

Expert Advice For Starting A Rabbit Business

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

After buying one doe rabbit as a pet for his kids, Randy Nierling, Blair Wis., soon ended up with a full-time job as a rabbit farmer with 700 cages and a manure pit.

"Rabbits really do breed like rabbits," jokes Nierling. "Our first doe had 8 doe babies, and everything grew from there."

Housing those 8 and their offspring quickly led to an addition to the garage for 30 to 40 cages. Gradually the yard filled with another 50 to 60 hutches. Deciding to go full-time with the rabbit farming, Nierling went from an acre and a half to a small farm with a 35 by 240-ft. barn in 2010.

"I had 700 double stacked cages, and I had only filled half the barn," he recalls.

All those rabbits meant a lot of manure. With technical help from his county's land conservation agency, Nierling was approved for financial assistance to build a manure pit.

"It was a 120 by 40-ft. pit with a 350,000-gal. capacity," says Nierling. "It was designed to be pumped once a year. We flushed rabbit manure into gutters and then by gravity into the pit. I thought about using gutter cleaners, but rabbit manure is

extremely corrosive and would have corroded them away in a few years."

With housing and manure handling taken care of, Nierling continued to work on productivity. After trying numerous feeds, he found one that seemed to work. Large 4-ft. fans installed at one end of the barn improved air quality and reduced disease.

As more things fell in line, time on feed decreased from 14 weeks to 10 or less.

Most rabbit breeders he talked to waited until does were 8 to 9 mos. old before breeding. He reasoned that he was marketing rabbits at 9 to 10 weeks at a 6 to 7-lb. weight, so why wait so long to breed.

"I pushed breeding to about 4 mos. of age," says Nierling. "We used to wait to breed dairy cattle when they were 24 mos.; now they're already calving at that point."

The shorter timing presented few problems, perhaps losing one litter out of 25. The work involved was a bigger problem. Three times a week Nierling would pull 30 does out of their cages, put them in with bucks for 5 hrs., and then back in their cages.

"I regret double stacking as that added a lot of extra labor," says Nierling. "You need a step ladder to climb up to reach does in the



After he decided to go full-time with rabbit farming, Randy Nierling added a 35 by 240-ft. barn. All those rabbits meant a lot of manure, so he added a big manure pit.

upper layer."

Another problem is the tight profit margins. Nierling was sending a batch of rabbits weekly to a central Iowa processor. A truck would pick them up at a nearby town.

"I got \$1.59 a pound live weight," says Nierling. "If I had lived closer to the processing plant, I could have delivered them myself and been paid \$1.00 a head more."

He was selling 25,000 to 30,000 rabbits a year, but he estimates he was spending 8 to 10 hrs. a day, 7 days a week with the rabbits.

"I was making only 50¢ an hour," says Nierling. "An extra dollar a head would have really helped."

Nierling was trying to find ways to reduce labor when his health failed and he ended up

on kidney dialysis several times a week.

"I had to close down the rabbit operation, sell off the equipment and let the farm go," says Nierling. "I spent much of 2014 and 2015 in the hospital."

After getting a kidney transplant, Nierling is slowly recovering his health. While he doubts he will start raising rabbits again, he has advice for those who are interested.

"Set your business up close to a processor, keep labor to a minimum and find a market for the rabbit manure," says Nierling.

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Hops Harvester Fits In Pickup Bed

The rapidly growing microbrewery industry need hops, and small hops growers need harvesting equipment. That created a market for the Hop Harvester 1000, which fits in the back of a pickup and runs on 110-volt electricity, says Steven Steenland, owner of Steenland Manufacturing, a family-owned fabrication business in New York state.

The harvester's belt-fed system has rubber fingers that pick off the hop cones, which drop to a screen, while the rest of the plant falls into a separate pile.

The compact size of the unit makes it affordable for producers with 1 to 5 acres of hops, Steenland says. The Hop Harvester 1000 sells for \$11,800, compared to \$50,000 for an imported harvester that is more complicated and has steel fingers.

