

Poultry To Produce Barn Conversion

Bill Ferguson is turning barns that once raised chickens into indoor hydroponic grow houses. When he lost his contracts to produce chickens for Tyson Foods, he took a completely different path.

"It's been a remarkable journey, taking 2 1/2 years to get where we are," says Ferguson. "It'll probably take another 3 to 4 years to get where we want it to go."

Ferguson started with three 40 by 500-ft. chicken barns. The conversion involved clearing out existing equipment, trenching in plumbing for the hydroponic system, insulating the walls and ceiling, pouring concrete, and installing the hydroponic tanks, pumps and filters. Overall, it cost about \$200,000. He believes this investment is already paying off.

"I made good money with the barns for 20 years," he says. "With the hydroponics, I'll make more money with one grow house than I did with three barns."

Currently, his Riley Creek Farms produces 24,000 heads of lettuce every 30 days, using only half of one grow house. By late August, he'll have nearly doubled production and will supply lettuce weekly

to three school systems. Eventually, he plans to grow not only lettuce as his main crop but also cucumbers, tomatoes and strawberries. He's adding Dutch buckets for vegetable production and towers for strawberries in a second house.

"Right now, we're focusing on getting healthy, fresh food into our schools," says Ferguson. "Next, we'll focus on other local markets, including hospitals, nursing homes, restaurants and grocery stores."

He notes that local schools have reported throwing out 40% of the lettuce they buy, which often spoils due to the distance it must be transported. He chafes at the waste of food and money.

"Our furthest school is 30 miles away," says Ferguson. "They won't get bad lettuce."

He wants to serve as a resource for others interested in pursuing a similar endeavor and also as a classroom for students.

"I want to pass on the knowledge we've gained," says Ferguson. "There are buildings all over the U.S. like mine, and nothing is wrong with them," says Ferguson. "I want to help farmers figure out how to convert them to a new use."

It's knowledge he's still gaining.

"We're still in the learning process," he says. "We've had issues. Lights are very important to us, and energy bills are very high. I think solar panels will be the answer. I don't think it'll pay with traditional energy."

Ferguson is quick to credit his supporters, starting with his local bank. He also received a "Convert to Crops" grant from the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a nonprofit health organization. That grant funded hydroponic equipment and a refrigerated trailer for local deliveries. Alabama's Farm-to-School program subsidizes schools' purchasing of locally grown foods. HudsonAlpha Wiregrass's "Navigate" program provided grants and technical guidance.

Ferguson was recently diagnosed with cancer and is undergoing treatment. Meanwhile, he's moving full speed toward his goals, learning and sharing as he goes.

"There are only three of us in the state doing anything similar," says Ferguson. "We're all using different systems, but we talk to each other and feed off each other's ideas. We're learning every day and making



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changes as we go, sometimes daily. I want my neighbor to know what I'm doing, and that if it'll help him, he can use it."

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Farm Offers Year-Round Excursions With Goats

Into the Woods Farm of Middle Grove, N.Y., offers an abundance of ways for visitors to connect with nature.

"Being an outdoor educator, it's always been my goal to encourage people to get outside," says founder and farm owner Phaedra Zoe Stasyshyn. "I found both goat walks and goat yoga brought more people into the outdoors while also allowing them to experience animals in a natural environment."

Stasyshyn brought five goats home in 2016 and subsequently decided to open her 15-acre wooded property to visitors.

"We're a remote location, so we really gained attention during the pandemic years," Stasyshyn says. "We stayed operational by offering only private events to allow folks to be outdoors in safety."

Today, the farm provides outdoor experiences for all seasons, including snowshoeing from November to March, and "Wild Walks" with goats for the rest of the year. These walks are private for the group that books, ensuring they cater to the group's abilities. Goat yoga runs from May through October, weather permitting, for both onsite and offsite experiences.

"Experiences run from 9 a.m. through dark seven days a week," Stasyshyn says.

