

Sickler Farm

Farming is in Jeff Sickler's blood. His mother's father owned a dairy farm. His father's father owned a John Deere dealership and was in vegetable production. However, Sickler didn't get into the family business until about six years ago.

"Both my grandparents would say, 'You don't want to get into farming. You won't make a living.'"

The south New Jersey native arrived in West Virginia 30 years ago with no plans to continue the tradition.

"My wife signed me up for a mission trip to West Virginia. They were building a barn for a local preacher here in town. I came down and had a great time. The next thing I knew I was leading mission trips down here," he says.

Soon after, Sickler and his wife Lisa moved to Moatsville to do mission work full time. That lasted 26 years.

"We started growing 1,000 mums to try and make a little extra money in the fall, some extra Christmas money. We sold out in two weeks and I said, 'I think we're on to something,'" recalls Sickler. "This year we sold 12,000 mums."

The family bought a 140 acre farm on Chestnut Ridge

Road in Barbour County. Plants were only going to be a side business.

"When I first bought this place I thought I was going to cut some hay, get some steers. We cut hay on 12 acres and baled 50 round bales. When it was all said and done, we made a profit of about \$500. It took \$50,000 of equipment to do it and three days of burning diesel fuel," says Sickler. "A friend came over and saw we had a



small asparagus patch. He said, 'Do you know how many you can get off an acre? Two-thousand pounds an acre!' The math made a lot of sense."

It was out with the hay and in with the hanging baskets, vegetables, and a few farm animals.

Sickler stresses they've been blessed with a lot of support along the way including Dr. Lewis Jett of WVU's Davis College of Agriculture and Larry Gower, the owner of Mary's Greenhouse in Elkins.

Today the farm is dotted with a bright red barn, high tunnels,

greenhouses, and several acres planted with vegetables of all varieties.

"Right now in the field we've planted 400 tomato plants, a couple hundred pounds of potatoes. In one of our high tunnels, we have 2,000 onions and some garlic. As soon as they come out we'll put 10,000 carrots in there," explains Sickler. "We have squash in another high tunnel along with zucchini. We're just harvesting the last of our Romaine lettuce and

bok choy. In the third high tunnel there are 300 tomato plants, 10-12 varieties, 200 pepper plants, and lettuce between the rows."

The hanging baskets take up two greenhouses, hanging from the ceiling and sitting on and under tables.

"The first year we grew hanging baskets we did 250. They were beautiful but they were ready 2 weeks after Mother's Day. We learned a lot that first year," says Sickler. "This year we grew 3,500 hanging baskets."

Regular customers like Pam Fries say you can't find a better basket.

"Sickler's have the healthiest baskets. They have beautiful color combinations and the baskets don't poop out on you in a couple of months like a lot of the store ones do. The store ones start out pretty but they don't keep up the beautiful display like these do."

The farm is now a family business.

"Originally it was just me

and my wife. Two years ago my youngest son, who was working for Apple, called and said 'Do you have a place for me at the farm?' We were thrilled to have him," says Sickler

Three months ago his oldest son started working full-time on the farm.

"I have my two boys. That's been a blessing. Then my daughter lives right on the corner. She helps out all the time. It's good to have our family here. That was our dream."

Expansion is in the Sickler's future. This year they added 600 flats of vegetable starts, 400 flats of bedding plants, and patio pots. The sky is the limit.

Even with all that activity, farming doesn't pay all the bills. The Sickler's have a snow removal business to make extra cash.

"If we didn't have a mortgage on the farm and a \$1,000 a month truck payment, we'd be close to making it."

Still, Sickler says farming is a viable career.

"If somebody loves farming and is willing to work hard,



they can make a living. However, they have to think out of the box!"

What would Sickler's grandparents think about his chosen profession?

"Farming is in our blood. My grandparents would probably smile right now," says the farmer with a big smile of his own.

You can find Sickler Farm products at the Morgantown and Elkins Farmer's Markets. They also sell straight from the farm located at 1739 Chestnut Ridge Road in Moatsville, WV. You can reach them at 304-457-6615 or send them an e-mail at lisa@sicklerfarm.com.

