

## He Used Waterjet "Torch" To Launch Worldwide Business

Waterjet cutting systems like the Farm-Jet (Vol. 38, No. 2) can be used to cut parts from metal and a whole lot more. Pat Burrington used his waterjet to build a business with clients from the U.S. and Canada, and as far away as France and the Virgin Islands. He is as likely to be creating artistic inlays as cutting out gussets and pin bosses for farm machinery or flumes for irrigation ditches.

"I can cut anything with it but tempered glass," says Burrington. "It has advantages over plasma cutters and lasers. I can cut plastics, stone, tile and even mirrors, not just conductive metals. A laser will cut 1/4-in. steel twice as fast as a waterjet, but the waterjet leaves no hardened edge or need to grind or sand."

Waterjet cutting was a new technology when he bought the \$120,000 OMAX system 12 years ago. A highly trained welder and welding inspector, he had no idea what he would end up doing with it. There were no schools to teach waterjet cutting, and he received no training from the Chicago area company that sold it to him.

"The technician delivered the machine and walked me through it as he put it together, warning me I was my own if it broke down," recalls Burrington. "I asked when he would train me how to draw a design and use it. He laughed and said, that's on you, adding that drawing files for cutting

wood, metal, tile or cutting out metal signs were all different."

Burrington learned how to create the software files needed to carve a wide variety of materials. He admits he made a lot of mistakes early on.

"If you make mistakes on a stainless steel plate that cost you \$800 to \$1,000, you won't stay in business for long," says Burrington.

When a software update came out that let the operator etch or engrave material by turning down water pressure, Burrington tried it. Soon he was etching in feathers, beaks and eyes on mallards before cutting them out. He put scales on fish and muscle tone on elk and deer.

"When the owner of the company saw it, he was blown away," recalls Burrington. "The company didn't know you could do what I was doing with their machine."

Since then he has built equipment for his own use and parts for others. As word spread, so did his business. He has cut intricate designs out of mirrors, tiles and other material, and then cut inlays from other sources to exactly match the area removed.

"With the waterjet, I can cut within 3 to 4 thousandths of an inch and be dead on," he says.

Burrington says his most challenging piece to date was a flooring project for a high school. It involved a couple hundred little



Pat Burrington has built a worldwide business using waterjet "torches" designed to cut parts from metal and many other materials.

pieces for a tiger, as well as lettering. It was about 12 ft. across.

"I would do a little section and then move over and do another little section," he recalls. "It was expensive flooring, so I couldn't make a mistake."

Burrington says he gets about 95 percent of his work through his website. He had it created early on and has since added numerous examples of his work.

"Anybody in the world can find it and pull up my quote sheet," says Burrington. "Answering the questions on it gives me what I need to know in advance. If the person has a sketch or design, they can submit it with the quote sheet, and I can figure a rough price."

Burrington takes the sketch or idea and creates the drawing or CAD file needed. He does all his own software work. He says his waterjet has come in handy for his own use as well as filling orders.

"I needed 2 custom gaskets for a Stromberg carburetor, but I couldn't get parts," he recalls. "I scanned the top and bottom of the carburetor, traced the pattern with the OMAX software and cut out 2 perfect gaskets."

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## One-Of-A-Kind Berry Farm Ignites An Industry

Andrew Pitz is a sixth generation Iowa farmer whose family operation has gained business notoriety and financial success by growing aronia berries, better known as black chokecherries. "Years ago my father saw that aronia berries had the potential to become an ingredient in many consumer products so he decided to grow them on our farm," says Andrew. "We found some plants, nurtured them along, and within a few years we were producing a fair amount of fruit."

The Pitz family found that growing the berries was only part of their job. They also needed to find a market. Over the years their berries have become ingredients in everything from chili starter to salsa to health supplements. In addition to selling to distributors and food processors, Pitz and his family sell private label products on their Sawmill Hollow website. Organic Aronia Berries, Berry Concentrate, Berry Powder, Jelly, Syrup and several health supplements can be ordered online.

Pitz says that one of their keys to success has been helping others succeed in the same business. "We're not an island out here, even though we're the only farm in the U.S. dedicated exclusively to aronia production," Andrew says. "I learned early on that to succeed we had to generate interest so more people would grow the product just like we were."

