

Lehigh Conservation Farmers

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every potato of the 70 tons he uses has to be washed and screened for the disease.

Help in harvesting and packaging some of the potatoes, sold in 50-pound bags, comes from Stephanie and Pam, Wessner's daughters, and the grandkids. Diana said they help hand-harvest a few acres at the beginning of the season in late July.

The past year, Wessner's son grew about 1/2 acre of peppers and another 1/2 acre of cabbage. About 8,000 pepper transplants are used and about 7,000 cabbage transplants, according to Diana.

Diana farms with Forrest on the farm Diana grew up on. A farm, said Diana, is "a great place to be raised. There's no place like a farm, believe me. I think the world of it."

Before retiring from 28 years as a phone company service technician, Forrest said he would often sit inside on a rainy day and watch as "millions of gallons of water" would run down the side of a hill near the homestead. He often thought how much of a "shame we can't keep some of that for when we need it." So, in 1990, an irrigation pond was built.

A year later, in 1991, looking at an old cow path gave Forrest a thought: what if that area, which always seemed wet and impossible to work, could be reconstructed and refurbished for wildlife?

With financial assistance and other help from the Fish and Wildlife Commission, Wessner signed up to have the project complete. In all, about 15 acres of wetland were reconstructed, plants and bluebird houses were installed, and wood ducks were allowed to propagate.

"It's blossomed," said Wessner. "There're ducks everywhere. I saw four sets of wood ducks down there on Sunday. Last year we sat at least seven hatchers. It's great."

The Wessners are working to restore eight acres of wetlands at another farm site.

Wessner signed up all three farms they maintain under the state's farmland preservation program. The program has put strong reins on residential and commercial development on farmland.

Wessner remembers one day when, driving up the hill that crests above the farmstead, he noticed some sightseers who happen to have Arab-type headdresses. Wessner stopped and asked if they needed any help. One said to him, "Oh, what a beautiful place you have here! A wonderful place! We're just enjoying the view."

Wessner worries that other countries would want to invest in the beautiful, hilly area in the region around Germansville. "I'm

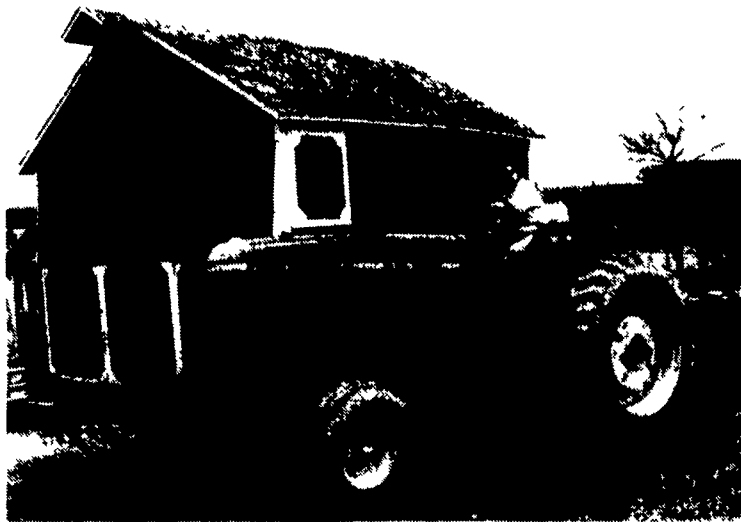
opposed to putting a house on every hill. People like to build their house on top of a hill with a great view, but after they've lived there two years, they've lost their appreciation of the view. It's only good if you visit occasionally. If you live there, you lose your appreciation."

Wessner said he wasn't opposed to those who come out and want to live in a rural area. "I just like to see farmland stay farmland and houses built from the city, out."

For his son, who received a degree in agronomy from Penn State, Wessner worries that challenges lie ahead, especially in an area that is becoming rapidly developed. Son Forrest III is married to Jessica, who received a degree in environmental resource management (wetlands ecology) from Penn State.

Many farmers, he said, don't want to be forced to adopt one program or another because of regulations or policy. Regulatory agencies, in the past, tried to force farmers to comply to questionable practices — now, there is more spirit of cooperation among agencies and farmers.

"They're not telling me what to do," he said. "I believe in most of the stuff already. We're only sorry that more farmers don't take advantage of everything we have offered to us."



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Regarding soil conservation, Wessner said, "You want to keep your soil on the farm, because what are you going to do without it? I mean, you're just going to go down the tubes (if you don't). Soil is the number one consideration, especially for agronomic crops."

The farm Wessner grew up on is now a part of the Jordan Watershed Project, a study to see what practices farmers can employ to control soil and chemical runoff on farmland.

"People are checking these streams all the time," he said. "If the farmer's not on the ball, he can be in a lot of trouble in a hurry."

On his own crops, Wessner said he staggers the placement of the potato and soy crops, which are on highly erodible land, with grass or hay strips to contain the soil.

That's just one of the problems potato and other crop farmers face.

"I think if you are a farmer, you got to worry about one thing or another. It never leaves you."

Homeowners Should Test Soils Too

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — Agriculture Secretary Charles C. Brosius is reminding homeowners and home gardeners to test their soil before adding fertilizers to lawns and gardens.

"A soil test may save you some work, and some money as well," Brosius said. "By not adding excessive nutrients to the soil, you'll also help to improve the quality of groundwater in your neighborhood and beyond."

Every year, many homeowners over-fertilize their lawns and gardens. Fertilizers not absorbed by the soil and plants can seep into the groundwater or end up in streams and other bodies of water. Excessive nutrients in water can cause algae growth, which depletes oxygen needed by fish and other organisms.

Homeowners can save money by selecting the specific type of fertilizer that they need to get the best results. They can also save by making sure they use the proper amount of fertilizer.

Soil testing is available through private firms or with a do-it-yourself kit available from your county extension offices.

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