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP) standards. The state-federal cooperative certifies – among other poultry productions – hatcheries to meet standards of breeding stock, baby chicks, and hatching eggs. These standards center around up-to-date methods of disease testing. Diseases covered by NPIP include avian influenza ("bird flu").



Pheasant eggs resting in an incubator receive numbers to help keep track of different batches of eggs.

Continually looking to innovate, Chrisman has even developed a unique gamebird transport case. Unlike traditional cases, these plastic creations are lightweight and washable. They are made to be stacked, and Chrisman even took strapping the cases into consideration, including a notch for transport straps.

Double Barrel Game Farm & Hatchery's reach spans the United States, including pick-up and delivery locations in Kansas and South Dakota. Even so, as the Chrisman kids gather eggs and speak excitedly about "chores," it's clear that even after over two decades, the core of Double Barrel Game Farm & Hatchery is close to home.

The Chrisman siblings — Arianna, Ryah, and Tripp - show off their finds after searching for eggs in Double Barrel Game Farm and Hatchery's breeding outbuilding.

DODGE COUNTY

DECADES OF JOY

Couple's produce business grew gradually, continues to do well

Gordon and Susan Miller of Grandview Farm are shown near their asparagus field. The Millers grow produce which they sell in Fremont, Lincoln and Omaha.

TAMMY REAL-MCKEIGHAN PHOTOS, FREMONT TRIBUNE

DODGE COUNTY

TAMMY REAL-MCKEIGHAN
Fremont Tribune

In the late 1970s, Gordon and Susan Miller's children wanted to earn some spending money.

So the Millers planted sweet corn to provide their kids, Scott, Ryan and Kori, with jobs.

From that idea grew a produce business, called Grandview Farm.

The farm, south of Fremont, provides the Millers with a scenic view of beautiful sunrises. Wild turkeys can be seen in nearby fields and Canada geese fly over the Millers' house.

A family whose roots go deep into the art and practice of farming, the Millers now enjoy seeing their grandchildren work on the farm.

The Millers mainly grow corn and soybeans but have also dedicated about 12 acres of their land to growing produce, which they sell at area farmers' markets.

They grow a variety of produce including: asparagus, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, peppers, sweet potatoes, beets, broccoli, cauliflower, lettuce, cabbage, kohlrabi, Brussels sprouts, squash, watermelon and cantaloupe.

The Millers' fruit-and-vegetable venture grew gradually.

After they planted sweet corn, customers began asking for other types of produce.

"As our customer base increased, we raised more and different kinds of vegetables," he said.

Susan began taking the produce to the Haymarket in Lincoln and farmers' markets in Fremont. She now also takes produce to the Sunday Farmers' Market at College View in Lincoln.

Gordon retired from Hormel Foods Corporation in 2010 and began taking produce to farmers' markets in Omaha. He takes vegetables to Village Pointe on Saturday and the Askarben Village Market on Sunday.

"We raise most of the vegetables for the farmers' markets and we do some wholesale," he said.

Gordon enjoys growing produce.

"We're able to get up in the morning and just go out and work. We have a more flexible schedule than someone who has to go to work somewhere," he said.

Gordon said he likes the challenges of growing vegetables.

"Every year is different," he said. "You're confronted with the changes of the weather, but it's interesting."

Like her husband, Susan enjoys the benefits of an outside workplace.

"I like working outdoors," she said. "It's peaceful. It's calm. It's real therapeutic some days. We're out in nature."

Gordon and Susan Miller of Grandview Farm pull weeds in their onion crop.

Boxes of broccoli plants can be seen at Grandview Farm.

Gordon Miller of Grandview Farm uses an asparagus harvester when picking his crop.

DODGE COUNTY

Gordon and Susan Miller of Grandview Farm are shown near their cabbage field. The Millers grow produce which they sell in Fremont, Lincoln and Omaha.

