

The Gingerich's Grow Alfalfa in Central Iowa

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Steven and Jean Gingerich are MFA members in east-central Iowa. They have been farming 160 acres near Parnell, IA, for about 30 years. They milk 50 Holstein cows and maintain about an equal number of younger, replacement animals.

They follow a cropping rotation of 70 acres of row crops; mostly corn (~60 acres) and some soybeans annually. Alfalfa is a significant part of their cropping rotation, totaling ~90 acres of their tillable land. They like to keep alfalfa stands for 3-4 years, but stand conditions and productivity influence stand longevity in any particular field. Orchardgrass is occasionally interseeded into alfalfa in the later years of the stand for hay type diversity. Their farmstead also includes a few acres of pasture.

The alfalfa production is integral to the Gingerich's various enterprises. Their general goal is to harvest their alfalfa on a four summer-cut schedule for 'dairy quality' forage. They will, on occasion, take a fifth, late cut if circumstances allow. The first cutting is ensiled in a bunker silo; the remainder harvested and stored as dry hay (all in small rectangular bales). Over the years, they have acquired a combination windrower/rake that limits driving on hay or windrows. When baling, the Gingerich's watch moisture levels carefully to optimize forage handling and storage with minimal losses.

While all of Gingerich's corn silage and most of his hay is used to feed his own dairy herd, Steve has been trying to develop a limited cash hay business – selling hay to local goat producers. He notes the quality demands from his customer base are as high, or higher than that for his dairy herd. Forage testing is routinely done on all of the forages.

The day-to-day farm activities are done by Steve and a hired man. Steve's wife, Jean, works off-farm and also contributes to the farm work.

When asked if they have made any notable changes in the overall operation in recent years, Steve says, "No radical changes." He says they try to concentrate on what they started out to achieve, focusing their efforts on dairy production, and growing great alfalfa hay. He adds that this has not been easy and 'you just have to keep adjusting to the minor problems that arise along the way' – such as the countless adjustments to the cattle free-stalls and oxygen limiting plastic film on the sides and top of the bunker silage.

When asked about the conservation practices he uses Steve paused, and then said, "When growing forages, we naturally fall into resource and conservation mode. Managing for ruminant livestock sets us up to be conservationists."

As for positive trends he sees in agriculture, Steve thinks he has seen a general increase in both crop and livestock production levels. One of his greatest concerns in the Midwest, however, is a decline in ruminant livestock numbers. Steve speculated it would take implementing new and existing livestock and cropping technology, mechanization, and management intensification to bring ruminant livestock numbers back.

Steve said membership and participation in the Midwest Forage Association gives him greater access to forage and livestock related research information and provides a forum for the exchange of ideas.

It is good to know there are still farmers in Iowa who want to grow great alfalfa.

