

## Dairy Turns Manure Into Pots

For eight years Matt Freund worked on the "recipe" to shape manure into pots that would be durable until planted in the ground. Test marketing started in 2005. Nursery owners and gardeners appreciate the added nutrient value that goes directly to plants when the pot decomposes in the ground. The whole process also appeals to people interested in buying "green" products.

Freund explains that he and his brother, Ben, milk 250 dairy cows in East Canaan, Conn. Since 1997, they have run their herd's manure through a digester. The methane gas is collected and used as an energy source. The liquid is spread on the field for fertilizer and the remaining solids composted. Freund uses those solids to make weed-free, odorless CowPots.

Besides adding value, CowPots solve the problem of managing manure.

"We organized the Canaan Valley Agri-

culture Cooperative to look for environmental solutions that put us ahead of the curve," Freund says. Each producer uses various ways to manage the manure from a total of 2,000 cows in their valley to meet new nutrient management regulations.

CowPots is one solution, and Freund notes that grants have helped with research and development, but that the business has now moved forward without governmental assistance. The Freunds recently set up equipment to mass-produce CowPots.

Currently, the 3 and 4-in. pots retail at 50 to 60 cents apiece, Freund says. CowPots in larger sizes will be offered in the future.

The pots are used like peat pots to start plants, though CowPots hold water better and require less frequent watering. Fertilizer needs to be added as usual to start the plants, since the pot's nutrients only become available to the plant when it is placed in the

**Nutrient value of pots goes directly to plants as manure decomposes in ground.**



ground and the pot decomposes.

With the initial excitement about CowPots, Freund says he believes demand will quickly outgrow the local supply of manure.

CowPots are available for purchase through the CowPots website, as well as at

retail and garden stores in some states.

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## Gopher Expert Traps For A Living

Thomas Wittman's "career in gophers" started when he was an organic farmer back in 1982. That's when he learned firsthand what a problem they can be.

"I've trapped gophers daily for over 20 years and in 1999 started a company, Gophers Limited, focusing primarily on gophers and moles, but also on voles and ground squirrels," Wittman explains. "My goal was to find a trapping method that would be fast and effective enough to be a good alternative to poisons."

Wittman's new technique involves trapping from the surface instead of digging down into the main burrow. He doesn't need to carry a shovel since he uses a small Japanese gardening tool called a "hori hori" to open up the tunnel. Then he sets a "cinch trap" which is designed for use on the surface.

"Using that combination of tools, I spend less than a minute to set each trap. It speeds up trapping so much that I can cover very large tracts of land," he explains. "It's also important to have experience so you know how to place the trap in exactly the right position."

Other control techniques that Wittman uses include repelling the pests with non-toxic liquids that he applies to the ground. One of his products contains castor oil. The gophers don't like the taste yet it's harmless to the environment.

Alternately, one method of "excluding" the pests is by using pre-fabricated "Root-Guard baskets" that you plant into, and which keep gophers and other tunneling pests from eating the plant's roots. There are also gopher-proof underground wire fences that create a vertical barrier, or install horizontally under sod to prevent gophers and moles from popping up through the surface.

"I don't use poisons because they can harm children, pets and other wildlife. There are plenty of other methods that work better," he explains. "One aspect of my business is teaching these non-toxic control methods to individual farmers, ranchers, and residential homeowners, as well as to commercial property owners and in school settings."

Another beneficial option is establishing nesting boxes for barn owls, as an adult can consume up to 1,000 gophers per year (and these birds have been in steady decline in



**Commercial trapper Thomas Wittman traps gophers from the surface with cinch traps. He uses a small Japanese gardening tool (left) to open up the tunnel.**

some areas).

Wittman has a degree in environmental studies, focusing on ecology, and studied under the famous wildlife ecologist Raymond Dassmann.

Gophers Limited sells cinch traps for \$15 each (plus S&H) or \$165/dozen; hori hori knives for \$28 (plus S&H); Digger's Triple Galvanized Gopher Wire (60 in. by 100 ft.)

for \$135 (plus S&H); and pre-formed wire planting baskets (72 1-gal. baskets/case) for \$140 (plus S&H).

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## Sainfoin Coming Back As Dryland Forage Crop

After unsuccessful attempts at getting alfalfa stands started during especially dry summers, Wally Blain finally turned to sainfoin, an old legume forage crop that his father grew in the 1970's.

He planted 150 acres of sainfoin on his Joliet, Montana, farm in the spring of 2006 and was pleased with his first cutting in 2007.

"It made two tons an acre, which is good for this area," Blain says. "It did way better than alfalfa would have. It grew up to my waist."

Even though the sainfoin was coarse when it was harvested on the first of July, Blain says his registered Angus cattle - even newly weaned calves - clean it right up. Since cattle can't bloat on sainfoin because of its condensed tannin levels, it makes excellent pasture after the hay is taken off.

Growing sainfoin is similar to growing alfalfa, says Dennis Cash, forage specialist at Montana State University. Because sainfoin seeds are about 10 times bigger than alfalfa, University recommendations are 30 to 35 lbs. seed/acre dryland and 40

to 45 lbs./acre on irrigated land. For many years the large amount of seed required made it expensive to plant sainfoin, but the price dropped in 2006 to as low as \$1.50/lb., which attracted producers such as Blain.

Blain seeded less than the recommendations at 18 lbs./acre - 2 lbs. alfalfa seed, 3 lbs. grass seed and 13 lbs. sainfoin seed. Later in the summer he cut the stand to clip off weed heads and was pleased with the density of his fairly weed-free stand in 2007. He mowed the sainfoin with a 16-ft. swather and had big windrows, which took about five days to dry before being baled into large round bales.

After harvest the forage seemed to die out, but greened up again with moisture in late September. Blain says he is optimistic about another good crop in 2008.

Though yields will decrease, established dryland sainfoin should last about as long as alfalfa, Cash says. The forage is suitable for areas that have low rainfall averages (12 in. per year and up) and climates similar to Montana's.

"It's susceptible to root rot and doesn't last

**Wally Blain planted 150 acres of sainfoin on his Montana farm. "It did way better than alfalfa would have," he says.**



as long under irrigation," Cash says. "And it's more sensitive to acid soils than alfalfa. The two big advantages are that it's immune to alfalfa weevil and 100 percent bloat safe," Cash says. Sainfoin works well for Montana pasture management - taking one cutting of hay and then using regrowth for pasturing the herd.

Finding seed may be the biggest problem, Blain says. He made many calls before finding available seed 150 miles away.

Blain adds there is one more benefit to growing sainfoin.

"It's the prettiest stuff you've ever seen,"

he says. The rose-pink flower makes a field look like a vast flower patch. To tease his wife, Blain gave her a bouquet of blooming sainfoin with its red flowers. He ended up bringing bouquets home for three weeks.

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