Gordon and Susan Miller have planted cabbage plants amid black plastic mulch, which stores solar heat so the crop matures sooner. It is watered by drip irrigation.

Susan Miller of Fremont holds a handful of asparagus on Grandview Farm.

This long row of onions is seen at Grandview Farm.

And they see plenty of nature.

They tell the story of a wild turkey.

The turkeys who come to the Millers' cornfield, leave and fly toward Camp Cedars in the winter.

One tom turkey, probably injured in a fowl fight, had been rejected by the other birds.

He started hanging out not far from the Millers' house. They set out some water and food for the turkey and he slowly recuperated.

The turkey would follow Gordon down a lane as the man started to leave to go to town.

"He'd perch on a tree branch and wait and when I came home, then he'd jump off that branch and follow me right up to the house," he said.

The late behaviorist B.F. Skinner, whose experiments involved chickens pecking a button to get a kernel of corn, probably would have enjoyed the turkey, who'd ring the Millers' doorbell.

"He was smart," Susan said of the turkey, who'd also try to nudge her bird feeder to knock seed out on the ground to eat.

When the hen turkeys returned from their winter grounds to the farm, he rejoined them.

The Millers still see the turkey once in a while.

They enjoy other aspects of their outdoor work.

"The sunrises are amazing," he said.

In the morning, the skies are painted in shades of red, orange, yellow and pink.

"When we have a rain, you can see a rainbow and it will be cool, because you can see the whole thing," she said. "Sometimes in town, you can only see a piece of it."

Susan's love of nature stems from a farming heritage that spans decades.

Her relatives came from Baden, Germany, and she believes they were farmers before they came to the United States in 1854.

After arriving in the U.S., they moved to Wisconsin and then came to Cedar Bluffs.

Her dad, Christian Krause, grew up on a farm. Once he graduated from high school, he went into the military in World War II and served in Germany. Twice wounded, he was awarded a Purple Heart.

Krause returned to farm at Cedar Bluffs. He married Carol Rasmussen in 1947 and they had 10 children.

Susan was the second oldest child.

Her grandfather, Roy Rasmussen, bought the farm south of Fremont, where her parents moved in 1954.

Here, her dad grew corn, wheat and alfalfa, and baled hay. Christian Krause later left farming and went to work at Fremont Hatchery.

Susan and Gordon married in 1969 and moved onto what became Grandview Farm in 1970.

One sunny afternoon, the Millers went out to an asparagus field. He sat in a motorized cart with a canopy. Blue sky peeked out behind huge white clouds as he quietly made his way down the row, harvesting the crop.

Asparagus is one of the most popular vegetables because it's fresh and the woody tissue is left in the ground when they pick it. That means pretty much all the rest to be edible — versus what's offered in stores where about a third has to be trimmed off, he said.

They harvest asparagus from the last week in April through the first week in June.

Susan Miller likes growing artisan tomatoes best, while her husband likes cantaloupe.

"We get to take this to the market and people like it," he said. "You meet a lot of customers and it's fun to have customer friends."

Susan has a customer, who brings his children. Each child may select a vegetable.

"This one little boy always wants broccoli," she said.

One time, broccoli wasn't available so the dad encouraged his son to ask for asparagus.

Now, the boy asks for asparagus each week.

"It's interesting how a lot of parents bring their kids and try to teach them about vegetables," she said. "I feel like the parents are trying to teach them to be healthier. I think that's pretty cool."

COVID provided some unique challenges in 2020.

Farmers' markets didn't start until June that year. Spaces were made between vendors. Everyone wore masks.

"People were slow to come," she said. "They were afraid."

Gordon contacted customers from Omaha and arranged a drop-off point where they could get their vegetables.

"It was in a big, wide-open space," she said.

To stay safe, customers would park and come one at a time to get their produce.

"Everybody would wait until it was their turn and it worked out nice and they were very thankful for us to meet them that way," Susan Miller said.

