



featured

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED — SUCCEED!

Weather foiled first attempt at small-acreage production but Worland producer's harvest now overflowing across Big Horn Basin

By Tori Dietz

Mark Stiver, owner of Stiver's Stone Pony Vineyard and Garden, is now harvesting the fruits of his labors by selling produce at farmers markets throughout the Big Horn Basin and in Casper.

Stiver bought 10 acres of land south of Worland in 2007 after retiring in 2006 from his civil engineering position with the Wyoming Department of Transportation. Having grown up on an irrigated farm in southwestern South Dakota, the 10-acre purchase fulfilled a long-time desire to return to his roots of working the land.



Addie Hanson, granddaughter of Mark Stiver, holds a prize cabbage.

First Venture a Learning Experience

Stiver's initial venture into produce production was not as successful as he'd wished. With the dream of eventually owning a winery, in 2008 he planted 2,000 grape vines, 100 fruit trees, and several hundred raspberry and blackberry plants. Due to harsh, dry winds, tough winters, and young vines, his grapevines did not produce as he had hoped.

Not ready to give up on the cold-hardy, University of Minnesota-developed grapes, he put his green thumb to work in the vegetable garden to provide some cash flow until the grapes matured. Results were bountiful – he sold out the first year of the Worland Farmers Market (2009). The next year, he doubled his garden and sold most of his produce. This past year, he again doubled production and sold most of what he grew, mostly through farmers markets in Worland, Cody, Basin, and Casper, sales at his farm, and at local grocery stores.

Stiver is considering leasing several acres nearby to grow more melons – which have been brisk sellers at markets. He also plans to install a high tunnel to extend the growing season for tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers.

This past spring at a seminar in Minneapolis, he met a Montana

winery owner who expressed interest in buying wine grapes. In September, the Montana winery purchased 1,700 pounds of grapes. The winery owner liked the grapes and indicated he wants to contract for more next year.

Focus on Sustainable Practices

Stiver says he tries to grow crops sustainably, using primarily manure and compost from local sources. He also fertilizes through a drip irrigation system and applies some foliar products. Stiver has recently begun researching organic fertilizer – but wants to be sure quality and size of produce can be maintained before he changes his operation.

Thus far, he's been able to have great production without pesticides, but spider mites have become a problem. He is researching natural controls for this pest.

Plentiful Produce

Stone Pony Vineyard Garden produces artichokes, garlic, cabbage, peppers, leeks, dill, beans, peas, tomatoes, cucumbers, beets, carrots, potatoes, onions, cantaloupe, watermelon, summer and winter squash, and sweet corn.

landowner



Mark Stiver has always dreamed of owning a winery.

Using drip irrigation is one of his best decisions, says Stiver. The water is placed when and where a plant needs it and prevents overwatering. Weeds, without water, are kept down.

Weed control is a big issue for produce growers. Stiver cultivates between rows to reduce weeds, uses a propane torch to burn some weeds down, and uses chemicals sparingly on field edges. He plans to plant a living windbreak/shelterbelt and install a temporary, double-layered snow fence windbreak on his north property boundary. The temporary

windbreak would protect the living windbreak from herbicide overspray while immediately reducing wind-related desiccation and other damage to grapevines and fruit trees

Family, Friends Help

With a bountiful harvest came a demand for extra help. This past summer, grapes on 350 vines ripened at the same time, and friends and family members helped with harvest. Mark's companion, Jane, helps at the Worland Farmers Market, and daughters Erin and Beth help at markets in Cody, Worland, Basin, and Casper. Stiver says he's thankful to have Carlos, his hired man, who is now proficient in the pruning and care of grapes.

Help also has come from a world-wide source. Stiver became involved

in the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) program and hosted interns who helped weed, mow, and prune grapes.

"This organization has provided me an awesome opportunity to meet people from around the world and learn about their customs and cultures," he says. "At the same time, it provided the interested interns the opportunity to learn about my operation and to explore the Big Horn Basin."

For more information about WWOOF, visit www.woofusa.org. Stiver has a Facebook page – Stiver's Garden.

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Produce from Stiver's business are sold in farmers markets in Worland, Cody, Basin, and Casper.

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