



featured

Rural Worland couple's goals for property

By Barton Stam

"Too much to mow and not enough to farm," jokes Lyle Spence about the property south of Worland he and his wife, Shelley, have called home since 2002.

Their 15-acre property was built with a vision. That vision included highly productive hay fields and grass pasture, a war on weeds, and well-built barn and corals. The Spences wanted their property to be appealing to the eye and managed in a sustainable fashion. The land, building, fences, and pastures are well taken care of, and it is clear the Spences enjoy their stewardship. Like many small-acreage owners, the Spences are horse enthusiasts. They keep five head, and a colt is expected this spring.

Use Rotational Grazing

The horses graze 2 acres intensively during the summer. Lyle will give the horses access to one small plot of the 2 acres at a time while other pastures are rested and the grass allowed to regrow. This rotational grazing is accomplished by moving one or two lines of electric fencing.

I had the chance to watch them move the horses, and the horses were clearly excited by the prospect of fresh pasture. As soon as they were moved, the horses enthusiastically started nibbling the seed heads from the new grass. Dry hay is also fed during the growing season, in a dry lot, to supplement their diet of lush forage and to give



Horses are rotated through paddocks divided by electric fencing.

the forage in the grazing paddocks time to regrow.

The rest of the fields are in hay production during the summer. In the dormant season, the Spence horses graze the hayfield and the other pastures after hay has been cut, baled, and stacked. The Spences' neighbor does the haying and takes hay in lieu of cash.



The vineyard produces 20 to 100 pounds of grapes, depending upon the weather.

Improvements Help Productivity

Lyle and Shelley have worked hard to improve productivity including closing open irrigation ditches and using gated pipe, seeding desirable species, testing soil and fertilizing, and improving weed management.

All this hard work and management have paid off. Weedy plants are endangered species here, and the Spences are able to feed their horses entirely with forage and hay grown on their acreage. For several years, the Spences have used fly predators, biocontrol agents for pest control, which they spread over manure piles for fly control. They do a great job at keeping fly numbers down.

The property, in addition to being a home to family and livestock, has a newly planted vineyard. The Spences first planted grapes in 2003 as a tribute to Lyle's mom, who grew up on a vineyard and whose father worked in neighboring vineyards.

They didn't know if they could produce fruit, but the couple did want a nice, vigorous leafy border plant on the fence around their yard that would have a

landowners

include eye appeal and sustainability

connection to family roots.

While they have had good luck with some varieties grown in his grandfather's vineyard (Niagara, Catawba, and Delaware), Lyle recommends hardier varieties such as Edelweiss and Frontenac. They have also planted Valiant, St Croix, and Elvira vines, but they are too young to judge their suitability to the Washakie County climate. The Spences have also planted seedless varieties but found them too fragile for cold weather.

Grapes Heavily Pruned

Grapes are planted as 1-year-old bare root vines in grow tubes along a trellis. The vines may grow 15-18 feet a year. Lyle and Shelley prune heavily in the spring to encourage fruit growth. Fruit production has varied from 20-100 pounds from seven or eight vines, depending mostly on the weather. Lyle is careful to keep the herbicide 2,4-D away from the vines because grapes are very susceptible to it.

The vines are watered and fertilized with whatever

the lawn is given, and electric fencing is used to discourage livestock in the adjoining pasture from any grapevine sampling. A straw bale in front of each vine during winter helps prevent wind desiccation.

The fruit is eaten as table grapes, and Shelley makes delicious jellies.

Garden Spot

Summertime also brings a prolific vegetable garden with everything from potatoes and beets to lettuce, cantaloupe, and cucumbers. Green peppers, tomatoes, and onions are



Produce from the Spences' garden include potatoes, beets, lettuce, tomatoes, and green peppers.

canned together by Shelley to make a soup base.

The Spences crowd their garden plants together

within the 30-foot-by-30-foot garden plot. Their theory is that something is going to grow in that space and it might as well be something they want. They weed heavily the first couple of weeks and then the dense canopy of garden vegetables deters weeds. The garden is also mulched with a compost of manure and grass clippings from their lawn.

Careful planning, hard work, and a love of the land have turned the Spence property into an example for all small-acreage owners. Their labors have shown what can be possible on the land.



Lyle Spence with grapes and Neifi, their dog.

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