# Black Hereford Cattle Now An Established Breed

By Chad Smith, Contributing Editor

Starting a new breed of cattle is no easy chore. In fact, Joe Hoagland of J&N Ranch in Leavenworth, Kan., doesn't recommend it.

However, that's precisely what he and his family did when coming up with their Black Hereford cattle. After incorporating the Black Hereford Association in Kansas as a non-profit, he began breeding them several decades ago.

"We were already raising Angus and Hereford cattle, so we already had what we needed to get started," says Joe Hoagland. "We continued with those two breeds before switching entirely to Black Herefords in 2000."

Their first Black Hereford production sale was in 2003, the same year that Black Herefords received the international breed designation from the National Association of Animal Breeds.

"That was a major step that allowed us to label semen as 'Black Hereford semen' rather than a cross-breed," he says. "We did all the work on breed development through artificial insemination."

While he wasn't involved in the first cross-breeding attempts, he did buy cattle from the two men who were.

"You have to produce an original cross between the breeds, and then you breed it back to a full-blood Hereford to get a 3/4-blood animal," he says. "You then use the 3/4-blood to get a 5/8-blood animal with black on both sides of the pedigree."

He says that's a simple explanation for a process that takes years, but once he got to the last step, it was time to start registering as Black Hereford cattle.

There were several advantages to establishing Black Hereford cattle. The first is a price premium based on hair color. But that was only the start.

"We also picked up quite a bit of calving ease from the Angus cattle," Hoagland says. "There's also an advantage with shorter gestation periods, better carcass quality with more marbling, and bigger ribeye size from the Angus."

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They also kept the docility, feed efficiency, and adaptability from the Hereford side. The advantages seem to have combined well, as the number of breeders is now in the hundreds.

"Black Hereford breeders are now in 35 states around the country," Hoagland says. "There are also breeders in different countries, including Canada."

They've sold Black Herefords to farmers in New Zealand, Europe, and multiple other international locations.

"Black Herefords are set to join the IGS, the International Genetics Solutions multi-breed analysis," he says. "Many other breeds are involved in that and do their EPDs together, and we're going to join them."

J&N Ranch is a seedstock producer for other farmers and recently held their fall production sale. They sold 14 bulls for an average price of $4,325 and 58 females for approximately $3,500.

"We were thrilled," he says. "That was a pretty substantial sale. Also, we sell about 100 bulls in the spring, and last year they averaged around $5,500."

They ship their bulls in the spring around the country, so the Hoaglands spend approximately 4 to 6 weeks traveling and talking to customers.

"People can buy our bulls over the internet," Hoagland says with a laugh. "We've sort of become the Amazon of the bull business."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Joe Hoagland, J&N Ranch, 25332 Wolcott Road,

# Saved Seed Grew Into Family Business

Nathaniel Bradford grew up eating watermelon, okra and collards from seed passed down from previous generations. What was family heritage is now a family business, as he grows them for sale to fine restaurants and other markets within a 50-mile radius of his home. The former professional landscaper is now a farmer like his great, great, great-grandfather Nathaniel Bradford, who developed the family watermelon before 1850.

"The Bradford watermelon was first documented in 1851 as one of the best of its time," says Bradford. "At some point, my namesake shared the seed with others, and it ended up in the northeastern U.S. Our family has no idea how widespread or popular it became."

"We thought my great-grandfather had bred our watermelon," says Bradford. "He was a plant breeder in our area and had worked with and improved our watermelon, okra and collards."

Bradford eventually learned about Dr. David Shields. The University of South Carolina professor had researched and written about once-famous regional fruits and vegetables. One of those was the Bradford watermelon.

"I sent him an email asking if ours could be the one he had written about," says Bradford. "He replied immediately that it was. He and Glen Roberts of Anson Mills (Vol. 46, No. 1) reached out to me and encouraged me to make the seed available."

Over the next 2 years, Bradford transitioned from landscaping and part-time farming to full-time farming. He soon added the family's okra and collards, promoting them to regional chefs with much success.

While he still maintains a Bradford watermelon website, the business continues to change. He's concentrating on fresh sales versus processed products.

