

Former City People Who Can Now “Finally Farm”

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Anita and Jerry Miller are MFA members living near Independence, Iowa. They own and manage a cash hay and horse boarding enterprise called ‘Finally Farm.’ Theirs is an all-forage farm, composed of about 90 acres of hay and 20-30 acres of pasture. Anita describes the farm as a lot of small, scattered fields along both sides of a creek. The hay fields are on the ‘uplands,’ with the pastureland along the creek.

Millers were ‘city people’ who moved to the country 16 years ago, and have been learning to farm ever since. Their early years involved a lot of ‘experimenting with forage species and methods.’ They sought advice from neighbors and relatives, and picked up management tips from sources, including MFA and the Iowa State University Extension Master Equine Managers Certification Program. Over the years, they are getting a better sense of productivity and limitations of their farm and are now doing more ‘site-specific’ management.

Hay is produced for use in the on-farm horse boarding enterprise, and for the cash hay market. They plant a broad mixture of legumes and grasses, including alfalfa, red clover, timothy, smooth brome grass, and a little tall fescue. The goal is to keep hay stands for 3-4 production years, but sometimes frostseed

legumes stretch the stand to five production years. They use an oat companion crop at establishment, which they harvest as oat hay. They are producing ‘almost organic hay’ so manure and lime are major components of their fertility program.

The hay for their horse boarding business and the wants of their ‘loyal cash hay customers’ direct their harvest management. They strive for a four summer-cut harvest schedule, but uncooperative weather and Anita’s love of nesting birds sometimes leads to some delays in the date of first cut, which can result in getting only three cuts some years. Until now, the hay was harvested and stored as large-round bales, but an increasing number of their hay customers want small-rectangular bales, so they are planning to try some small bales too. Most of the hay is stored outside on stone storage pad areas. All the hay lots are sampled and tested for nutritional value.

Hay marketing is Jerry’s job. Advertising through the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship Hay and Straw Directory, and word-of-mouth referrals has netted enough regular customers who generally buy all of the hay each year. Some hay is sold directly from the field, but most is sold during the year.

Boarding horses is the livestock enterprise on the farm. The Millers own 4 horses and board up to 15 in all. They, and their customers, like to use pasture grazing as part of the annual forage needs for the horses. The pasture acres occupy the creek bottom areas among the trees. The pasture is permanent mixed grasses and legumes and is divided into five rotationally-stocked paddocks. Frostseeding is used to maintain and improve the mixed swards. Anita says the grazing management takes time to do well, and that learning about the characteristics and opportunities of the various grasses and legumes is an ongoing challenge.

Anita describes her farm and its management from the viewpoint of a steward of the land. She is very conservation-minded, and feels that the conservation of soil, water, and wildlife are not being valued as much as they should be in current management in midwestern cropping systems. Travel and time spent in other parts of the country make her appreciate the change of seasons in the midwestern U.S. She likes to see winter come and allow the crops a time to rest.

When asked what she likes about her farm in Iowa, Anita says, “It’s beautiful!” She adds that forages are easier to maintain than row crops on their hilly land with ‘sand points.’ And, she adds, “If Mother Nature would cooperate, it would be fine.”

She is proud of her farm. When friends and relatives visit, they are impressed by the landscape and can relax while camping along the shady stream. ‘Finally Farm’ seems to be a fitting descriptor of where Jerry and Anita Miller are in their life’s journey.

Anita is currently an MFA board member and says she learns a lot from MFA’s Forage Focus, Clippings, and the website. She also enjoys the discussions with producers and MFA members from around the upper Midwest, learning how they manage their farming operations. She is also interested in the outcomes of the various projects that MFA’s Midwest Forage Research Program (MFRP) funds.