

# FARMING

By  
George DeVault

## On The Edge

### REPORTERS TO THE RESCUE

#### Or, How The News Media Can Help Your Marketing

In 1999, a newspaper story gave our business a boost. It was another drought year. By late July it was so dry that the headline in the Allentown Morning Call read "Barren fields, broken dreams." Crop losses in Lehigh County were already estimated at 75 percent. Stunted corn in a photo looked like pineapple.

"Farmers seeking emergency assistance," another headline said. "Most counties in the region face huge losses in corn and other crops because of drought."

Consumers took the dire news to heart. "Where have all the customers gone?" asked a Morning Call headline on Aug. 18. "Farmers' roadside stands are lined with fruits and vegetables, but shoppers are in short supply."

The author was Food Editor Diane Stoneback. My wife, Melanie, knew Diane from when Melanie was a reporter at the Call a few years earlier. So I didn't feel too awkward calling Diane to compliment her on her article — and to suggest another one.

"You know, Diane, there is some good news in farming this summer, despite the drought," I said. Then I explained our weekly vegetable subscription service. Customers pay in advance — months before the start of the season — for 20 weeks of veggies.



George DeVault

That provides operating cash, so that the farmers don't have to go to the bank for a loan. The farmers, in turn, keep planting a little of a lot of different crops (141 different varieties of 40 different vegetables that year), and drip irrigate everything. That provides a steady supply of greens, root crops, herbs, berries, cut flowers and staples like carrots and tomatoes.

"And our customers are amazing," I told her. "When they come out to the farm to pick up their weekly bags, they ask, almost with tears in their eyes, 'Are you guys OK in this weather? Do you want to just keep the money, forget about the veggies, and try again next year?'"

Diane was intrigued. She had heard about vegetable subscrip-

tion services before, and said she meant to write about one sometime. What really caught her interest, I think, was the good news angle of the story.

Early the next week she came out to the farm with a photographer for a few hours. We showed her all around the greenhouses and fields, explained our irrigation system and gave her copies of our newsletter.

Then she asked if she could interview some of our customers. Sure, why not? We gave her the phone numbers of half a dozen people from around the area. Here is a sampling of what they told Diane:

"Before we completely unpacked our first bag of produce, we ate every one of the raw sugar snap peas it contained," said Sharon Sanders, a veteran food writer and cookbook author. "I know how food should taste because I grew up on a farm in west central Pennsylvania. I've also lived in Italy, where luscious vegetables seem even more important than pasta."

"We've been amazed at the great foods we've gotten from our subscription in such a rotten year. The sweet corn was remarkably sweet and tender and full of milk."

"We look forward to the weekly newsletter and recipes from

the farm as much as the produce. My husband says it makes him appreciate what has gone into the tomato he is eating. It's a connection we have to real people and a real place — something that's not often found today."

"I had never seen a blooming flower on sage, used garlic greens or tried preparing edamame (edible soybeans still in their fuzzy pods) from scratch," said Regina Ragone, food editor of Rodale's Prevention magazine. She had also been test kitchen director for Ladies Home Journal and food editor for Weight Watchers magazine. Each Thursday, she stopped at the farm to pick up her vegetables before commuting to her apartment in Brooklyn.

"I love going to the farm. Seeing George and Melanie at work is like looking at a living Norman Rockwell (painting). The day they were packing heirloom tomatoes in all colors and sizes, the tomatoes looked like jewels. Seeing food in that pristine condition and where it is grown excites me."

"Sign up for succulence," was the headline on Diane's story in the Sept. 1 Morning Call. "Subscribe to good health with food from the farm."

That morning, our telephone started ringing non-stop. People from all over the Lehigh Valley wanted to sign up for succulence.

There was just one problem. They couldn't subscribe then. We were sold out. The season was almost over. We had only planted enough for the people who signed up last spring.

"But we'd be happy to add you to our waiting list for next year," we told callers.

"Yes! Please put me on the list," everyone said.

We did. And early the next year when our annual subscription flier went into the mail, the people from the waiting list were among the very first to send us checks. They wanted to make sure they didn't miss out this time around.

One thing more and more people want these days is farm-fresh food. That's why Diane's story is still generating sales for us, nearly four years after it appeared in print.

*Editor's Note: With his wife and 25-year-old son, George DeVault raises certified organic vegetables near Emmaus. He is a Food and Society Policy Fellow with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in a program funded by the Kellogg Foundation. The DeVaults' articles on diversification, high-value crops, greenhouse growing, and cut flowers are available on the Rodale Institute's new Website, [www.newfarm.org](http://www.newfarm.org).*

## How To Make — And Keep — Good Media Relations

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There is a very fine line between a strictly commercial message and a public interest article.

Knowing — and respecting — that line means the difference between getting a lot of good, free publicity or being told, "Buy an ad, buddy!" Case in point is the article "Jewels in the field" that ran June 28 in the Allentown Morning Call. "Despite extreme weather, strawberries are still good for picking. But not for much longer," warned the sub-head.

Notice the difference? Weather for strawberries has been lousy this spring, yet Lehigh County strawberry growers still have lots of ripe berries to be picked. That's the good news. Bad news is the berries won't be around much longer. Either way, it's news.

Whenever you have something unusual happening on your farm, local newspaper and radio and TV reporters want to hear about it. The catch is they usually won't know about it unless you tell them. That means picking up the telephone or sending a quick e-mail message.

Who do you contact? Ask for the farm reporter first. If no one is assigned to the farm beat, try the food editor or a general assignment reporter. Keep an eye or an ear out for whoever does the most and the best farm stories.

