

# Hack Farm, generations of farmers



Thomas “Ray” and Gail Hack on their 128-acre farm, as much-needed raindrops sprinkled the fields.

Gail Hack gazed toward the 128 acres of lush fields that make up Hack Farm in Union Grove, Wis.

She clutched her two year-old granddaughter Malaya’s hand. “She’s the fifth generation of farmers,” Hack said, and readjusted the toddler’s pigtails.

Thomas “Ray” Hack, Gail’s husband, is a third-generation farmer, running the business his grandfather started. Ray and Gail run the farm full-time. Gail was a secretary until she married Ray 31 years ago, and she has been farming ever since.

The couple has three children, all of whom are involved with farm operations. Their son Jason, an English teacher, was recently laid off from the Kenosha school district. He often helps at the family’s South Shore Farmers Market stand. Their other children, Nick and Mia, also help part-time.

Hack Farm sells eggs. Chickens roam about the farm, scratch at

the ground, and peck at tomatoes and corncobs left out for their dining pleasure. The vivid plumage of the jungle fowl stood out as they mingled with their domestic cousins. "There's not a big profit [in eggs]," Ray said. "Chickens are a lot of work."

Instead, the farm's main focus is the big array of vegetables grown on 128 tillable acres: eggplant, tomatoes, squash, beets, radishes, pepper varieties (green, yellow, red, jalapeño and other chile peppers), pickles, cucumbers, cabbage, kale, cantaloupe, and watermelon. They also grow sweet corn, soybeans, and winter wheat.



Jungle fowl rooster strutting his stuff.

The Hacks have colorful jungle fowl, like this handsome beast, along with their domestic chicken species.

The Hacks mostly sell in the retail market but they have some wholesale customers. Gail said much of the wholesale business was lost with the downfall of the old Commission Row on Broadway St. in Milwaukee's Third Ward, when that neighborhood's makeover and revitalization began in the 1990s. Vendors in Commission Row had been Hack's customers for decades, she said.

Their retail outlets today include farmers markets at Union Grove, Greendale, Hales Corners, Racine, and South Milwaukee.

This summer is their first season at the South Shore Farmers Market. Ray said they will be there again next year.

Ray and Gail store beets, onions, and squash to sell at winter markets, including the market at St. Ann Center in Bay View. The farm will offer a corn roast this year at the renowned St. Martin's Fair in Franklin, Wis. on Labor Day weekend. They do not sell to any restaurants, but have discussed the possibility of setting up a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture).



Zucchini, cucumbers, and squash growing on a section of the 128-acre farm.

Concerning farming's greatest challenges, with no hesitation, Gail and Ray both exclaimed, "The weather!" The mild, dry winter and lack of snow in 2012, combined with record-breaking heat waves and little rain, created a farmer's nightmare. Ray said that climate change and unpredictable weather has made growing difficult over the years.

"It's scary," said Gail. "We need snow this winter. People have commented on what a nice winter we had, but it wasn't. The water table is low."

Ray said the past winter and summer made for a bad season for their leek and onion crops. "They went to seed," Ray said, adding that their squash will be late this year.

The farm currently employs no greenhouses or hoop houses. The Hacks must be creative to keep crops in good condition when challenging weather arises, using strategies like covering young plants with quart baskets if a late spring frost hits, then removing the baskets promptly the next day to prevent overheating.

The Hacks said that they use no insecticides, pesticides, or fertilizers. Ray said one advantage of this arid summer was that it kept the pests at bay. Gail added that in the past they have occasionally sprayed cabbage, but not this year.

Ray puts in 12-hour days during the market season. As for what he does during winter...

“As little as possible,” he joked. Kidding aside, he said there are miscellaneous projects and things to fix.

As Ray gazed across his fields, he noted that there are fewer family farms now than in the past. “We’re dinosaurs now,” he said. Acknowledging that it may be more difficult now for young farmers to start up, he was quick to tout the rewards of farming. “The best thing about farming is being your own boss.”