This year, she'd started going to farmers' markets in May in Lincoln and he'd started in Omaha. Customers have been enthusiastic.

"They're so excited to have something fresh off the farm," she said.

May also was the time when Audrey Woita of Omaha, project leader of the nonprofit No More Empty Pots, brought friends from Mosaic to help weed the onions on the Miller farm.

Mosaic pursues opportunities to empower people with diverse needs including intellectual and developmental disabilities. Woita brought the Mosaic friends to the farm so they could see if they enjoyed working outdoors.

The Millers and their guests worked knee to knee weeding onions and Woita said she enjoyed hearing about the history of the farm.

"It is a special place and Gordon and Susan are delightful," Woita said.

The Millers plan to keep going with their vegetable venture.

"We'll probably continue what we're doing for a few more years and then kind of slow down," Gordon said.

But memories of a turkey, a broccoli-loving boy and magnificent sunrises will last a long time.

SAUNDERS COUNTY

GROWING STRONG

Hundred Hills Hops and Vines continues to flourish in fourth year of business

Hundred Hills' Vineyards Kara Sousek, left, Sam Creal, middle, Jessica Creal, right, and Sam and Jessica's children 2-year-old Ben and 8-month-old Angela pose for a photo at the vineyard on May 13, 2021, in Prague, Nebraska.

ELSIE STORMBERG PHOTOS, WAHOO NEWSPAPER

SAUNDERS COUNTY

Hundred Hills Vineyards co-owners Sam Creal, left, and Kara Sousek, right, check on their grape vines on May 28, 2021, in Prague, Nebraska.

NOAH JOHNSON
Fremont Tribune

Hundred Hills Hops and Vines is centered around family.

Even its name holds a special connection to Kara Sousek, the owner of the hopyard and vineyard located near Prague and Raymond.

The inspiration behind the "Hundred Hills" name came from Sousek's grandfather Frank Sousek, who based the name of the hills surrounding the Prague area.

"That's where the name came from," she said. "It's what a lot of people know as the Bohemian Alps of Nebraska."

The business, which now spans nearly 13 acres of land between its two locations in Raymond and Prague, launched in 2017. Sousek had just graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

That spring, Sousek planted her first acre of grapes in Prague with plans to sell the product to Cellar 426 Winery in Ashland. At the same time, she continued working for a separate, 10-acre vineyard near Raymond.

After the owner of the Raymond vineyard went into retirement, Sousek began the transition to own the property. Now, Sousek is in her second year running the Raymond vineyard and has also seen her vineyard in Prague expand to 2.5 acres.

In addition to their expanding vineyard, Sousek said her and her brother-in-law Sam Creal wanted to begin harvesting hops. When Sousek first started the business in 2017, Creal planted around an acre of hops at his home.

While most of the grapes are typically sold to a group of local wineries, Sousek said the hops business was difficult to get off the ground.

"The hops have not been what we thought," she said. "There have been a little bit here and there to home brewers, but otherwise the hops haven't really taken off."

Sousek attributed the lack of growth in the business' hops sales to a lagging market in Nebraska.

"I know people that would love to use local grown hops, but there's kind of a big obstacle with getting them processed and providing the quantity that breweries are wanting to use," she said. "So far, it seems like Nebraska has a lot to figure out before we can grow a sustainable product for breweries in terms of hops."

Even so, Sousek has seen plenty of interest in the local vineyard's grape supply. Sousek said the focus on growing grapes has led the business to expand every year since it launched in 2017.

In addition to harvesting its own grapes, Sousek said Hundred Hills also provides custom harvesting for other Nebraska wineries. She said many wineries have issues harvesting grapes by hand, especially if they don't carry the same recognition as other, more popular wineries.

"Wineries can get some of their customers, if they have a big enough following, but it takes maybe 30 people to pick an acre of grapes in five hours," she said. "We used to do hand harvesting, but it was a lot of stress trying to make sure we had enough people to get them picked on time."

