



Each year the Brown County Fair in Aberdeen, S. Dak., holds a "Super Farmer" competition which includes tasks such as throwing hay bales.

Farmers Compete At County Fair

Toss a bale far enough and pound a post fast enough, and you could be declared a Super Farmer. The annual competition at the Brown County Fair, Aberdeen, S. Dak., includes tasks like stacking bales and pushing a wheelbarrow through an obstacle course.

"We've been running the competition for more than 10 years," says Derek Ricci, fair manager. "Each year we change it a little. One year it is stacking hay bales, and the next might be roping horns on a bale."

The contest has male and female categories in both adult and teenage divisions. Most years the number of competitors ranges from 10 to 20.

"The concept is to educate the non-agricultural community to the work farmers do," he says. "We usually get some non-farmers each year. Invariably we hear how much harder the tasks are than they expected."

Ricci notes that there is a definite rhythm to throwing a bale. "Inexperienced contestants wonder why theirs don't go as far," he says.

While the Super Farmer title and trophy may be enough, contestants also receive prizes. Ricci explains that, like the contest itself, prizes change from year to year, depending on the sponsors.



Other competitive tasks include hay bale stacking and a wheelbarrow obstacle course.



"Some years we award cash; sometimes we give out gift certificates," says Ricci. "It is a fun contest to run. We always hold it on Sunday, the last day of the fair."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Brown County Fairgrounds, 400 24th Ave. NW, Aberdeen, S. Dak. 57401 (ph 605 626-7116; Derek.Ricci@browncounty.sd.gov).



Measuring 10 ft. long and weighing 1 ton, these giant metal pinecones are a real eye catcher along Floyd Elzinga's driveway.

Eye-Catching Giant Pinecones

When Floyd Elzinga's giant metal pinecones went viral on the internet, people speculated that they were made out of shovels. He actually makes the 1-ton, 10-ft. long pinecones out of laser cut steel, bending pieces on a press before welding them together in a spiral pattern.

"There's something about the shape and idea of the pinecone that has resonated with people. It's a very systematic pattern the way the scales are put on," Elzinga notes.

His first large pinecones were commissioned by a Canadian who moved to the West Coast.

The pinecones line his driveway looking like they fell from a giant tree.

Elzinga does other sculpture work but says the pinecones seem to be popular with everyone. He lists pieces for sale on his website and sells them through screened galleries.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Floyd Elzinga, 3841 Mountain St., Beamsville, Ontario Canada L0R 1B2 (ph 905 563-5926; www.floydelzinga.com; Floyd.elzinga@sympatico.ca).

Hops Farm Also Hosts Weddings

The name Hoppily Ever After Farm perfectly captures the unusual business combo that Scott and Shannon Schwabe offer - a wedding venue that grows hops. Just beginning their third season, the Michigan entrepreneurs admit they have lots to learn about the labor-intensive work of growing hops, but their location near the 45th parallel makes Michigan a great place for growing the perennials used in making beer.

"The Michigan brewing industry is really growing, and they are getting their hops from out-of-state," Shannon Schwabe says. Since Michigan once had many successful hops farms, she and her husband hope to be part of bringing that back.

There is a need and opportunity to provide fresh hops and other products and services. With help from Michigan extension, the couple started small and currently have 3 acres of hops on their 45-acre property.

They purchased a 35 hp. tractor, cultivated the soil to build up the hills to plant, and dug an irrigation pond.

"Hops are grown from rhizomes or cuttings," Schwabe explains. "We purchased established plants from other Michigan farmers who do the propagation."

With more than 100 varieties to choose from, Scott, who is a home brewer, researched the market and selected 2 bittering and 2 aroma hops varieties.

Hops grow on a 20-ft. tall trellis system. After cutting the initial growth back in the spring, hops plants are trained to grow up the strings. Throughout the summer, side shoots are pruned and the area is weeded. Near the end of August through mid-September when the hops are at about 23 percent dry matter, the Schwabes rent time from another farm that owns a Wolf Hop Harvester.

Strings holding the climbing stems are cut, and they're fed into the harvester that separates the hops from the stems. The Schwabes take their hops to a local farm for drying and processing.

"If not dried and stored properly they will mold and go bad," Schwabe says.

Some of the hops are sold fresh to small batch brewers, but most are baled and pelletized at a processing facility 65 miles away. The Schwabes can have the processor sell the hops or they can pay for the processing and sell them on their own.



As the Schwabes learn the hops business, weddings help pay the bills.

So far, harvests have been small - 50 lbs. the first year and 500 lbs. in 2018 - but they will get larger each year.

"It takes plants 3 to 5 years to mature," she says. "And the initial investment is big. You're looking at \$15,000 per acre to get started, not including processing."

Growing hops is very labor intensive with weed control as the biggest challenge since they avoid using herbicides. Along with their day jobs, the Schwabes care for the hops through the summer. Family and friends help in the spring and at harvest, and a manager takes care of the wedding venue side of the business.

"I've been in the wedding industry as a photographer for 10 years, and hops are a great backdrop. They're an amazing plant," Schwabe says, adding that they also sell hop stems to local florists.

They held a home brewers festival last year and expected about 50 people. More than 200 people came, and the Schwabes plan to have another festival this year.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Scott and Shannon Schwabe, Hoppily Ever After Farms, Cottrellville Township, Mich. (www.hoppilyeverafterfarms.com; shannon@clickingthroughlife.com).

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