Gail agrees. “Nobody’s on your back.” Customer interaction at farmers markets is a plus, she said. “

She shared a story of how, when she and Ray were on vacation, she was recognized by a couple as “the corn lady.”

We love the people,” Gail said. “They’re nice, and appreciative. The customers become your friends.”

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# Geneva Lakes Produce, from asparagus to zucchini

Flowers, fruit, vegetables, pumpkins—Geneva Lakes Produce does it all.

Scott Koster has owned Geneva Lakes Produce in Burlington, Wis. since 1987, and grows everything from asparagus to zucchini.

The farm is comprised of 150 acres. Koster owns 4.8 acres and rents the other acreage from neighboring retired farmers. Koster also barter. Neighbor Judy lets Koster use some of her land in exchange for his plowing services.

Koster worked on his grandfather's farm in Illinois, which specialized in gladioli. Koster left farming when his parents told him to "go to college and get a real job." He became a salesperson for Pioneer seed company, but his passion for farming drew him back.



—photo Sheila Julson

Koster runs the farm and his five children help. His son Jordan recently graduated from UW-Platteville with a degree in agriculture and will join the Geneva Lakes Produce team. Koster's wife Jackie used to farm, but grew tired of the hours

and went back to social work.

Koster has been selling his produce at the South Milwaukee Farmers Market for about three years. His farm also has a presence at 16 farmers markets in Wisconsin and Illinois, and a farm stand at the intersection of Highways 120 and 11 where they sell flowers and produce. Koster said he tried community supported agriculture (CSA) ventures in the past, but “rather than give customers whatever I have, I’d rather have them come to the market and choose what they’d like to have.” He also has some wholesale customers.

The farm produces flowers early in the season, followed by vegetables. They also grow hay, which Koster said provides winter income.

While many Wisconsinites enjoyed the mild winter and warm spring, Koster predicts pests will be problematic this year because there was no harsh winter to kill bugs. Dealing with wild weather swings is one of the biggest challenges for farmers. “The weather is like a roller coaster. Learn not to throw up, and you’re fine,” he said.

Many small farmers use organic methods; however, while Koster said he respects organic farmers, he’s not afraid to integrate modern farming methods. He occasionally sprays insecticides, but “only when we have to,” he said. “The crops need to be taken care of. It’s just like taking medicine, but only when you’re sick.” He uses an integrated pest management system that according to Koster is an environmentally sensitive method of managing pest damage, with the least possible risk to people and the environment.

Koster uses hoop houses, a fairly new development in Wisconsin agriculture. The structures are made of heavy plastic wrap stretched over tubing. The sun’s radiation heats the interior. Hoop houses can significantly extend the growing season by sheltering seedlings and plants. The plastic sides can be

rolled up to cool the houses when needed. Koster said Geneva Lakes Produce has used hoop houses for about two years. He heats his greenhouses with wood stoves. Koster also uses black plastic mulch to reduce weeds and protect young tomato plants and roses.

Willingness to try new things and be creative is crucial to keeping a small farm afloat, especially when one has to compete with commercial agriculture. "Big ag has advantages such as GPS tractors that maneuver themselves. I have a 1950s tractor," Koster said, as he pointed to the rustic tractor his son, Corban, drove through the leek field.

Koster understands how families struggle in today's economy, which creates another challenge for small farmers: educating consumers about why it is more socially responsible to buy from small farmers than to buy "Walmart's \$1.99 strawberries."

Knowing your farmer is a bonus. "I grew it, I picked it. If someone gets a bad melon, they can come back to the market next week, and we'll talk about it," Koster said.

He receives calls about once a week from farmers-market organizers who invite him to be a vendor. He's willing to try new markets, but pointed out that while farmers markets help fill a demand for good food, an over-saturation of markets could also be a problem for small farmers, as they may cut one another out.

