

# Barley Straw Grows Into Niche Marketing Enterprise For Keener Family

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plants. In most cases it actually increases the invertebrate population and provides additional food source for fish.

"Marketing is the key," Keener said. "You need to look for a market and decide how to fill it, not make a product and then look for the market."

Keener contacted potential markets in several states. Weis Market sells Kountry Bales in 200 stores and many landscaping stores also market the barley straw.

Ironically, when Keener first contacted a large supplier, they rejected the idea of marketing barley straw. But so many customers asked about it, that the company contacted Keener to order supplies.

Last year, they started manufacturing barley "kubes" to meet the demand of many of the smaller water gardens.

Repeat customers report that barley straw really works.

Customers must realize that barley straw does not kill existing algae but inhibits new growth. It should be applied before spring and the appearance of algae. If water temperature is less than 50 degrees, it may take six to eight weeks for the straw to produce active chemicals that inhibit algae growth. If straw is applied when water is above 70 degrees, it may become effective within one or two weeks. Barley straw remains effective approximately six months before another application is required.

Keener grew up on a farm, but has worked as a truck driver for the past 20 years. On the side, he has continued to dabble in agriculture-related projects. For example, the family grows 8½ acres of strawberries, pumpkins, gourds, and flowers.

A co-worker gave him the idea to bale hay for the pet industry. People who raise ham-

ster, gerbil, or a rabbit want only a small amount of hay, not a regular-sized bale. The Keeners Kountry Bales took off and are marketed in four states. For pets, hay is made of timothy, alfalfa, and clover.

The Keeners learned they must be as careful with their product as if they were providing food for humans.

"This is an age of litigation," Keener said. A piece of metal in the hay could cause death to the animal. For that reason, they always use baler twine tied by hand, which makes the process more time-consuming but necessary.

The product cannot contain weeds or have been rained on after it was cut. The hay must cure before bagging. The Keeners purchase the hay and straw after the first frost so that insects are reduced.

The name Kountry Bales was chosen with the "K" representing Keener.

Although Keener used the

printed information supplied from Penn State extension, he neither asked for individual help nor attended conventions.

He considers that a crisis, of sorts, pushed him into pursuing the barley bale potential. After the company he worked for 20 years did some reorganization, his hours were cut in half.

That pushed him to find additional avenues of income. From past experiences, he believes that everything happens for a purpose.

His entrepreneur attitude is verbalized by his philosophy: "Opportunity is always in front of you. Look at a way to turn a crisis into opportunity."

Life, he said, has provided him an education. "I got my college just by going to work. I go in all kinds of stores. I watch and listen to what does and does not work."

The potential for a full-time business manufacturing bales for pets and for ornamental

purposes are there, but the Keeners prefer pursuing barley bale production.

They recently expanded the building to store 3,500 regular sized bales. Because dust from straw and hay are extremely flammable, heating the building was a concern. Keener had an electric grid for heating put in the concrete floor.

The whole family works together. "I couldn't do it without them," Keener said. His wife Donna works as an LPN at a local pediatric center and designed the labels, takes care of the computer work, and is an encourager.

Son Deron and Keener mostly work together. Deron gets paid a certain percentage of every bale. The process has been a business learning experience for him. He doesn't get paid until payment is received from the customer.

For more about Kountry Bales, call Keener at (570) 437-3547.



Each bale is hand-knotted, a time-consuming process. To protect his hands from blisters, Keener wears gloves with the fingertips cut off the first two fingers to enable him to grasp the twine.



Seven-year-old Derek likes to punch holes in the packaging, which enables the bales to breathe.

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