

Money-Making Ideas To Boost Farm Income

If you're looking for new ways to add to your bottom line, take a look at the money-making ideas featured here and on the next page.

If you've found or heard about a new income-boosting idea, we'd like to hear about it. Send details to: FARM SHOW Magazine, P.O. Box 1029, Lakeville, Minn. 55044 (ph 800 834-9665) or email us at: editor@farmshow.com.

Helen Thomas grows gourds - 55 acres worth of them - and sells them to crafts people and artists.



Gourd Lady Does Big Business

Helen Thomas knew a good thing when she started raising gourds on part of the family's melon farm. What started as a single row quickly grew to 1/4 acre and today covers about 55 acres.

"I used to look through seed catalogs for unique melons, and then one day I noticed gourds," she recalls. "I thought they might grab attention."

Today she sells gourds to crafts people and artists as well as paints them for fall decorations. Artists, who sell their finished works for as much as \$22,000, have used her washed and dried gourds. Other customers make cat houses out of big Bushel gourds and some even make tables.

"One year I painted 7,500 gourds for decorations," she recalls. "Another year, I planted Apple gourds, dried them out and painted them red. One was 6 in. high and 7 in. across. A fellow came up and asked for seed for that apple. He thought they were real."

Large gourd varieties include hard shell Kettle, Bushel, African Kettle, Bottle and Tobacco. She also raises smaller varieties for ornaments and containers, such as Sennari and a smaller version of Bottle. Gourds are available clean or unclean, dried or undried. She sells gourds alone as well as in special packages, such as a box of 25 gourds for \$96. She also sells how-to pattern books for use with specific gourds.

Gourds are priced on size, season, quantity and availability. Mini-gourds (2 to 3-in. dia.) can sell for \$2 each or \$1 each in groups of 25 or more.

Thomas saves seed from her best gourds to ensure uniform genetics from one year to the next. She fertilizes the gourds heavily, similar to melons. Fields can only be left in gourds for two years, with a three-year rotation in alfalfa to build the soil back.

Gourds are picked as soon as the ground frosts. They're piled on wagons or piled on the ground through the winter and spring, as long as six to nine months, until dry.

Gourds are then brought in to a washing area which consists of an 8-ft. dia. cattle tank. Six nozzles on a pipe send water in two directions, powered by a power washer. Each batch of gourds takes about an hour to clean away excess material and get down to the hard shell.

There can be a lot of batches to clean. Yields can reach as high as 150 wagon loads averaging 300 big gourds or 400 small gourds each. However, yields can be much



One variety of gourds is big enough to make coffee tables.



less, and depending on the winter, Thomas can lose half her production due to spoilage.

Once the gourds are washed and dried, they are stored on shelves in her barn. She also uses a house trailer that had been gutted out after a fire and lined with shelves.

Because of the mold that grows on the curing gourds, Thomas advises always wearing protective masks when cutting or working with them. She also suggests using a strong fan when cutting or drilling gourds. "Blow the material away as you cut," she says.

Thomas markets her gourds at area craft markets and from her farm. She also hosts events at the farm. Special gourd craft classes are held there as well as tours of her Museum Collection of GourdArt. While it doesn't include any \$22,000 pieces, the 500-piece collection does include work by many of her customers.

"I have all types of gourd art: tip carving, acrylic, oil, weaving on gourds, even musical instruments made out of gourds," says Thomas. "I have some of the best customers in the world. They're very good artists, and sometimes they will give me a piece or trade one for gourds."

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Dubi Ayalon has a water buffalo herd that he plans to milk for the first time next spring. Water buffalo milk is used to make authentic Italian-style mozzarella cheese.

Water Buffalo Milk In Big Demand

Dubi Ayalon isn't your average Wisconsin dairyman, and his cows are about as far as you can get from Holsteins. The former Israeli special forces soldier and school teacher has a water buffalo herd that he'll milk for the first time when they calve later this spring. Water buffalo milk is in big demand for making authentic Italian-style mozzarella cheese.

"Restaurants in Chicago importing it now are calling me to ask when we will have cheese available," he says. "The price for the milk is high, but the money for the cheese is even higher. It goes for \$25 per pound."

Ayalon didn't know anything about raising cows, much less water buffalo, when he started. He doesn't know anything about making cheese either, but he is ready to learn.

"At first I'll sell the milk to Cedar Grove Cheese, and they'll make the cheese. I'll work for the cheese maker to learn how to make it and then make my own cheese," he says.

Right now all his herd is making is manure. During the winter, he feeds each animal about 4 1/2 lbs. of grain a day. In the summer, when they're on pasture, grain drops back to a pound a day. However, they eat lots of hay.

Ayalon hopes to have 10 cows in production this summer, but even then he won't have milk to sell immediately. He plans to let the calves nurse for several months to get them off to a good start, as the Italians do. Then he'll begin milking. Daily production can vary from 10 to 50 lbs. per animal.

"If I'm a genius at taking care of them, I may get 25 lbs. per day. If I'm okay, I may get 15 lbs. per day," he says.

Water buffalo meat is also in strong demand. Ayalon says he has been told the California market will pay as much as \$3,500 per animal. Like the milk, the meat is very low in cholesterol. While he expects to sell males, he has no plan to sell females until he reaches his goal.

One difficulty has been to find equipment to handle the animals. He has found a man who will make special headlocks for him, as standard stanchions don't work. And the animal's legs have to be chained in place during milking, he says.

He was concerned about finding a milking machine. While at the Wisconsin Dairy Expo, he spoke with a company that ships equipment to Southeast Asia for water buffalo milking.

Ayalon recognizes that his is a long-term project and one he has to learn as he goes. His goal is to get to 30 milking animals. He has no desire to go above that number. He sees water buffalo as a good niche for a small farmer.

"In my opinion, a lot of farmers who want to be small need to be unique," says Ayalon. "If a farmer really wants to get rich, he should milk camels. In Israel camel milk sells for \$1.50 per pound. It's thought to be very healthy for you. There's even an old story that it works like Viagra. I would milk them, but I broke my back riding one, so I don't like them."

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Butcher Kettles Make Tasty Pop Corn

"We wanted something unusual to bring to our annual church festival. It's a real eye catcher," says Kevin Kuhn, Oconee, Ill. about his home-built, gas-fired "butcher kettle" corn popper.

The huge corn popper is built around a pair of 2-ft. dia. cast iron hog butchering kettles. One kettle is enclosed inside a 3-ft. sq. metal box with a spring-assisted hinged lid. Heat is supplied by a gas burner - salvaged from a water heater - located under the kettle.

Once corn is popped, the spring-assisted lid is raised and the popped corn dumped into the second kettle, which sets on a three-legged base next to the box. The corn is then bagged for sale.

"It's an eye-catching process. Visitors like to watch the corn as it's being popped so it draws in customers," says Kuhn. "We put a little sugar on the popped corn, but it doesn't have the color of caramel corn."

"We now operate the popper four weekends every fall and run 750 to 800 lbs. of popcorn through it per season. All people



Home-built, gas-fired "butcher kettle" corn popper is built around a pair of 2-ft. dia., cast iron hot butchering kettles.

have to do is smell the popcorn and they'll stop to buy some."

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