"Sometimes we run three to four experiences a day."

The goats turn visitors into repeat guests. "All fifteen of our Nigerian Dwarf goats have names and distinct personalities," she says. "They were raised with constant human contact since birth, ensuring they're gentle and friendly."

Stasyshyn frequently takes the herd on visits to local events, including festivals and the county fair.

While all seasons are popular with visitors, snowshoeing comes near the top, due to the farm's unique elevation at 1,550 ft. above sea level.

"It gives us a much snowier winter than even one mile down the road," she says. "In the eight years since we started offering events, we've guided thousands of people. Yoga was the most popular for a while, but the option to wander the woods with goats soon caught up."

Stasyshyn manages all construction and maintenance for the property with her kids.

"The truth is, our activities came about as a means of survival for the farm. All of the proceeds for our activities pay for the feed and care of the animals and property, allowing us to continue to offer our unique experiences."

Still, separating work from home life is challenging.

"I keep myself and the property available for last-minute reservations 365 days a year. I've learned to take vacations when we have dependable farm sitters available," she says. "It's also a challenge to keep the property accessible at all times, especially with the changing seasons."

For those interested in maximizing the tourism potential of their properties, Stasyshyn highlights the importance of clearly defined goals.

"It has to be a passion, not just a hobby. Farming and running your own business is certainly a labor of love. You have to love the lifestyle and hard work while also being creative."

She believes her success comes down to being scrappy and willing to work hard.

"I often tell folks that I do this so I can enjoy my home and property. If I had to hire people for all the things I manage, like driveway maintenance, property care, home improvements, farm care, office work, childcare, etc., we'd never make it. If you're handy and love staying home with a sporadic schedule, maybe this model is for you. But know that inviting people onto your property



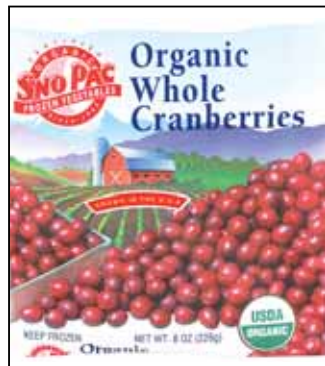
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is a challenge that needs to be considered in great detail before committing."

All farm visits and events are by appointment only.

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Their Frozen Vegetables Are Still Organic



"I expect the organic industry to continue to grow," says Gengler.

Sno Pac Foods of Caledonia, Minn., has been growing, processing and selling certified organic vegetables for over 80 years.

"The organic industry has grown immensely since we started in 1943," says company representative Peter Gengler. "We started out selling locally, then grew along with the industry."

Company founder J.P. Gengler was ahead of his time. Around 1900, he began growing produce with organic practices, operating under the belief that food and farming shouldn't require excess chemicals or pesticides. He cared about the health of his customers and the land he farmed. Beyond the farm, Gengler started a lumber business and harvested ice from a nearby pond, storing it in icehouses for shipping across the country by railway in the summer.

Gengler's relative, Leonard Gengler, saw potential in the newly invented mechanical refrigeration for furthering their market reach. He built a locker plant where locals could rent freezer space. He purchased a farm and began raising berries and vegetables to process and freeze at the plant. Demand grew, and soon Sno Pac supported consumers across Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa.

Today, the original vision continues as the fourth generation of Genglers upholds their commitment to the company's founding ideals. They remain as committed to organic practices and the natural world as they always have.

"The frozen vegetable business depends entirely on the weather, all the way from planting, cultivating, growing and harvesting," Gengler says.

The produce attracted attention even before healthy eating became popular, as customers bought it because they enjoyed the flavor. Many customers come from families that have eaten Sno Pac vegetables for three or four generations, and even drive straight to the processing plant to pick up their yearly supply.

"We have product across the USA and some exports as well," Gengler says. I expect the organic industry to continue to grow. Our product is available at stores across the country."

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