Don't forget the photo department. Newspaper and TV photographers are always looking for colorful feature photo opportunities. Changing seasons on the farm present limitless possibilities, from the birth of the first

spring lambs, a field of ripe orange pumpkins, or a one-horse open sleigh cutting through new-fallen snow.

For less timely items on daily newspapers, contact the editor in charge of the editorials. Letters to the editor should be simple — and civil. Limit yourself to just three concise paragraphs and your chances of getting published will improve tremendously. For longer, more complex subjects consider an op/ed piece that usually runs opposite the regular editorials in dailies. Just be sure to check out the newspaper's guidelines for style and length first.

Once reporters and editors get to know you, chances are they will call you the next time they need a comment on the weather, progress of crops, or government farm policy.

## Field Day For New Marketing Ideas

ROCKSPRING (Centre Co.) — Growers are always looking for new ideas in the marketplace, whether it is a different crop mix or a way to draw the consumer to the farm.

In order to expose central Pennsylvania growers to some new ideas, a field day is scheduled at the Penn State Horticulture Research Farm at Rockspring on July 23 at 5 p.m.

One new crop idea to look at is a sweet Spanish onions. In addition to production aspects of onion production, the field day will also look at several sweet Spanish onion varieties.

Evaluation will also be done on the variety Candy and how well this performs as greenhouse grown tray plants, field grown bare root transplants, and sets. There is a cooperative effort between Penn State University, Pennsylvania Vegetable Growers Association, and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture in creating a name brand onion for Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania Simply Sweet® Onion is a branded onion, licensed through the Pennsylva-

nia Vegetable Growers Association. It has been marketed locally as a branded onion in Washington County, Harrisburg, and Philadelphia retail stores. The onion is produced in Pennsylvania under a set of production and grading standards that result in a very high quality, large, sweet, non-pungent onion. It is marketed in August and September, during a period of low competition from other branded sweet onions grown in other states or other countries. Several acres were grown in southwestern Pennsylvania and the demand for these Pennsylvania onions was greater than the supply.

Is the demand great enough for additional growers? Can local central Pennsylvania growers meet this demand? Come on out to the field day and see if there is an opportunity for you.

High tunnels will be highlighted after the sweet Spanish onion trial. According to Penn State's Center for Plasticiculture, high tunnels encompass a crop growing system that fits somewhere between row covers and greenhouses. High tunnels are relatively inexpensive permitting

entry into crop production with limited capital. This system is particularly appealing to new-entry growers who utilize retail-marketing channels.

High tunnels are not conventional greenhouses. But like plastic-covered greenhouses, they are generally quonset-shaped, constructed of metal bows that are attached to metal posts which have been driven into the ground about two feet deep. They are covered with one layer of 6-mil greenhouse-grade polyethylene, and are ventilated by manually rolling up the sides each morning and rolling them down in early evening. There is no permanent heating system although it is advisable to have a standby portable propane unit to protect against unexpected below-freezing temperatures. There are no electrical connections. The only external connection is a water supply for trickle irrigation.

The tour will highlight some crops that can be successfully grown in this system. For additional information and/or directions, call Tom Butzler at (570) 726-0022. Refreshments will be provided.

## Cornell's Small Farm Program Sponsoring Quarterly Magazine

ITHACA, N.Y. — Cornell's Small Farm Program has begun preparation of the premier issue of its new magazine, the Small Farms Quarterly (SFQ) for distribution at Empire Farm Days.

According to Joanna Green of the program's staff: "SFQ is a celebration of what farming is all about. And farming is about a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Whether your interest is in specialized production, diversification, maximizing profits, or family values — whether your viewpoint is one of a producer, a homemaker, a parent, a

grandparent, or a young person — we think you'll find inspiration, encouragement and valuable information in this and future issues of Small Farm Quarterly."

The Quarterly is sponsored by Cornell's Small Farms Program and PRO-DAIRY/CCE NWN Dairy, Livestock and Field Crops Program.

For more information on the program or the magazine, contact Joanna Green at Cornell's Small Farms Program, (607) 255-0946, or e-mail [jjg16@cornell.edu](mailto:jjg16@cornell.edu).

## Pre-Conditioned Calf Sale Meeting Set

TOWANDA (Bradford Co.) — Middleburg Auction and Penn State Extension are sponsoring a meeting Monday, July 7 at 7 p.m. to discuss the Livestock Marketing Association Vaccinated and Certified Calves (LMA-VACC) pre-conditioned calf program. The meeting will take place at Penn State's Bradford County Extension Office in Towanda.

The pre-conditioned calf sale is scheduled for Saturday, Nov. 8 at 1 p.m. at the Middleburg Auction in Snyder County. It is open to producers who agree to follow the pre-conditioning protocol

with required vaccinations and boosters, parasite control, and weaning at least 30 days ahead of the sale.

Pre-conditioned calves often sell at a premium because of lower rates of morbidity and mortality after being placed in a feedlot.

For more information on the LMA-VACC pre-conditioning program or the July 7 meeting, call Dave Hartman, Penn State extension agent at (570) 784-6660 or Bill Weist at the Middleburg Auction at (570) 784-6660.

## Twilight Tomato Meeting Set

HOLTWOOD (Lancaster Co.) — A twilight meeting at Steve Groff's Cedar Meadow Farm in Holtwood is scheduled for Wednesday, July 9 at 6 p.m.

Visitors will have a chance to see Groff's system of growing tomatoes under Haygrove tunnels. For more information, call 877-HAYGROVE.