Yet despite slim profits, no health insurance, and a work schedule that can extend beyond 80 hours a week—or "working until you drop," Koster said the passion for farming drives him. "You just gotta love what you do."

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# Who's your farmer?

Photos by Joel Jaecks & Katherine Keller

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*Chia Xiong gives photographer Joel Jaecks a bag of snow peas.*

On a sunny July morning at the South Shore Farmers Market, Hmong farmer Chia Xiong (she-AWNG) sliced through a tiny dark potato, exposing the vibrant purple meat for a curious onlooker not familiar with the spud variety.

Xiong's children were also under the canopy, and stood behind the long tables that displayed carefully arranged produce such as peas, potatoes, onions, and lettuce.

The children greeted customers, and held the tops of the plastic bags open for one another as they packaged their vegetables for the shoppers to take home.

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*Youa Xiong adds more beets to the Xiongs' produce display at the South Shore Farmers Market.*

Behind the scenes, Xiong's wife, Youa (Y00-ah), sat among large storage totes of assorted produce as she shelled sugar snap peas.

Xiong, one of several Hmong farmers at the South Shore Farmers Market, has been farming in the United States for 10 years, and is in his eighth year at the popular lakefront market.

“What I like is that there are lots of people,” he said. “The market also focuses on organic produce. That’s what I do.”

Xiong said he does not use any pesticides on his produce. He also sells at the West Allis market.

A first-generation immigrant from Laos, Xiong brings a rich agricultural heritage from his homeland. His family had farmed for generations in the mountainous countryside of the Southeast Asian country, where crops such as rice and corn are common. Upon arriving in the United States, Xiong worked in manufacturing for nine years as a machine operator in Menomonee Falls, and then began farming again because he wanted to include his family in his work and leave something for his children.

In addition to the traditional offerings at most market stands such as cilantro, lettuce, basil, onion, beets, spinach, sugar snap peas, and colorful floral offerings, Xiong grows and sells Asian produce. Chinese broccoli, a deep green leafy vegetable with very small flower heads; bok choy, also known as Chinese white cabbage, a nutrient-dense vegetable with white stems and dark green leaves; and squash leaves. The choy sum, Xiong said, wasn’t ready to harvest until mid-July.

A typical day on his farm is eight to 10 hours, six days a week, but Xiong said he enjoys the job.

He explained how his agricultural techniques are unique. “In the U.S., whole fields are plowed and tilled, but I farm by sections, and set a deadline for each section,” he said, forming his hands into loose squares as he spoke, “the produce is not too young, and not too old, and is always fresh for the customers.”

Xiong leases 44 total acres of farmland on two separate plots in Oak Creek. Much work is done by hand, but he also uses a tractor. He lives in Milwaukee with his family on a slim profit margin of \$8,000-\$10,000 dollars a year. “During the

summer, I save for the winter months. I save money for heat, electric, and the mortgage. During winter, I help people in my community." He has also traveled to Laos and Thailand for missionary work.

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Seven-year-old Kabbou (Kab-B00) is the youngest of Xiong's children, and wearing a red jacket and a shy expression, stood alongside her siblings as they bagged produce for their customers and made change. The camaraderie of close-knit family helping one another is common among the Hmong culture, and Xiong said he wants to keep the kids involved. "My goal in summertime is to not have the kids wander, and get into the farming business so they all can help."

While the children laughed and joked around during a rare moment of downtime, Xiong explained that it takes about 10 hours to pick, pack, and prepare for the market.

Will Hmong youth remain interested and continue the farming traditions? "I don't know if they will like it or not," Xiong said, "but I want to train them so they know how to operate."

*Zongcheng Moua (M00-ah) of Moua Consulting Group, LLC served as the translator for Sheila Julson and Chia Xiong. Moua, along with his wife, Mayhoua Moua, own and operate the firm and provide cross-cultural training, interpretation, and translation services in Hmong and Lao languages.*