Instead of relying on individuals to pick their grapes each weekend, Sousek turned to a more efficient alternative; a mechanical harvester.

"We've been mechanically managing all of our grapes, except for when we plant new vineyards," she said. "What took 30 people

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Hundred Hills

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four or five hours to do by hand takes us two or three people less than two hours."

Richard Hilski, the co-owner of Cellar 426 Winery, said Hundred Hills is an important partner in helping foster Nebraska's wine industry.

"We've been working with Kara for years now," he said. "It's important for us to have good, dedicated growers that we know and can count on to provide a good product for our clients."

Sousek said Hundred Hills is "very much" a family business. Growing up, her family harvested corn and soybeans, as well as livestock. After graduating college, Sousek said she wanted to return home and put a new spin on her family's farming operation.

"When we brought the vineyard back, it was kind of exciting but I think they were a little concerned," she said. "What new crop is this? Is this going to work out? But they have been very supportive."

Creal and Sousek's father focus heavily on custom harvesting. Sousek said Creal brings a wealth of mechanical experience to the business. That's important given the business's constant growth.

Hundred Hills Vineyards co-owner Sam Creal takes his son Ben on a ride in the New Holland Braud Harvester.

Hundred Hills Vineyards drives a New Holland tractor through the vineyards.

"That really helps since we do keep expanding," she said. "You can't really do everything by hand anymore."

Prior to working with Sousek at Hundred Hills, Creal worked at a car dealership in Lincoln. He also spent two years row crop farming before transitioning to the vineyard with Sousek.

"It's just been learning a new thing almost every day for a while," Creal said. "It seemed like it was just learning a new skill or trade or anything like that to help."

Having established roots in the growing business alongside his family, Creal said he is excited to see how Hundred Hills develops in the coming years.

"We've got two small kids together right now and it'd be great to see them come out and help as time goes by," he said. " … That is a nice thought for the future, but we'll just have to wait and see."

Over the last four years, Creal said the opportunity to foster connections with area wineries and growers has been a bright spot for him and the business.

"We try to do what we do well and provide a high-quality product," he said. "I'm just proud to see that go through, once it is in the wineries hands, to see what we produce become the end product that people enjoy, whether it is wine or beer."

Over the next two years, Sousek said she hopes to see Hundred Hills continue to expand. Those plans include putting in more acreage to allow for more grapes to be planted.

"It's an exciting time where there's a few new grape varieties out there that we are finding make very good wine," she said. " … It's a very exciting time for growing grapes. The market is very good for them."

In the future, Sousek also hopes to open a winery that would be run by the family in conjunction with the vineyard.

It's a lofty goal given the amount of product she would need to produce to continue supplying other local wineries as well as her own, but Sousek is looking forward to the opportunity for growth.

"I feel very blessed with the past four years since we started," she said. "Just seeing the tremendous support from friends and family, they've all gotten on board with it. It's a great, great journey and it's been a great learning experience so far."

ACROSS THE STATE

GRAIN ROBOT ...

... designed by NU students, a potential lifesaver for farmers

Ben Johnson, left, and Zane Zents recently won a Lemelson-MIT Student Prize for their grain-safety robot, the Grain Weevil.

COURTESY PHOTOS, CECIL SMALLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

ACROSS THE STATE

LUNA STEPHENS
Lincoln Journal Star

It can take only a matter of seconds to become buried or entangled in a grain bin. Yet despite the risk of serious injury and even death, grain farmers for years have had no better way to maintain their grain than to climb into the bin.

But two recent University of Nebraska students are working to change that, developing a robot to "do the work that no farmer should."

"The only real solution is to stay out," said Ben Johnson, an Aurora native who graduated this spring with a degree in electrical engineering. "Situations happen where the farmer has to make that decision and a lot of times they say 'It's not very common, it won't happen to me.' Obviously, it sometimes does."

