

## Sweet Corn Growers Built A Loyal National Customer Base

Larry Larson and his wife Mary raise sweet corn so good that it ends up in nearly every state but Hawaii. What started out as a way to save their family farm has become a thriving business.

"We started raising sweet corn in the early 1980's," recalls Larson. "We were a young couple with a lot of debt and needed a way to stay on the farm. The first year we planted an acre, and it grew from there."

In the 1990's their 2 children joined the business, running a vegetable stand at a local shopping mall parking lot 6 days a week. Corn and vegetables were also marketed at nearby farmers markets. Once the kids left home, Larson and his wife cut back to just the farmers markets. They also reduced their sweet corn acres from a high of 30 to 6 acres today.

Along the way they built a fan base of customers all over the country who are hooked on Larson's Premium Sweet Corn.

"This year we've had people from California, Arizona, Florida and other distant states stop in to pick up sweet corn," says Larson. "They'll take it home with them or ask us to ship it for them."

The Larsons have shipped corn as far as

remote native villages in Alaska. One of their most famous and longest-term customers is the wife of Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary fame. Born and raised in the Willmar area, she returns home several times each summer. "When she leaves, she packs up a suitcase full of our sweet corn for Peter and his buddies," says Larson.

When FARM SHOW visited the Larson stand in late July, a dozen ears traveled home. Even 4 days later, the corn was delicious. Larson says the corn he plants with SR2 genetics has up to 35 percent sucrose, which is why it lasts and ships so well. The U.S. Post Office is another reason the corn can be shipped successfully.

"You can put 14 ears in one of their Priority Mail boxes and ship it across the country for \$7," says Larson. "It will arrive the next day or the day after and be fine for eating. We pick fresh the day we sell it, but with the high sugar and low starch conversion, it is good for 4 to 5 days if kept in the husk and refrigerated."

Sweeter corn is one thing that has changed in the business, as new hybrids are constantly introduced. The price he charges has changed as well, from the \$1.60 per dozen when he



**The Larsons sell corn to a customer at their stand at the Willmar, Minn. farmers market. Customers all over the U.S. are hooked on Larson's Premium Sweet Corn.**

started to \$7 per dozen today.

This year the Larsons started planting April 7th. Three weeks later they planted again. In May it was every 10 days and then once a week in June with the last planting July 3rd.

"Our earliest corn was ready for market around July 20<sup>th</sup>, and our last corn will be ready around the third week in September," says Larson.

While it makes for a long summer, Larson

says the payback is more than monetary. "It's like old home week at the first market," he says. "Customers get to know you almost as family. You develop friends among other market gardeners, and it becomes a way of life."

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## Ice Cream Bars Boost Income At Dairy Farm

Tetzner's Dairy has been a fixture in picturesque Northern Wisconsin near Washburn since 1891. Although milk and ice cream have been a staple of the dairy's business, hand-made ice cream bars now supply a nice boost to their bottom line.

"We have vanilla, chocolate, chocolate mint and cherry ice cream sandwiches available all the time because the demand is so high," says Pete Tetzner, who along with his dad Greg, brother Matt, uncle Kevin, and aunt Jackie operate the business. Tetzner's 100-cow, 600-acre dairy overlooks Lake Superior, not far from Bayfield and the

popular Apostle Islands.

Every week in the summer Tetzner's Dairy produces 200 gallons of ice cream and several hundred ice cream bars. Pete Tetzner says it's a labor-intensive job. The sandwiches require the most work because cookies are placed in molds, then filled with ice cream using a hose. Molds are placed in a minus 30 degree freezer for at least 24 hrs. before they're removed by employees using an oven mitt because they're so cold. The sandwiches are removed from the molds and packaged individually, again by hand.

Like many family operations the Tetzner's

don't spend a lot of money advertising their products. "We have many regular customers, and new ones hear about us by word-of-mouth and just stop in," Pete Tetzner says. "They're amazed that we have a nice store with products sold entirely on the honor system. We also sell locally to many stores and restaurants. People have come to recognize our name as quality products made right by a family operation."

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**Handmade ice cream bars supply a nice boost to the bottom line at Tetzner's Dairy Farm in Wisconsin.**

## Cover Crop Users Now Grow To Sell

David Brandt started using cover crops to boost production of corn, soybeans, and wheat. Now he uses a third of his fields to produce cover crop seed to sell to others. He and his son Jay started Walnut Creek Seeds to meet the demand for cover crop seeds created in part by the family's success using cover crops themselves.

"I started no-tilling corn and soybeans in 1971, but within 4 or 5 years I started seeing compaction problems and reduced yields," recalls David. "University extension advised mechanical tillage to correct it, but a friend suggested a cover crop of clover and vetch."

The cover crops worked so well that Brandt's story has become part of cover crop history, and he has become a sought after speaker and advisor to others considering cover crops.

"We found that the cover crops not only took care of compaction, but they also reduced erosion, which we had with fields going from soybeans to corn," says Jay.

As a test farm for Chevron in the 1980's, David experimented with rye for fields going into soybeans and legumes for fields going into corn. The impact was clear, with greener, darker crops and better yields.

"People would come to field days, see the difference, and ask us to sell them some

seed," says David. "I didn't want to be a seed salesman, but I started selling anyway."

Starting in 2010, the seed mix the Brandts planted for their own cover crops and what they offered customers began to expand. When Jay and his wife Ann started farming with David and his wife Kendra, they bought a split planter, allowing them to plant peas and radishes in split rows.

"Dad knew farmers out west who were planting more diverse species after harvest," says Jay. "As we saw the benefits, we started expanding what we planted and what we sold."

Today, Walnut Creek Seeds offers more than 50 varieties for use as cover crops including buckwheat, oats, rye, barley and triticale that they grow themselves. Plans are to add legumes including peas and clovers.

The business has changed too. Initial demand for oats and rye led to the use of an old antique Clipper grain cleaner. That has since been replaced, and production practices have changed as well.

"Weed control is a priority, and timing for fertility is a little different for seed than when growing for grain," says Jay. "We made a big investment in our seed cleaning business and are state inspected. That allows us to be accepted as members of the Ohio Seed Improvement Association."



**Walnut Creek Seeds sells more than 50 crop varieties that they grow themselves.**

The Brandts now sell single seeds, mixes and custom mix seeds for customers. Mixes are specially-designed for gardens, grazing and production agriculture. Although their primary market is Ohio, the Brandts sell in more than 20 states.

Check out Dave Brandt and his use of cover

crops at FARMSHOW.com

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