Their farm created fun and interesting educational events for students, the general public and potential customers. In 2008 they hosted a North American Aronia Berry Festival, which quickly grew into an annual event. In 2013 it drew more than 3,500 people to the Sawmill Hollow farm the 3<sup>rd</sup> weekend in September. The event included family friendly activities for children and adults, along with complimentary tastings and even recipe contests. Discussion forums provided advice on growing aronia



Black chokecherries can be used as an ingredient in everything from chili starter to salsa to health supplements, says grower Andrew Pitz.

berries and dietitians presented information on using aronia in healthy food selections.

"Seeing this operation grow from a single farm into an industry has been especially rewarding," says Pitz. His family joined with several other growers in 2008 to start the Midwest Aronia Association, a group that now includes several hundred members in 14 states. Members have more than 200,000 plants under cultivation.

Aronia fruit is produced on a bushy plant that has fragrant blossoms in the spring, bright green leaves in the summer, and dark purple fruit in the fall. The plants are naturally understory and woodland edge species that grow well in forested areas. They're resistant to drought, insects and disease. Although the fruit alone has an astringent flavor, it can be made into juice, baked into breads and used in salsas and chilis. Aronia is an excellent anti-oxidant with many health benefits.

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## On-Farm Mill Sells All It Can Make

Dan and Fran DeRuyck grow and harvest wheat, then grind it into flour. Local bakers and homemakers buy their flours and flakes almost faster than they can process them.

The Treherne, Man., on-farm business has steadily grown since Dan's parents, Gerry and Marie, experimented with growing 20 acres of organic wheat and selling to a couple of local bakeries. Gerry added a small mill in his garage and by 2004 he couldn't keep up with demand. Dan and Fran harvested their first organic crop in 2006. Now, in addition to farming 700 acres of organic grains, the couple buys grain from neighbors to meet the demand for their milled products.

Dan and his father take care of the outside work, farming and unloading the grain in storage, cleaning it and bringing it to Fran, "the milling queen."

Her roller and stone mill are set up in half of the 24 by 24-ft. remodeled garage. With stainless steel counters and easy-to-clean walls and floors, the milling area is like a commercial kitchen to meet permit requirements. The other half of the garage has a cooler to store 30-bu. totes of oat groats until they are delivered.

"We get comments that our oats are the best tasting," Fran says. She explains that she doesn't temper (heat) them like the ones sold in stores. The taste and texture are better, but the oats only have a two-month shelf life.

Besides oats and wheat, the DeRuycks mill spelt and rye, and they process buckwheat, flax and sunflowers.

"Our customers give us ideas of what they are looking for," Dan says, and Fran can adjust the grinds. For example, most bakeries like fine flour, but many customers prefer it coarser for tortillas. Oat flakes vary from small to regular, to coarse flakes used for granola.

Since giving out samples when they first started, the DeRuycks have not had to do much marketing. They are affiliated with

local cooperatives that provide website information ([www.harvestmoonfood.ca](http://www.harvestmoonfood.ca)) and have had some media coverage, but most business comes through word of mouth.

"Our business stands out because we are certified organic, processing the grain ourselves, and are willing to meet with people and do what they need," Fran says.

"Customers ask us how our crops are doing," Dan adds.

For farmers considering milling and marketing their own grain, he suggests starting small and growing as markets develop.

"Get as much information as you can," Dan says. "Be patient. You'll learn as you grow. You will make lots of mistakes."

Marketing direct to customers — from 5-lb. bags of flour to pallets of 40, 50-lb. bags from British Columbia to Ontario — definitely increases the value of their crops compared to conventional markets, the couple says. By processing grain themselves they can grow the business without adding acres.

But they point out they are also doing several jobs from growing to cleaning, and milling to marketing.

"It's very physical and not an 8 to 5 job," Fran notes.

With continued demand, Dan plans to move storage from his parents' farm to his farm to make the process more efficient.

With her computer to keep her on track with orders, Fran schedules her milling to provide a fresh product to customers.

She notes that she is so busy, she doesn't have much time to bake for her family. Fortunately Dan's mother, Marie, bakes bread to make sure the flours Fran grinds work well.

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