

Case Study

Norm Kaiser Asparagus Farm, Central City, Nebraska

Background

Norm Kaiser has an acreage inside the city limits of Central City, Nebraska, and has been supplying asparagus to the Central City, Nebraska, schools through their Farm to School program for the last three years.

The Farm to School program was started by Joyce Rice, the head of the Central City Food School Service. Mrs. Rice knew students needed to eat more nutritious and fresh food, and she decided to be sure that happened.

Joyce started the program by identifying local farmers who could supply food for school lunches. She has also gotten them involved in giving presentations at school. This teaches the children more about how food is grown, where it comes from, and the importance of supporting local growers.

One of the producers Joyce has worked with is Norm Kaiser. Norm is an entrepreneur whose main business is refinishing antique furniture. He raises asparagus as a side business.

Norm and his family lived in downtown Central City. His goal was to move the antique business to a bigger location, but still close to the community where his four children attend school. Norm found an acreage with lots of things going for it. It had a 30 x 40 foot building for his successful antique refinishing business, a large home for his family to live comfortably, and over an acre of land.

The extra land is what lured Norm into farming – he wanted to do something to provide additional income. About 10 years ago he began learning more about niche agricultural markets and attended a training put on by the University of Nebraska focused on small farms and truck gardening.

After completing the training, Norm researched the crop best suited for his land, one with a ready market. He considered growing strawberries on a half an acre until he realized the shelf life of fresh strawberries was very short, and they were quite work intensive.

Asparagus seemed a better fit both for the time he could devote to preparing, growing and harvesting the crop and its much longer shelf life. Asparagus could be refrigerated and stay fresh for several days. It looked to Norm as though there was a niche that needed filling, and it seemed like the best possible crop for his acre of land.

He didn't go into this venture blindly, but took a good amount of time researching and learning prior to purchasing seeds or planting even one asparagus plant. Norm contacted an asparagus producer who lived in the vicinity and who had been successfully raising and pickling asparagus for a number of years. The grower encouraged Norm to pursue his idea and felt he could be quite successful planting the entire acre to asparagus.

Norm wanted to move slowly to be sure he understood the process and could grow the best possible



Norm Kaiser and "helper" standing in front of his acre of asparagus plants

crop. He purchased hybrid asparagus seed at \$.65 per ounce since he felt it was imperative to plant quality seed. Nine years ago he started growing asparagus on one-half acre, and about five years later he added an additional half acre. He has been successfully producing asparagus since 2001.

It takes approximately four years to reach full production capacity, so he is happy he took his time developing this crop. Norm is harvesting 9,000 plants at over 1 ton per year. He sells his crop to the local grocery store; the local Farmer's Market; to individuals who have placed an order or just stop by his farm; and he sells to the school as well.

Involvement in Farm to School

Joyce Rice, the Food Service Director at Central City Schools, has known Norm for years and knew he grew a high-quality vegetable. She had been purchasing local fruits and vegetables from another farm (Helgoth's Melons, Pumpkins and Produce) for over a year and wanted to expand the types of vegetables offered to the students.

Joyce approached Norm about selling some of his crop for school lunches. He was open to it, and is going into his fourth year providing asparagus for the students. Norm didn't have to do any special planning to sell to the school and has been able to meet their need easily, though he says, "I sell every single asparagus I plant – my reputation has gotten around."

When asked what the challenges and benefits were to selling his crop to the school, he cited delivery as the biggest challenge. It takes time even though he's located close to the school. It's much easier to have customers come to him to purchase. However, the benefits outweigh the challenges.

He's been very involved in the entire Farm to School process. Norm delivers his asparagus to school and helps prepare and serve it to the students. He provides educational sessions about how he raises the crop, the nutritional values associated with it, and the work involved in growing asparagus. That allows him to work closely with the students and answer their questions. He says that is the most rewarding part of his involvement.

Joyce says most of the kids had never even SEEN an asparagus, but they cleaned their plates and are now asking their parents to buy the vegetable.

Norm also mentioned seeing students and their parents at the local Farmers Market as another benefit. Students have taken a liking to the vegetable and persuade their parents to purchase from him. It's been rewarding to be a part of changing and improving young children's diets and introducing them to a new vegetable packed with vitamins and nutrients, most of those kept since the asparagus is prepared within 24 hours of picking.

