

FFA Project Became Young Man's Business

Ben Niendick's FFA bale sale project is now a year-round business. Niendick makes small square and big round wheat straw bales on area farms, including his Wellington, Mo., family farm. The bales are sold to a variety of markets, from construction sites to nurseries, farms, gardens and home decorators.

"We sold a lot of straw to a big pipeline project in Oklahoma one year and have sold straw as far east as Quincy, Ill.," says Niendick. "The small square bales are wire tied, which not a lot of people do anymore. The wires hold up better than twine, which customers appreciate."

Niendick does what he can to make sure customers get what they want. His straw is clean and bright. Every field is inspected and certified to be weed-free before it's baled. While not necessary for home and farm sales, nurseries and construction sites need the straw to be noxious weed free.

"It is a little costly, but the certification adds value to the straw," says Niendick.

"More importantly, it is a good selling point. People feel better about buying the straw when it is clean and bright."

Niendick's straw business grew rapidly the first few years, spiked with the pipeline business, but has since leveled off. He sold 1,600 bales his first year in 2008, doubling that the next. This past year he sold around 31,000 small square bales while still in college.

"Now that I'm out of college, I'll have more time to sell more straw."

How much he has to sell can depend on the weather. In 2015 a rainy summer resulted in only half his expected number of bales.

"I had to buy big square bales, break them down and rebale in small squares to fulfill the contracts I had in place," recalls Niendick.

He runs 3 small square balers and thirteen, 28-ft. box trailers for delivering bales. Each trailer can hold up to 250 bales. Two trailers can be hooked together for transit, allowing Niendick to deliver from 400 to 500 bales in a trip. Bales are priced by quantity and distance



Ben Niendick turned an FFA "bale sale" project into a year-round business in which he makes wheat straw bales on area farms, then sells them to a variety of markets.

to be hauled.

"I can get most orders delivered within 2 days," he says. "Good customer service is important. You have to be able to get along with people."

Niendick says his biggest challenge is finding enough wheat straw. This year he lost one of his biggest growers when he chose not to plant wheat. In addition to finding new suppliers, he is also diversifying to find new

markets and more uses for equipment.

"I had the opportunity to plant some alfalfa and am baling and selling it as well," says Niendick.

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Willow Tree Farming Pays Off For Basket-Weaving Entrepreneur

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

About 4 years ago Howard Peller planted 50 varieties of willow trees on two acres of his Roseville, Ohio, farm. Each winter since then he harvests the new growth for the baskets he weaves and to sell to customers for a variety of uses.

Coppicing (growing woody plants) is an ancient practice that Peller studied while living and studying in Germany, along with basket weaving.

Peller used to be head of design for baskets at The Longaberger Company. He realized there could be a market for willow to make baskets, which he sells mostly at local farmers markets.

Thanks to his website, he has also developed a national market for willow itself. The smallest diameter dry sticks (1/8 to 1/4 in. dia.) are used for basket making. Larger diameter green 7-ft. sticks are used for living fences and structures. There is a renewed interest in building woven wattle fences and using willow for practical items such as tomato cages – and even boats.

Willow trees multiply quickly. The 7,000 single sticks he originally planted have multiplied at the roots, sending up as

many as 60 shoots. Each winter, Peller cuts the willow with a pruner and old-fashioned tools such as a billhook. He dries the basket material for 2 years to ensure baskets won't shrink after they're made. The longer, living fence sticks are put in a cooler to be shipped in spring and early summer. The variety of species gives customers color, texture and tensile strength options. Most willow trees thrive anywhere that has at least a short dormancy period, Peller says.

Managing it all – both growing the material and weaving it – is challenging, Peller says. People generally do one or the other. But he finds the work satisfying and meaningful because he can grow something on his land to make a living.

"For me the big thing is finding harmony living with nature. It doesn't jive with today's world, but it's something I want to do," he says.

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Four years ago Howard Peller planted 50 varieties of willow trees on his Ohio farm. He harvests the new growth for the baskets he weaves and for sale to customers.



Willow comes in a variety of colors and textures.



Peller's willow baskets are sold mostly at local farmers markets. Willow trees multiply quickly at the roots, with each plant sending up as many as 60 shoots.



According to Peller, there's a renewed interest in building willow fences.