

Willingness to Change is part of Fifth-generation Farm Tradition

The 'only constant is change' is a frequent refrain for many farmers.

It is true for the farmers at W.D. Henry & Sons, a Western New York vegetable and floriculture operation founded in 1888 in Erie County.

"If you are not moving forward, you are moving backward. It's impossible to stay in one place. There are new cultural techniques, new marketing x, new regulations, and so on," said Mark Henry, who, along with his son Daniel are fourth- and fifth-generation owner-operators at W.D. Henry & Sons farm in Eden.

The Henry's work 450 acres, including 300-owned acres, where they grow sweet corn, broccoli, cucumbers, peppers, summer squash and other vegetables. They have three acres under greenhouse floriculture production, including annuals, perennials, and potted crops for holiday sales.

W.D. Henry & Sons farm is a member of Eden Valley Growers, a cooperative of 10 farmers located south of Buffalo, which purchases inputs, as well as markets and distributes produce for the farms. The cooperative markets more than 45 vegetables to grocery stores and warehouses around Buffalo, Syracuse, Albany and Pittsburgh, PA.

"Our markets are 100 percent supply-and-demand," Henry said. To fill a niche among regional chain stores, the farm grows early-season crops, including sweet corn that starts its life under plastic tunnels. For 30 years, the farm has employed Integrated Pest Management, a system that aims to reduce use of chemical pesticides on farms."

Many of the growers that make up the Eden Valley cooperative are cousins, descendants of the families that emigrated in the mid-1800s from the Alsace-Lorraine region of France and Germany and established farms east of Lake Erie.

Henry said many siblings and cousins left agriculture to pursue other careers, but for those who stayed in farming, he said, "It's a rewarding experience that you are born and raised with and you

are proud of what you are doing, trying to supply nutritious, healthy food for people to consume in a beneficial manner."

To maintain a sustainable business for the long haul, Henry said, "It's important to stay up to date on trends and new ideas, as well as to seek advice." He said the farm is in regular contact with educators and researchers at Cornell University and Cooperative Extension, product suppliers, and soil health consultants.

W.D. Henry & Sons has purchased crop insurance for decades and although they have had few payouts over the years, Henry said, "We take all the preventive measures we can."

The farm insures their sweet corn using the dollar policy available in most counties in New York State. Fresh market sweet corn is one of the few vegetables for which there is crop insurance.

The farm also participates in the Non-insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program, known as NAP. The program provides financial assistance to growers of crops not covered by federal crop insurance in the event of low yield, crop loss, or prevented planting.

The unpredictability of weather drives the need for crop insurance, Henry said, recalling a NAP payout the farm received for a hailstorm that destroyed the farm's pepper crop in 1998.

"Like all of us in agriculture, we are very subject to Mother Nature and the weather," he said.

The farm is located in a snow-band east of Lake Erie that can see blizzards. In November 2014, Henry recalled, the farm received 94 inches of snow in less than 48 hours. Many of the farms in the area saw greenhouses and the roofs of barns destroyed.

Despite the obstacles in farming, Henry said, agriculture is still an industry of opportunity. Consumer interest in locally grown food, organic food and more is opening new niche



markets. Henry is cautiously optimistic for new farmers starting out.

"It's possible, but it's not easy," he said, of getting started in farming today. "You need good neighbors, good advisors, and good luck – from the weather, Mother Nature. You need good prices for your product from start to finish to be successful.

You have to wear a lot of hats in the produce business– you have to be a grower, a businessman, a marketer. You have to be able to rent or obtain enough land to make it economically feasible. There are a lot of new avenues that are opening up with retail and local markets, food hubs, (and) a lot of interest in organic, which brings a premium price. There are new advantages to be utilized."

For more information about risk management and crop insurance, visit the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets website www.agriculture.ny.gov/AP/CropInsurance.html or the USDA Risk Management Agency website www.rma.usda.gov. To discuss or purchase crop insurance, contact a crop insurance agent. To locate an agent, ask a neighbor for a recommendation, use the agent locator tool at www.rma.usda.gov/tools/agent.html or ask your county Farm Service Agency to print out a current list of crop insurance agents doing business in your county. For more information about NAP, contact FSA at your county Farm Service Agency: www.fsa.usda.



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