Hop growers appreciate its versatility – they can take it to the field and run it with a generator or set it up in a building and bring the harvested hops plants to it.



It's affordable for producers with 1 to 5 acres of crops, says Steenland Mfg.

"We have already shipped them all over the country and to Canada," Steenland says.

As the brewing industry grows, Steenland is preparing to meet their needs with a bigger machine suitable for larger acreages.

"We are trying to grow with our customers," he says. And they recently introduced a batch-type hops dryer.

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Connecting Livestock Farmers To Cropland

Minnesota's new Cropland Grazing Exchange (CGE) website (www.mda.state.mn.us/cge) connects livestock farmers who need grazing land with crop farmers who have land to graze.

The idea came from farmers who wanted to improve soil health by adding manure from grazing animals, says Kelly Anderson, a Minnesota Department of Agriculture livestock specialist.

She notes that most crop farmers don't have livestock that they can put on cover crops in the late fall and spring. At the same time, livestock owners who want to extend the grazing season and save feed for winter benefit also.

Just started in March, Anderson says about 20 producers had logged in with their locations and information. "We keep things pretty private," Anderson says. "Producers negotiate with each other."

While anyone can view the website map, participants must set up an account to log in.

They answer questions that provide helpful information. Landowners list the number of acres and type of land (residue, cover crop, pasture/hay) and if it is organic, seasons it is available, fence type, water availability, and herbicide history. Livestock producers list the number and livestock type (cattle, sheep, goats), how far they will travel, season they want to graze, and if they are willing to fence, install a water system or haul water.

While it is set up in Minnesota, Anderson invites producers near the borders in neighboring states to check out the website and set up an account if they are interested.

"It's a win/win for improving soil health and extending the grazing season for livestock," Anderson concludes.

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Corn Vending Machine Catching On Fast

Two years ago (Vol. 39 Issue 4) FARM SHOW featured the Corn Xpress corn vending machine designed to dispense feed anytime, day or night. Because of demand, manufacturing costs have been reduced and the price of the machine has gone down.

"We started in Mississippi and now have 80 units in 13 states," says co-owner Dan Barnes. Customers include farmers who want to direct market their corn for two to three times what they can get at the elevator, as well as convenience store owners, co-ops and entrepreneurs. "It brings tremendous value to a location. Some convenience stores ran the numbers, and business increased 30 percent during hunting season. People stop to buy corn and end up shopping in the store as well."

The vending machines are set up in high traffic areas and intersections, where customers – primarily hunters – can stop day or night to buy corn.

Barnes and his partner, Chip Chisholm,

have made a few improvements on the U.S.-made vending machines since introducing them. Instead of being welded, they are bolted so parts can be put on a pallet and drop-shipped anywhere. The machines take cash, credit and debit cards. They have a security light. And they come in three sizes, 176, 260 and 340 bushels, with four purchase options: 5, 10, 33 and 55 gallons. Corn Xpress also offers an option for software to sell by weight.

"We dropped the price to around \$30,000 per machine," Barnes says, noting that the cost includes set-up and training and a one-year warranty. Units are bolted to new concrete or existing concrete parking lots and require 110-volt power access. With a 150+ mph hurricane rating, the polymer dome and steel frame units are engineered to withstand severe weather, and there have been no problems so far.

Barnes says he conservatively estimates payback in about 3 years. Some locations sell up to 20,000 lbs. of corn a week.

"It fits anywhere there is hunting activity



Corn Xpress vending machines are set up in high traffic areas and intersections, where customers – primarily hunters and hobby farmers – can stop day or night to buy corn.

going on, and also for feeding livestock on smaller farms," Barnes says. In addition to corn, units can be set up to dispense other grains, protein pellets, and rock salt. The company is currently working on developing a smaller unit to dispense feed at zoos and animal petting parks.

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