

“Agritect” Brings Farm Background To Architecture

Krista Hulshof is a self-described “agritect” who grew up on a dairy and poultry farm. That background has been key to developing an architectural firm that specializes in ag projects.

“I was working on a large winery for an urban architectural firm,” recalls Hulshof. “I could point out things like the space needed for a tractor and equipment to move around the site. My background made it possible for me to be a bridge between the designers and the owner, who was rural and practical.”

Hulshof likes working with farmers and is focusing on agriculture now that she has her own farm.

“I come to a project knowing how farmers think and knowing the efficiencies needed, whether moving equipment around a farmyard or cleaning up after working

outside,” she says. “I try to apply the nitty-gritty of farm life to projects.”

Currently Hulshof is working on a couple conversions of barns into houses. She’s also working with a dairy farm to convert from a tie-stall to a robotic milking operation with the option to expand in the future.

She admits that converting farmers into architectural clients isn’t easy. “The challenge in coming back to agriculture is most farmers don’t think about hiring an architect,” says Hulshof.

She encourages farmers and others to explore working with an architect before building new, remodeling or expanding. Hulshof says an architect can give value by helping with government red tape, like permits and zoning. She says they can also help through better design, getting the client a better value for their dollar.



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“Good planning can help with long-term use, so when construction starts, you haven’t limited future possibilities,” says Hulshof. “You can get free plans from a builder, but it is a flexible, inspiring design where you and visitors can spend a lot of time? It is hard to prove that you’ll get a better product, but it is easy to take an eraser to paper. It’s harder and more expensive to change a wall on a building that’s already built.”

While Hulshof doesn’t do project supervision beyond her home area, she is

available for consultation. Her website offers tips on how to hire an architect, as well as steps in the process of design. Her blog covers things like what a blower door test is and what to look for in a timber frame barn re-use.

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He’s Turning Palm Fronds Into Tasty Livestock Feed

Jim Parks has hijacked 2 waste products on the way to the landfill and turned them into tasty treats for livestock. Palm fronds and lesser quality dates had no market until he ground them up, pelleted them and started selling them under the Palm Silage brand.

“We’ve had an amazing response to the pellets and what we call Sweet Date Feed,” says Parks. “Right now we are focusing on the small farmer with a few head up to medium size operations with 30 to 50 cows. Hogs especially love the pellets, but it has been fed to cows, horses, goats, sheep, emus, ostriches and donkeys.”

From a nutritional standpoint, palm fronds are similar to medium grade hay. However, it’s extremely fibrous and hard to work with. After seeing goats eat palm fronds in Tunisia, Parks spent years working on ways to feed them to U.S.

livestock. He figured out how to grind them up, but palatability was still a problem.

“The dates are the secret ingredient,” says Parks. “They’re rocket fuel for livestock. They serve as a binder and sweetener. We also add canola meal and a bit of wheat nibs and rice bran to fatten the animal.”

Parks explains that while the dates would be acceptable in most countries, the American consumer rejects anything with the slightest blemish. Until he developed a process to use them in the palm pellets, they were considered a waste product.

Parks packages pellets in 50-lb. bags and distributes them from California to Wyoming. Sales have been so strong that he is ramping up production with a new pelleting mill.

He also sells a mixture of ground palm fronds and date crumbles as a forage replacer. The Sweet Palm Hay is packed in 450-lb.



Jim Parks grinds up palm fronds and forms them into pellets, packaging them in 50-lb. bags.

totes or super sacks. “One customer takes them out on the range and drops them like he would a big round bale,” says Parks.

The pellets retail for \$12.99, less if by the pallet. The totes sell for \$50.

“They both offer very affordable nutrition,” says Parks. “As a feed, they’re worth far more than we charge. However, we get the basic ingredients for a very reasonable price and as

a farmer myself, I want to pass the deal on to other farmers. They are very sustainable. No extra water is used to grow them. What used to go to landfills is now going to animals, and the results are amazing.”

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Sausage Lady Concocts Creative Flavors

Sandy Sorensen has an unusual method of developing new products. She comes up with the name first – then figures out how to make it. All are flavored brats, made from the heritage breed pigs she and her husband, Tom, raise on their Illinois farm. Technically, it’s sausage sold in bulk (\$7/lb.) or in pork casings (\$7.50/lb.), but Sorensen calls them brats because of their size – just four cased sausages to a pound. Whatever they are they must be good, because at the Carbondale Farmer’s Market, she is well known as the “sausage lady,” and she typically sells out within 2 1/2 hrs.

The special education teacher admits she never guessed she would raise hogs and develop a successful direct sales market of cuts, halves and wholes along with her custom sausages.

She says it was her love for animals that got her to buy her first 2 hogs 6 years ago. The Sorensens prefer old breeds such as Gloucestershire Old Spots and Large Black hogs that have more fat and flavor and do well on pasture.

“They don’t go into buildings unless they want to,” she explains. They eat bugs, grub roots, garden produce, acorns and nuts. She

supplements with barley, wheat and oats and a little corn and soybeans, and alfalfa mix hay in the winter.

Between April and November, she processes six hogs per month. About half the meat is sold as cuts, ham and nitrate-free bacon made by the processor. The other half goes into her sausage concoctions such as Ragin’ Cajun with garlic, paprika and red pepper; Evil Sister with fresh jalapeno; and 5 O’clock Somewhere with pineapple, mandarin oranges, cilantro and a shot of tequila. A customer favorite is Mozzamato, a sweet Italian sausage with sun-dried tomatoes and mozzarella cheese.

Sorensen rents the commercial kitchen at a local American Legion to make her sausage in 5-lb. batches one evening a week between April and November. Among Sorensen’s 27 flavors are some traditional favorites – a Polish sausage that she found on the Internet, as well as varieties that reflect her mother’s Kentucky heritage and her father’s Lithuanian ancestry. She typically has about half a dozen varieties available at a time.

Sorensen also sells neck bones, traditionally cooked by Lithuanians with sauerkraut. She processes leaf lard, made from the soft fat



Sandy Sorensen sells uniquely flavored brats made from the heritage breed pigs that she and her husband raise on their Illinois farm.

around the kidneys and loin, which is popular at the farmers market.

“I even sell pig tails (at the market). I try not to waste anything,” Sorensen notes.

Because of her fulltime job teaching, Sorensen says she prefers to stay small enough to keep quality control. But in the future she may look into the regulations required to sell smoked products including artisanal bacon.

Sorensen says developing a niche market

(sausages) helps compete with the growing number of pork producers selling fresh meat cuts directly to consumers. Customers also appreciate that her animals have a non-GMO, natural diet.

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