

# Celery Grower Celebrity For Day, Provider For Season

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EAST PETERSBURG (Lancaster Co.) — Whenever Merv Sherk tells people that he's a celery farmer, people ask questions. Recently, curiosity about celery farmers netted him \$1,000 and a television appearance on a national game show.

His claim to fame began while visiting his sister in California. She took Merv and his wife Angie to watch the taping of the game show, "The Price Is Right."

According to Sherk, nine people are selected from an audience of about 600 to compete in the show. As each guest walks through the door, he or she is asked a question. Sherk was asked his occupation. When he answered, "celery farmer," the host asked, "How many stalks do you raise a year?"

Sherk snapped back 400,000. Because Sherk was the only person asked more than one question, the crowd around him predicted he'd be asked to compete on the show. They were right. Sherk's name was called. He ended up winning \$1,000, a television, and a bit of fame when the show was aired several weeks ago.

That was when the nation learned about celery farming.

Hodecker's Celery is no ordinary celery.

"The difference between our celery and that sold in supermarkets is like comparing oranges to

apples," Sherk said.

In search of select inner hearts of the celery, the Shenks throw away more celery than they sell to customers. A small portion of the outer ribs are sold for soup but most is discarded on the compost pile.

Hodecker celery has no waste for customers because only the inner, tender part of the celery is sold.

Surprising to most people is that celery continues to grow for six to eight weeks after it is harvested. This is the secret of the Hodecker celery. It is kept cool and in the dark to produce tender, flavorful inner ribs. About half of the outer ribs are discarded before the celery is sold.

Few commercial growers offer what is more commonly known as bleached celery. Angie said that the concept for bleached celery probably had its beginnings when refrigeration was not available and families stored their vegetables in trenches for wintering. People grew to love the tender, sweet taste of the celery.

Over the years, many farmers dropped celery growing because of its labor intensity, but Jay Hodecker realized there was a market for it. Previously his family had a diversified produce farm, but in the 1950s, Hodecker began specializing in homegrown celery. The celery was sold at a roadside stand and at several local markets.

In 1985, Jay Hodecker died of cancer. Because family members did not want to take over the celery business, Sherk bought the business from the family. For the first nine years after Hodecker's death, Sherk leased the buildings on the Hodecker farm.

"But the rent was similar to commercial rent," Sherk said of the Hodecker farm located along heavily traveled Route 72.

In 1990, Sherk purchased seven acres of ground along Route 72, intending to set up a farm market. Then he heard that the former Northrup King research farm was for rent. In 1994, the Shenks leased the 52-acre farm for a five-year term. Although the Shenks

changed locations, they retained the Hodecker's Celery name. On the farm on which they now live, Sherk grows 30 acres of soybeans, 10 acres of wheat, and 15 acres of celery.

The straw and wheat is used to cover the celery in trenches and the remainder is sold.

The move to a new location resulted in a loss of 25 percent of the retail business, but Sherk made up the difference by supplying celery to a local supermarket.

In addition to celery, Florida citrus fruit is purchased by truckloads and sold from the store housed in one of the buildings on the farm property.

"From April through February,

the work never gets done," Sherk said.

The Shenks begin sowing seed beds in April. Overhead sprinklers are used to provide frost protection and irrigation.

The seedlings are transplanted in the fields during June and July. Plants are planted four rows at a time and then irrigated.

In late August, the celery is ready to bleach.

Black plastic around the plants keeps out sunlight and allows the white hearts to grow.

Harvesting begins in September. Outer stalks and remaining roots are trimmed off. The discarded celery is moved by convey-

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Although the celery farm has been moved to a new location, the Shenks have retained the Hodecker Celery Farm name.



The Shenks trim and wash the celery before selling so that only the most tender, perfect stalks are sold and customers have no waste.



The Shenks began sowing seed beds in April. The seedlings will be transplanted in the fields during June and July.



Angie and Merv Sherk sell celery, citrus fruit and other produce from their store on the farm.



"Celery has no personality. The goats are our therapy," Sherk said of the pigmy goats they raise.

# HOMESTEAD NOTES