

Grazing Turned This Dairy Farm Around

Sons Can Now Join Their Father In Farming

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The story of David Surprenant and his family farm is getting around among New York State dairy farmers. David farms with his wife and their two sons in Manteno, Illinois, and was a featured speaker at the dairy grazing conference series that swept across the state in January. His story is about how grazing turned around the farm business and opened up the possibility that his sons could join him in dairy farming.

David Surprenant began taking over the family farm from his father when he bought half of the cows in 1977, and then bought the other half in 1979. Through his initial years in farming, David attempted to follow the accepted model for dairy farming but found he was continually falling behind.

He had developed a good relationship with University of Illinois professor Michael Hutjens and asked him on a regular basis what size his dairy needed to be in order to be profitable. That size grew through the years and David felt he was spinning his wheels, continually expanding without ever getting ahead

financially. Finally, in the early 1990s, he was told that he would need to expand to 150 cows, which required him to build an entirely new facility. He was not ready to make that step and decided instead to pursue some stories he had heard about grazing.

David learned about grazing through magazine articles and decided to pursue it on a small scale. A New Holland magazine told about the Patterson brothers who were grazing in Kentucky. David called them up and asked how they were doing. They were a big help, and also introduced him to Dave Forgey in Indiana, who had started grazing the year before.

David's farm is 160 acres in a square, set up in four 40-acre fields. He started by turning one of those fields into pasture and over the next few years, all four fields became pasture. Although the transition wasn't easy, David could soon see that the financial picture on the farm was improving. He hired a consultant from Wisconsin who had worked for several years in New Zealand and advised David to "plant fence posts instead of grass seed."

Unfortunately, David's pastures were slow to develop. He



Cows turning grass into milk on a grazing operation.

attributes this to soils that had been depleted to less than 2 percent organic matter by years of corn and soybeans. Even now, after nearly 10 years in pasture, several of David's paddocks still have not developed into the thick, lush sod that he would like. After experimenting with sev-


eral different pasture types he has found that a mix of species, including orchardgrass, soft leaf tall fescue, and white clover, works best for him. He does believe that perennial ryegrass has a place on his farm but only in a limited amount as it does not grow in hot and dry conditions and

had a complete winter kill a few years ago.

Breeding

Experience with grazing has led David to an evolving perspective on what breed of cows to use and how to feed them on pasture. He began

(Turn to Page E19)

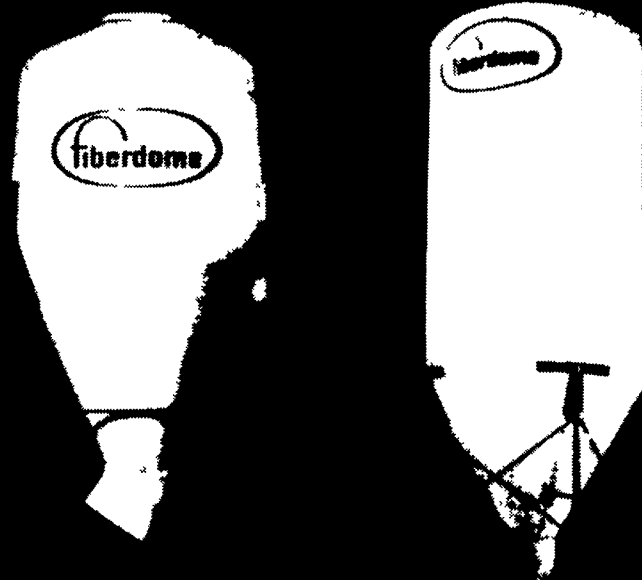


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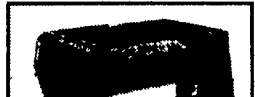
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