

“Ginseng Queen” Buys From Hunters

After nearly 35 years of buying ginseng, Marian Ahnen has earned the title Ginseng Queen according to her children and the ginseng hunters who've become part of her extended family. In September, Ahnen celebrates her 82nd birthday, and if it's like past years, customers will bring treats and help her celebrate as she inspects, weighs and buys the ginseng they bring her.

The hunters, ages 15 to 81, appreciate having a local buyer in southwest Wisconsin. The rich soil is ideal for growing ginseng, which provides welcome income for ginseng diggers. Last year prices were good, and Ahnen paid \$1,000/lb. for dried ginseng, but bought mostly green ginseng, which takes 3 to 4 lbs. to yield a pound of dried ginseng.

Ahnen explains that she buys for Paul Hsu in Wausau, Wis. He pays for the \$500 buyers license that allows her to buy up to 1,000 lbs. of dry ginseng. As a buyer, Ahnen is required by the local Department of Natural Resources to keep detailed records including names and license numbers of people she buys from and how many pounds she purchases from each county. Ginseng hunters travel from about a 100-mile radius to sell to her.

Over the years she's noticed a decrease in the size of ginseng roots as all the older ones have been harvested. It's also harder for ginseng harvesters to find places to hunt. They can't dig on public land, and many landowners stopped giving permission to hunt when prices topped \$500/lb.

“There's a lot of red tape,” Ahnen says. “Ginseng should be at least 10 years or older to dig. You count the rings on the neck of the root.”

She also needs to know the difference between wild ginseng and woods-grown ginseng planted from seed. “I can't buy it (woods-grown). That requires a different license,” she says.

Buying ginseng begins in September and runs through early January. Most hunters deliver the ginseng personally, but Ahnen also receives shipments from Iowa, which have been certified by that state's DNR. Last year, Ahnen filled out more than 800 receipts. Though September can be very busy and the paperwork overwhelming, Ahnen says she is grateful for the work. Initially, she was reluctant to take over the job from her late husband in 1980 after he became disabled from two heart attacks, emphysema and diabetes. But the money she makes has



Photos by Jerry D. Davis

Marian Ahnen has earned the title of Ginseng Queen, according to her children and the ginseng hunters who've become part of her extended family.

been important in supplementing her social security so she can remain in her home. When she talks about retiring, the ginseng hunters insist she can't quit.

“You get so attached to them - not only as good customers but as good friends also,” Ahnen says.

She adds she has another “family” in the spring when she buys morel mushrooms at

\$18 to \$19/lb. That's another story about a business that Ahnen developed on her own in 1984. She bought 2,000 lbs. of morel mushrooms her first day in business and never looked back.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Marian Ahnen, 209 S. Fourth St., Readstown, Wis. 54652 (ph 608 629-5117).

How To Get Started In Aquaponics

If you're interested in experimenting with aquaponics or ready to set up a commercial operation, FarmTek can help you design a system to fit your needs. Their systems come in 7 different sizes to produce fish and vegetables for your family or for sale.

“Most of our customers plan to market fish and produce from their aquaponics systems,” says Matt Denton, FarmTek. “They often create a small to medium size home system to learn with before upgrading to a commercial size.”

The GS Series Aquaponics System I is sized to produce as many as 650 heads of lettuce per year and 75 lbs. of fish. The 12 by 20-ft. system includes fish tanks, filters, float beds and pump. It's priced at \$1,995.

Float beds are available in 4 to 50-ft. long configurations, 8 ft. wide. They consist of 16-ga. sq. steel pipe frames, 24-

mil PolyMax liner and a 1 1/2-in. thick float surface. Prices start at \$549 for a 4 by 8-ft. bed, if ordered separately.

Systems are designed for producing lettuce but aren't limited to that. “You can also incorporate peppers or tomatoes, but you need leafy greens to take out the excess nitrogen produced by the fish.”

Denton recommends tilapia for beginners. “They grow fast and tolerate swings in pH, temperature and water quality.”

One of the strengths FarmTek offers growers is a strong support system. That includes information, training and reliable sources for tilapia.

“If people order a system from us, we can often send them and a significant other to school for free to learn how to use the system,” says Denton. “I often talk to customers every other day for the first week



FarmTek can help you set up an aquaponics operation to produce fish and vegetables for your family or for sale.

or two as they get set up.”

Denton suggests readers interested in an aquaculture system do the research first, not only on the relationship between plants and fish, but also on the local market for both. He also advises looking into energy resources

such as solar and geothermal to help reduce costs.

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“Slow Conveyor” System Helps Select Seed Corn By Hand

Rich Holman's low-cost seed handling system fits his approach to seed. The organic dairyman and seedsman has spent the past 12 years developing 2 lines of open-pollinated corn for his use and for a growing number of customers. Since keeping costs down is key to the operation, he designed and assembled a low-cost processing system.

“I have it set up so the system unloads automatically, allowing me to go through and hand select ears to save for seed,” explains Holman.

He started with a used IH-mounted picker. Holman used the elevator and the husking beds, mounting the elevator to the side of a covered chopper box. The husking beds, a sorting table, and an unloading conveyor belt are suspended off the floor inside the box.

“I pick with a Uni Harvester and an old Farmhand chopper box with an unloading auger,” explains Holman. “They are known for smooth unloading.”

When the wagon is full, Holman pulls

alongside the picker elevator. To ensure slow unloading, he mounted a gearbox with a 5 hp. electric motor to run the unloading auger.

“It feeds the ears very slowly into the picker's elevator,” he says. “The elevator, husking beds and conveyor are all electric and controlled from a breaker box also mounted in the chopper box.”

Ears coming out of the elevator feed through from one husking bed to the other. As they come out of the second husking bed, they land on a sorting table with the husks being discharged to the floor.

“I toss soft ears or ears with the husk still on to the floor,” says Holman. “It is a simple process, but one that has helped me reduce maturity on my line of Minnesota 13 corn from more than 100 days to 88 days.”

The good ears are tossed onto a rubber conveyor belt with paddles that carry them to a gravity box. Once the gravity box is full, the ears selected by eye and feel are transferred to a floored bin. Supplemental heat completes the drying process.

“After a couple of hours, the corn and



Low-cost seed handling system uses the elevator off an old corn picker alongside a covered chopper box. Picker's husking beds, as well as a sorting table and an unloading conveyor belt, are suspended off the floor inside the chopper box.

husks are often too deep for me to stand in,” says Holman. “Since the chopper box still has its apron in it, I climb out and run the husks and rejected ears into a grinder to make feed for my dairy herd.”

The chopper box roof eliminates the need for permanent storage of the processing system. A light over the sorting table allows Holman to process his seed corn ears even at night.



“I've been selling certified, organic seed corn for more than 6 years,” says Holman. “This processing system makes it possible for me to select only the best ears for seed. When it is running, my hands are flying and so are the ears.”

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