

VALUE ADDING MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

Tom McConnell, Director,
West Virginia Small Farm Center of the
WVU Extension Service



The concept of adding value to farm products is talked about continuously in the farm media, but this concept is so crucial to small farm survivability. Wool serves as a good example of the benefits of value adding. Historically West Virginia was covered with sheep and wool mills, as there was a strong local demand. Back then, the wool's value was higher as there were few competing fabrics, transportation was restrictive and processing was local. There was a strong local demand for wool. I read a newspaper article written by a Preston County high school agriculture student in 1938 describing his sheep operation; his income ledger included 5.9 pounds of wool at \$1 per pound. Things are different now.

Several years ago, a group from Helvetia in Randolph County asked me how to increase the price of their wool. West Virginia wool is noted for its quality, but the fiber diameter (34 microns) keeps it out of high-fashion garments and pricing it at the bottom of the wool price list. Its final use, except for a year or two when it was shipped to India and China to be woven into rugs, has been industrial. I suggested they make their wool into blankets.

They sent their wool to Canada (there are a couple U.S. companies that provide the same service) to a family run company that cleaned and washed the wool, spun it into yarn, and wove it into blankets. Their final product includes a combination of lap robes and queen, king and double bed blankets. The colors are beautiful and they have great appeal to their many customers. Since then, other shepherds have chosen the same value adding chain and have

been successful.

This story is about the process. Changing West Virginia grease wool into blankets is not complicated, but involved. It required study. This is no different than learning any new skill.

They first had to determine what it would cost to process this wool and what the final product would be worth. All involved had to learn how to pack and move this product from West Virginia to Canada. Then there was an issue of hiring a broker to represent the wool and shipping issues of a raw agricultural product into another country, as there still are many regulations dictating how and where this wool entered that country. Trucking was an issue, too.

They had to establish a working business structure to protect each farmer entrepreneur in this new venture. Then the group had to decide what colors and sizes would be best. They next had to consider where they would market those blankets. These decisions to the "outsider" looking in appear to be "simple". It resembles the response to every dairy farm family struggling with horrible milk prices as yet another "expert" says,

"Make cheese." Proving the responder has not considered the investment, market and demand, regulations, and labor required to make that change.

This group, began not knowing what they didn't know, but they knew they were not satisfied selling their wool at current prices. They started making inquiries, then building on what they learned they made more. Soon a plan emerged, but it was always ready for changing to fit the need. The overall requirement of the plan was to allow them to add value to their wool by making it a consumer product. None of the decisions required in this process required high level cognition, just perseverance and study. The process really amounted to just finding the way. What they did was certainly more involved than just dragging their wool to a pool, yet it was exponentially more profitable.

As we have wound down our market garden year and begin to rest up and ponder what's next, we should ask the question, are there value adding and season extension opportunities I should consider. Many of us are still reluctant to step into the unknown and find a way to harvest increased and prolonged income. Just like the wool, the path is covered with regulations and rules and, yes, increased investment. Certainly there will be things to learn you never considered and sometimes you will take a turn that will lead nowhere and that is a lesson, too.

Maybe the most important part of the "wait till next year" thought process is trying to decide just what you and your family wants from your small farm operation. The opportunity for profitable value adding is great if you want to take advantage of it. But it is your move.

Hall of Fame, cont. from page 3

Selected nominees will be officially enshrined during the WVAHFH Enshrinee Recognition Dinner that will be held in July 2010.

The WVAHFH is a program of the WVAHFH Foundation, which is an incorporated, independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization. Membership is composed of West Virginia agriculture and forestry organization and individuals.



Taken from West Virginia University Extension Service "Garden Calendar 2009"

~ November ~

- Nov. 2 Remove stakes and trellises
- Nov. 3 Fertilize under deciduous trees and shrubs
- Nov. 4 Mulch carrots for winter use
- Nov. 5 Water trees and shrubs thoroughly if fall has been dry
- Nov. 7 Turn compost
- Nov. 8 Remove diseased plant debris
- Nov. 12 Apply lime and fertilizer according to soil test
- Nov. 13 Winterize garden tools
- Nov. 14 Mulch strawberries
- Nov. 18 Turn compost

- Nov. 19 Mulch perennial beds
- Nov. 25 Fertilize houseplants
- Nov. 27 Cut back garden mums

~ December ~

- Dec. 3 Turn compost
- Dec. 5 Protect shrubs from harsh weather
- Dec. 6 Mulch hybrid roses
- Dec. 12 Watch for seed catalogs
- Dec. 17 Turn compost
- Dec. 21 Winter begins
- Dec. 27 Plant live Christmas tree