Johnson teamed with his dad, Aurora farmer Chad Johnson, and Zane Zents, a computer engineering major from Omaha, to create the Grain Weevil, a robot that can move and maintain grain within a grain bin.

Their startup company is based in Aurora and also has an office in Omaha.

The Grain Weevil's latest prototype is a 30-pound remote-controlled robot that uses two augers and gravity for leveling grain, breaking crusts, performing inspections and feeding grain into extraction augers.

The Grain Weevil is a 30-pound remote-controlled robot that uses augers and gravity to level grain and redistribute it throughout the bin. It is portable, waterproof and dustproof. If it is accidentally buried, it can dig itself out of up to 5 feet of grain.

Zents and Ben Johnson won a Lemelson-MIT Student Prize for the invention and also received a Nebraska Innovation Fund Prototyping Grant.

The idea for the Grain Weevil came from a family friend of Johnson's who didn't want himself or any of his children to face the danger of climbing into a grain bin ever again.

"It really started as just a fun project for a family friend and then the more we learned and the more we talked to other farmers, we realized that this could really be something special that could help a lot of people," Ben Johnson said.

Johnson has been working with robotics since high school and he brought Zents onto the team to help with the software and data collection side of things.

After talking to hundreds of farmers, Johnson and Zents found that almost every farmer they met knew someone hurt or killed in a grain bin accident.

"It's been a problem for as long as there have been grain bins," Johnson said.

When inside a bin, farmers can quickly become trapped because of the unstable nature of grain inside the bin, especially the funnel shape created when grain is being extracted with an auger.

Working in grain bins can also lead to long-term health conditions such as farmer's lung disease.

There were 20 reported deaths from grain bin entrapment or entanglement nationwide in 2020, according to a Purdue University study. The most recent death from entrapment in Nebraska was a 72-year-old farmer in Nehawka in December 2020.

The Grain Weevil is being tested through on-farm trials in multiple states to see how it performs in a variety of grain types and climates.

From there, Johnson said they'll be able to get an idea of how the product will function for farmers.

"We're trying to move as fast as possible to get it out there to start saving lives and to start helping farmers manage their grain bins," Johnson said.

Besides offering an opportunity to create a product that could potentially save lives, Zents said the startup has been a great way to put his degree into practice right out of college.

"It really makes us feel like we have something on our hands here, that all that time spent in college learning and absorbing all this information has finally paid off," he said.

Johnson said he has appreciated the partnerships Grain Weevil has formed within the agricultural and startup communities in Nebraska, which have helped make the product a reality.

"It's been a lot of fun learning through that process (of) how to run a startup company," Johnson said. "It's things like that that get me really excited to be in the startup world here in Nebraska, doing innovative things from rural Nebraska."

Reach the writer at lstephens@journalstar.com or 402-473-7241.

SAUNDERS COUNTY

FINDING A NEW CALLING

Ailing pet led Wolfe to hemp farming

During a forum on hemp production hosted last August on Kevin Wolfe's family farm near Colon, a group hears information about the crop, which was approved for growth in Nebraska in 2019.

SUZI NELSON PHOTOS, WAHOO NEWSPAPER

SAUNDERS COUNTY

SUZI NELSON
Wahoo Newspaper

Kevin Wolfe, right, in his hemp field with State Sen. Bruce Bostelman during a forum on hemp production Wolfe hosted last August near Colon.

COLON – When Kevin Wolfe's elderly bull dog Charlie got to the point that he couldn't walk across the living room, the farmer and construction business owner turned to CBD to give his family pet some relief.

It worked well, and extended Charlie's quality of life. He even took a three mile "stroll" in a blizzard last winter, Wolfe said.

"We probably got an extra two years out of him," he added.

When he purchased the CBD, also known as cannabidiol, Wolfe became interested in the plant that provides CBD – hemp. He attended a forum in Neligh and learned more.

