

Sunshine, Rain Sprout Potatoes, Love At Keener Farm

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ELIZABETHTOWN (Lancaster Co.) — J. Williard Keener is keeping a close eye on his potato fields these days. So far, 1991 appears to be a good crop year. While many areas have been hot and dry, the Keener potato fields have had several heavy rains.

"Sunshine and rain make the potatoes grow," Keener said.

Crops aren't the only thing that grows from sunshine and rain. Keener and his wife Barb find marriage relationships are enhanced through joys and disappointments in life.

In February, Barb was the winner in the county Pennsylvania Farmers' Association Sweetheart Contest. She penned the following words to describe "love" that has blossomed a 10 year marriage and produced three sons, Jonathan, 6; Joshua, 4; and Moses, 20 months.

HOW DO I SPELL LOVE?

It's saying your clothes are shrinking when they seem to be getting tight.

It's washing out diapers for me when I've fallen behind.

It says "you're gorgeous," when I just looked in the mirror and thought my hair needs washing.

It's encouraging me to try something different, letting me make an investment, and taking time off to help set up.

It's saying it wasn't that bad when I've failed.

It's taking two little boys in the "big truck" to give me a break.

It's staying out in the car with three little boys while I run in and out of stores.

It's praying for things that are on my mind.

It's gentle, kind, faithful and slow to anger

It's Willy!

Barb said writing the winning entry was easy because she had a good subject.

A happy marriage is a priority for the Keeners.

"You can't have a good marriage without a commitment," Keener said.

The couple are so adamant of this principal that in their wedding vows they said, "May God deal with us severely if any thing but death would part us."

While the couple said that similar backgrounds and expectations coupled with the strength of both sets of their parents' marriages built a good foundation, they know that marriage sometimes causes disagreements.

Keener's advice at these moments are "Don't be afraid to go for counseling. Go early. It is better not to wait until disaster hits."

Barb agreed. She emphasized that having a personal relationship with the Lord is a big plus in marriage. She said, "When I don't have the answer, I can pray and God will help. God has wisdom we don't have. He can change things that we think are impossible to change."

When first married, the Keeners spent eight months in missionary work in Texas, Colorado, and Mexico under the auspices of Youth With A Mission. Barb taught at an Hopi Indian reservation for her student teaching when she graduated from Millersville University.

When the Keeners returned to Lancaster County, Barb taught at Lititz Mennonite School while Willie joined his dad, Harold, and two brothers, Steve and Jeff, in a potato farming partnership. The Keeners grow from 20 to 75 acres of potatoes annually.

While they does not sound like a big farming operation, it is misleading as the partnership buys potatoes from local farmers and from Maine to Florida in order to meet the demands of local supermarkets and restaurants.

"We buy one to two tractor trailer loads every week," Keener said. The company bags the potatoes and markets most of them under the brand name of H.K. Potatoes.

The Keeners also have a hog finishing barn with 1,000 head of hogs. They grow corn and soybeans on 75 acres and rent an additional 20.

So far this year, the Keeners did not need to use irrigation, but they are prepared with a pump and traveler wheel that has one gun and a flexible hose for irrigation.

Too dry weather hurts the yield, too wet causes rot or quality problems. Potatoes thrive best with lots of sunshine but not too hot, with cool evenings and good rains.

Planting begins in early April. "Each spring I can hardly wait to get into the fields to plant," Willard said.

An automatic cutter is used to cut seed potatoes or B-size potatoes are planted. "They cost a little more, but the stalk is more sturdy and even," Keener said.

Weeds are sprayed and the ground is cultivated during the growing season. This year the Colorado potato beetle, the most fierce potato pest, is kept under control with a combination of Violate and



The Keener family from left: Willie, Moses, Jonathan, Joshua, and Barb stand with the sign that points to the H. K. Potato Farm.

Thiodin. Seven is used to control the corn bore.

Harvesting begins at the end of July or the beginning of August. The digging begins in early morning hours before the day is too hot.

Workers separate the stones and dirt from the potatoes that are loaded on the bulk trucks. The potatoes are graded, washed, dried, and stored in a cooler set at 50 degrees.

"Once the heat is out of the potatoes, the potatoes stay cool in air conditioned storage," Keener said.

The Keeners put air conditioning in in 1980.

"Air conditioning solves a lot of problems and is worth the investment," Keener said. "Supermarkets are more particular with quality than they used to be, and this helps maintain quality throughout the year."

Bulk storage also offers a supply for winter months. According to Keener, growers in this area are thinning out. Prices fluctuate.

The Keeners also sell out of their own warehouse, but find there is less demand for potatoes in the summer since many people have their own gardens.

Marketing is done mostly by word of mouth. Supermarkets talk to other supermarket managers and contact the Keeners about supplying them with potatoes. The independent farmers like it that way and don't have a desire to get bigger.

"Potatoes are a big investment and it is easier to make a profit by shipping than by raising all the potatoes," Keener said.

The Keeners think it is advantageous to raise a dual crop such as potatoes and pigs. They do not feed potatoes to the pigs. In addition to their finishing operation, the Keeners have a sow herd on another farm. They are in the process of switching to PIC breeding stock.

Unfortunately 1988 turned out to be a bad year to raise both hogs and potatoes. Many of the potatoes rotted because the weather fluctuated between being too wet and too dry. Although good potatoes were mixed in with the rotted ones, it was too difficult to separate and the potatoes needed to be thrown away.

"Sometimes a setback or bad times can be good to show where to make changes," Keener said. "It teaches us to hold on less tightly. In farming, you can do everything right and things still do not work out. I think recognizing that helps

me to relax more and take one day at a time."

Although you can't see the good when you are going through a bad time, Keener said, "The monetary investment in farming keeps you there when discouraged."

While the Keeners work to have potato quality superior or as good as the competition, they are careful to nurture their marriage as well. "It takes commitment to keep a marriage healthy and that's what we want," Barb said.



Barb, a former school teacher, spends a lot of time reading to the children.



These three brothers with mischief in their eyes keep things exciting in the Keener family.

Homestead Notes