

Permanent Maze Is Part Of Farm's Fun

A photo of a permanent maze captured our attention at FARM SHOW recently. Corn mazes have become common rural entertainment in recent years but it's rare to find permanent mazes like the ones popular in Europe.

"It was my idea to add a shrub maze to our corn maze," says Donna Siemers. In 2004, she negotiated with her husband, Byron, for about a third of the 2 1/2-acre maze to plant 3,000 half-foot tall Privet hedge shrubs 1-ft. apart.

"Watering and keeping the weeds down to keep them from choking out the young seedlings was a lot of work, Siemers says.

The work paid off, and by 2009 the hedges had thickened nicely and were about 4 1/2 ft. tall.

"Privet shrubs are fast growing, drought resistant and have beautiful green, shiny leaves," Siemers says. "There's grass between the shrubs so it looks like an English garden."

Her husband trims the hedge in May and again in August with a gas hedge trimmer. He trims the top slightly narrower so the sun can reach the bottoms of the shrubs.

Siemers Farms sells a variety of fruits and vegetables, and has a U-pick operation. Thousands of people come to the farm during the Apple Festival held over six weekends in September and October, which features train and wagon rides, a gift shop, music and 50 food and craft vendors.

Byron cuts his corn maze just prior to the event, which is a hectic time. The cut cornstalks are bundled and sold during the festival.

The hedge maze is located between two corn mazes. Putting rails and ropes across different paths changes the maze pattern. The four-story "castle" in the middle offers a spectacular view of the Siemers farm with a mountain backdrop that includes Mount Spokane.

The Siemers have operated a maze since 1994 and have continually added games and



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attractions. Life-size stuffed jungle animals in cages give the corn maze its name "Safari Zoo."

Because it greens up early, Siemers would like to use the hedge maze for a springtime event — perhaps an Easter egg hunt with a tea party in the castle.

She's trying to convince her crop-farmer husband to plant another hedge maze next to

some pine trees. This time, to save labor, Siemers would like to work up the area, install irrigation, measure out the design, lay landscape cloth, slit holes for the seedlings and seed the lawn later.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Siemers Farms, 11125 E. Day Mt., Spokane Rd., Mead, Wash. 99021 (ph 509 238-6242; www.siemersfarm.com).

Fish Farms Specialize In Japanese Koi

The Kloubec family of Amana, Iowa, has been in the business of raising game fish for decades, but they had a lot to learn when they started raising koi 15 years ago.

Because koi fish are sold individually in pet stores and garden centers, there's more profit in koi than game fish. But there's also a lot more labor.

"There are only half a dozen serious koi farmers. It's not an easy industry to get into," Ellen Kloubec says. "You're up against fish from all over the world, and it's not easy to gain recognition. It's very labor intensive. You have to evaluate each individual fish."

The Kloubecks had a couple of things going for them when they started raising koi - the right environment and a passion for fish.

Their farm is at about the same latitude as Niigata, Japan, where koi were developed. Raising koi in a cold climate is best because koi raised there adapt to warm climates, but koi raised in warm climates don't adapt to colder ones.

The passion for koi started with son Nick.

"We were on a game fish delivery, and someone gave Nick a couple of koi. Eventually they spawned naturally. It was fun for a farm kid," Ellen says. "His passion was contagious. As he started to sell some fish, we were convinced that we should start raising more koi. I went to Japan to buy breeder fish."

The Kloubecks purchased quality fish with bloodlines that trace back 100 years. They hired a Japanese consultant to set up an optimum breeding program - just as livestock owners do. That has paid off as the Kloubecks have had many prize-winning koi at competitions. There are 13 varieties, but with sub varieties there are more than 100 kinds of koi.

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," Ellen says. "Everybody likes something different. In the U.S. diamond-scaled, sparkly fish are popular. But Kohaku are the most recognized. It's a white fish with red markings."

Besides beauty, the Kloubecks emphasize health. They're the largest koi farm in the U.S. with more than 55 ponds on 80 acres.

Temperature is a key factor. With aeration and filtration, koi easily survive under ice in

Iowa's cold winters. But water temperature is carefully monitored every spring and fall.

"You can't feed them when water gets below 55 degrees," Ellen says. "Their digestive system goes dormant."

The Kloubecks have a specially formulated feed that sometimes includes an immune stimulant to keep the koi healthy.

The real work revolves around spawning. "We have to spawn each individual fish and they are all hatched indoors," Ellen says.

Fish are quarantined for three weeks when they are brought in from the ponds before they are shipped off to some 600 wholesalers. Because they don't import anymore and are isolated from other koi farms, the Kloubec Farm is able to keep parasites and viruses in check.

The public is invited to see the operation or buy koi from 8:30 a.m. to noon on Saturdays, from May through September.

Koi prices range from \$20 to \$20,000 depending on quality and markings, Ellen says. They live up to 30 years and some varieties grow 36 in. long or more.

"The thing with koi is that they're very friendly. They become pets and have person-



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alities," Ellen says.

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Day Camps Teach Farm Life

City kids learn all about life on the farm at the Kinkoona Farm Day Camps near Brodhead, Wis. Owner Suellen Thomson-Link and her three children host three-day, sold-out day camps each summer. City kids get to do chores, work with their 90-ewe sheep flock, and help on other farm projects. Parents pay \$150 for the experience.

"We started with three three-day camps, and it has grown to 10, with 8 to 10 kids at each camp," she says. "One boy has been back every year for the past four years. He says it's great because he doesn't have to learn any stupid camp songs."

Instead of singing, campers find themselves weeding crops, harvesting herbs and flowers to make creams and lotions, or foraging for wild food plants. The day starts with campers splitting up to help Thomson-Link's 10, 13 and 15 year-olds with farm chores, feeding the stock and cleaning out pens.

Thomson-Link got the idea for the day camps soon after moving her family to the 48-acre farm. Friends had volunteered to help her move in. "I was watching moms and their kids enjoy stretching fence and helping get the farm in shape," she recalls. "I realized I had a wonderful opportunity to share and teach."

Marketing the day camps has been easy. Thomson-Link and her family take farm products to farmer's markets in Madison, Wis. and Chicago, Ill. and pass out brochures. She also gets word of mouth marketing from families whose children have been there.

Thomson-Link also organizes and promotes a farm tour in her community. What started as an open house on one or two farms has grown to five farms and 350 visitors from around the region.

"People are keen to learn about farm life, and when they hear about the day camps, they ask if their kids can come," she says.



City kids get to do chores, work with a 90-ewe sheep flock, and help with other farm projects at the Kinkoona Farm Day Camp near Brodhead, Wis.

"For some of these kids, it's the first time in their life they have ever used a shovel or even a broom. As a therapist, it interests me that frustration sets in for many after about 15 min. With farm life, they see that they can't hurry nature."

Thomson-Link has her 2010 calendar posted on the farm website and will soon be taking orders. She sets her price based on

average childcare charges of \$5/hour for a 10-hour day. Overnight stays add \$50 per night to the total.

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