It was also around the same time that hemp was approved to be grown in the state. In 2019, the Nebraska Legislature passed two bills that adopted the Nebraska Hemp Farming Act and amended existing laws to allow hemp farming. The Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA) was given the authority to regulate growing, processing, handling and brokering of the plant.

Wolfe saw hemp as a way to begin to diversify his 1,800-acre farming operation in Saunders and Lancaster counties. He believes that there will be an even bigger market for hemp if the state approves medical marijuana, so he thought it was a good time to learn how to grow hemp.

"I'm trying to get my foot in the door to do medical marijuana," he said.

However, attempts to get medical marijuana approval in Nebraska have experienced setbacks. In May, a bill that would allow medical marijuana with strict regulations fell two votes short of breaking a filibuster and forcing a vote. The issue was supposed to go on the ballot in 2020, but the Nebraska Supreme Court blocked the ballot petition on a technicality. Supporters have fixed the issue and plan another ballot initiative. Wolfe said he donated money to the 2020 effort to legalize medical marijuana, and continues to support the cause.

Growing hemp in Nebraska has a special set of regulations. All growers must be licensed by the state. In his first year of hemp production, Wolfe used another grower's license to establish a three-acre plot on his family farm near Colon. This year, he received a license in his name.

The licensing process includes a background check, fingerprinting and filling out several forms, plus a $1,600 fee, Wolfe said.

The NDA comes out to test the hemp plants during the growing season to determine the level of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the chemical responsible for the high that results from smoking marijuana. Hemp grown in Nebraska must have less than 0.3% THC.

"They monitor it pretty closely," Wolfe said.

If a crop is too high in THC, it has to be destroyed. Wolfe did not have that happen with last year's crop, but he heard of growers that did.

"A lot of guys that got into hemp last year are not going to do it this year because they don't want to take a beating two years in a row," he said.

Marketing is another issue. Wolfe leaned on partners to market his 2020 crop and was disappointed with the results. He still has approximately 5,000 pounds of product in storage, waiting to be sold.

Wolfe harvests the flower, which is the part of the plant that is used to make CBD oil and that can be smoked. The biomass, or remaining parts of the plant, are also valuable for use as fiber.

During the Saunders County Hemp Harvest Forum that Wolfe hosted at the family farm last August, consultants told a group of local farmers that the fiber can be used to make fabric, rope and even building materials.

"Fiber is the thing that will probably be stronger to market eventually," Wolfe said.

Wolfe is seeking advice from other Nebraska hemp growers on marketing and other aspects of the industry, rather than turning to trade organizations.

"I'm teaming up with them for the experience," he said.

In his first year of hemp production, Wolfe saw good yields. He also learned a lot, he said, and is adjusting what and where he will plant this season. He moved the plot to a different location to get better irrigation, and will put fewer plants into the ground than last year.

He has also learned from experience that some varieties didn't produce well on his property, so he's trying new varieties.

Planting will begin in mid-June to avoid pollination with marijuana that grows in the wild, which can reduce CBD levels.

"We try to plant so it doesn't cross-pollinate with the ditch stuff," he said.

Hemp has a quick growing season, and producers can get two crops in per season, according to consultant Dustin Paulsen, who spoke during the August forum.

Wolfe planted just one crop last year and will do the same this season.

Because hemp growing has only just been reintroduced in Nebraska after being banned several decades ago, Wolfe said there are no pre-emergent chemicals available for weed control. They pull weeds by hand, which is labor intensive.

Specialized equipment for harvesting hemp is also rare. Last year Wolfe rented a machine to help with harvest, but doesn't plan to do so again this year because he felt it damaged too much of the valuable part of the plant.

After harvest, the hemp must be dried because the plant has a high water content. Growers can take the crop to a drying facility, but Wolfe preferred to do it on his own, researching the best method to hang the plants to dry and developing his own drying operation.

As Wolfe gets ready for the 2021 hemp growing season, he looks forward to another good crop, more places to market hemp, and expansion possibilities that the passage of medical marijuana could bring.

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