He has also added other old varieties such as Candy Roaster squash, Dutch Fork pumpkins and more. As the family heritage seed story has spread, other seed savers have contacted him, and he's spreading their stories and seed.

"I've met an entire community of seed savers and learned amazing stories of seed saved in freezers, sometimes only a few tablespoons of it, with a hundred years or more of history," says Bradford.

Last year he introduced Taylor Turnip Tops to South Carolina chefs. The plant produces tops, but not the traditional large turnip root. He received the first seeds from a man named Bill Taylor, whose family had long saved and planted the seed.

**"The Bradford watermelon was first documented in 1851 as one of the best of its time," says Bradford.**

"He came to get some watermelon seed and told me about his turnip tops, so we swapped seed," says Bradford. "When we shared it with our chefs, they went bonkers."

Later Taylor contacted him with the news that his own seed had gone bad. Meanwhile, some of Bradford's crop had bolted.

"I harvested 70 lbs. of seed," says Bradford. "I was able to give him a 5-lb. bag of his seed. Had he not shared with me originally, the variety may well have disappeared."

Seed for the Bradford Family watermelon and Bradford Family okra is now distributed by Sow True Seed.

Bradford plans to continue trying old crop varieties like Carolina African Runner peanuts, saving seed and, like his ancestors, improving them. Unlike modern peanuts, those selected by Bradford require no pesticides.

However, there's one seed he's not sharing. "We aren't letting our collard seed out right now," says Bradford. "They're our bread-and-butter crop, and I want to pass them on to family members. Perhaps they will let them out."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Bradford Watermelon Company, 5275 Dubose Siding Rd., Sumter, S.C. 29153 (customerservice@bradfordwatermelons.com; www.bradfordwatermelons.com); or Sow True Seed, 243 Haywood St., Asheville, N. C. 28801 (ph 828-254-0708; info@sowtrue.com; www.sowtrueseed.com).

**Christine Leonard makes specialty food platters using her ag background.**

Photo Courtesy of Aspyn Photography

# She Found A New Way To Sell Cheese

Christine Leonard turned her knack for creating beautiful cheese platters into a business called The Grater Good that sells cheese plates and offers classes.

The Young America, Minn., entrepreneur emphasizes locally-made artisan cheeses and perfect pairings.

"We eat with our eyes first, but when you dig in, certain foods go together - garlic cheddar with dill pickles; jam with brie or certain cheddars," she says, explaining she puts them next to each other on her artistic cheese trays.

After working for a cheese maker, the food science and technology graduate moved back to her family's farm, knowing she needed a niche market to make a living.

"My goal for this cheese business is that I can work with cows the rest of my life," she says. She and her parents milk 50 cows. By 2030 Leonard plans to trim the herd to 15 cows and make cheese.

In her first phase, she and family members converted a former radio announcer booth from the Minnesota State Fair into a 150-sq. ft. "cheese shack" that meets state requirements for selling food. She drove to creameries, meat markets, and other local producers to find the best local products to sell. Leonard keeps about 15 hard cheeses on hand and works with a couple of distributors for other items.

In 2020, she started with wooden boards that her brother made for her, but as the business grew, she switched to compostable trays made of recycled palm leaves.

"The popularity of sizes has changed since 2020 from heart-shaped trays for two people to the 5-person size last year. This year it's more like 10 or 15-person trays," she says. "People also like the individual servings, the charcuterie cups with skewers, or the mini-snack boxes."

Located about 45 minutes from Minneapolis, she has a few drop-off sites for customers, especially around the holidays.

"I also offer cheese classes and talk about how they pair with wine and beer. I work with local wineries and breweries and have done private in-home classes, book clubs, bachelorette parties, and I went to an office in Minneapolis," Leonard says.

For customers farther away, she offers virtual classes to explain the pairings and food on trays that she ships out earlier.

"Cheese is the perfect vessel to connect farmers with consumers. With my knowledge of agriculture, I can tell the farmers' stories," she says.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Christine Leonard, The Grater Good, 13315 106th St., Young America, Minn. 55397 (ph 952-334-3225; thegratergoodmn@gmail.com; www.thegratergoodmn.com).