Elmer Lapp

(Continued from Page A22)

had a foul every year since I bought her at age four with a foul at her side. She placed third in the aged mare class at the '82 Farm Show, and the only thing that looks 20 on her is her teeth."

Though one of Lapp's purebreds will cost its new owner as much as \$5,000, Elmer emphasizes that a working team of geldings can be bought for \$800 to \$1,000 each.

Lapp also points out that he avoids the soil compaction problems associated with heavy machinery.

"Farmers buy these big tractors and spreaders, and then they wonder why their ground gets so hard," he observes. "With horses you don't have that problem.'

Nevertheless, Elmer's Belgian pulling machines are no lightweights. Adults weigh between 1,800 and 2,000 pounds, with little difference between mares and stallions. Lapp prefers mares not only for their reproductive capabilities, but also because of their tractable nature. Geldings, according to Elmer, tend to become lazy, and stallions occasionally prove to be quite a handful.

But Lapp has found the majority of his Belgians to be quick to learn and easygoing. Their docile nature, Lapp maintains, is the reason that these giants consume about the same amount of food as a more high-strung saddle or buggy

The only exception to this comes when mares are pregnant or feeding fouls.

"Some of my mares milk almost like cows," Elmer says. Only half joking, he adds that horse milk. with its one to two percent butterfat content, could be a valued dairy product for calorie-conscious Americans.

An active spokesman for his breed's virtues, Lapp is secretarytreasurer for the 150-member Pa. Draft Horse and Mule Association, and acts as secretary-treasurer and manager for the Pa. Draft Horse Sale at the Farm Show in February.

This year Elmer will be assembling a picturesque 20-head team for Bird-in-Hand's 250th anniversary parade, on June 28, as well as providing the horsepower for threshing demonstrations at Chestertown, Maryland, in July, at the Rough and Tumble Museum in Kinzer, in August, and again in September at the Historic Schaefferstown Museum.

Though mules are popular draft animals among his Amish neighbors, Lapp remains a faithful fan of his powerful Belgians. The veteran horseman asserts that four of his big mares can pull his tractor disc, where a team of the lighter horse-donkey hybrids would likely require a fifth member.

Lapp does concede that mules generally seem to "have more sense".

"A mule won't eat himself sick, or run over anything," Elmer acknowledges, "and they do seem to take the heat better. But you see a lot more ornery mules than horses, and a mule will kick much quicker," Lapp adds.

Elmer Lapp's admiration for his brawny workhorses seems to be mutual. With a gentle, "get up", and a slap of the reins, nearly four tons of equine brawn lean willingly into the harness, and the quartet of massive sorrel horses, their blond manes and tails flagging in the spring breeze, is off with Elmer and his disc in tow.

After a few passes across the field, Lapp rests the animals and reminisces about teams from the

"We don't have teams like we used to, because we don't work them like we did then. But I'll never forget the team I was using in the early '60's. One day I was out discing when the feed man got here. I came in to help him unload,

compaction

(Continued from Page A1)

the pressure at much deeper levels," Reeder maintains.

The engineer also points out that going to duel wheels will do little to alleviate the problem.

"We've shown that the first pass of a tire over the soil does about 80 percent of the compaction damage, so spreading the pressure side-to-side won't help. And at depths of a foot or two, there is little difference between the pressure exerted by single versus duel wheels. The only way to alleviate the problem is to distribute the weight lengthwise through the use of multiple axles and four-wheel-drive."

Reeder adds that plowing may actually intensify the problem in two ways. First, the weight of the plow itself tends to compact the

and it took us about half-an-hour.

"When I walked back out, I noticed my horses were gone, but when I looked out across the field I could see them pulling all alone. Those horses made a complete sweep around the field all by themselves. Made every turn. And no skippers, either! Sometimes when I think of the work those horses did for me, it brings a tear.'

Visitors traveling the backroads of the Pennsylvania Dutch country south of Route 340, may come upon a streamside stone house and barn with a field full of husky chestnutcolored horses cropping grass in the summer sun.

Chances are they've happened upon Elmer Lapp's place, where horsepower is exceeded only by one man's devotion to his team.

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plow pan layer. And second, plowing is usually done with the most powerful-and heaviesttractors.

Other major offenders include combines, the larger grain wagons and manure spreaders. Reeder cautions that large spreaders and liquid manure tanks can do extreme damage because of their use during the wet spring months.

Though plowing is the generally accepted cure for compaction, John Yocum, senior research associate with Penn State's Department of Agronomy, points out that nature's cycles of freezing and thawing do a much more thorough job.

"You can never mechanically get soil back to the texture that it was at the end of winter," Yocum asserts. Other scientists agree that, as with most maladies, the best medicine is an ounce of prevention.

The most important combative measure is to avoid working in wet fields, says Dr. Fritton. If you're in doubt about whether or not to begin field work, Fritton recommends the squeeze test.

"Take a handful of soil from the bottom of your tillage depth and squeeze it," Fritton instructs. "If it molds to your hand and stays together, you're tilling before you should be."

Since surface compaction is directly related to tire pressure, Fritton recommends operating tractor and implement tires at their lowest usable pressures.

With deep compaction being a function of overall equipment weight, Ohio State's Reeder advises farmers to consider the use of multiple axles and four-wheeldrive to distribute the weight lengthwise. Authorities agree that, when weights are equal, a fourwheel-drive tractor will have less impact on the soil than a twowheel-drive unit.

Experts also agree that no-till and minimum tillage practices do help to alleviate the problem. In fact, Dr. Fritton notes that avoidance of deep compaction is one of the best arguments for notill farming. Though farmers must still be concerned with tire pressure and width, adequate aeration and water filtration are more easily maintained when soil is not manipulated as deeply.

This lack of deep tillage also allows farmers to work the soil on their no-till fields earlier in the spring.

A farmer suspecting compaction problems should pick up a shovel and see just what his crops are doing, says Dr. Fritton.

"Dig down to the plow's depth and then go six to eight inches more," Fritton advises. "A depth of about two feet should do it. Take a look at where your roots are going. If they're staying right in the furrow, you're going to have problems in dry weather.

Compacted layers will not only be visible in your field's profile, but may also offer considerable resistance to the shovel.

With soil compaction capable of reducing yields by 50 percent, farmers would do well to stay one step ahead of the problem. When no obvious explanations for apparent nutrient deficiencies, herbicide or drought damage, seem to solve the riddle, it may be time to take shovel in hand and dig deeper for an explanation.



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