



featured

RURAL CASPER VENTURE GREW A FAMILY WHILE

By Donna Cuin

Odds are you will have found the Smidt family if you drive by an old silo near Casper converted into a produce stand.

The passion of Bruce and Jennifer Smidt and their two grown children, Kylie and Freddie, is growing trees on their 28-acre tree farm that succeed in central Wyoming landscapes. They also grow and sell produce from a roadside market stand.

Bruce grew up in the landscape and nursery business, and Kylie and Freddie are sixth-generation farmers and nursery owners. Bruce's father ran a nursery in Nebraska. After Bruce received a landscaping architecture degree from Iowa State, he and Jennifer moved to Wyoming to start a landscaping business.

Opportunity met Necessity

In the 1990s, Bruce had a large landscaping job in the Sheridan area that lasted two years. The project required purchasing trees from 13 different states and Canada. That's when he decided there was a need for a local tree farm.

He and his wife purchased 20 acres on which the majority of the tree farm is planted. Five hundred of those first trees were apple and other fruit trees.



The Smidts operate a vegetable operation in addition to their tree nursery.

The first trees were ready for sale by 1998. Only dormant trees, which have a much greater success rate after transplanted into a landscape, are dug. This requires they dig trees in the spring or in the fall rather than during the typical growing season when many nurseries and landscapers are experiencing their busiest months.

Corn Prevents Erosions, Catches Snow

Their vegetable business had modest beginnings. Corn between tree rows helped prevent erosion and

conserved soil moisture by acting as a living snow fence. Several different varieties of sweet corn were tried and sold to neighbors. This progressed to selling vegetables out of the back of their pickup at the local hardware store and other locations and then to selling produce at the Natrona County Master Gardeners' Farmers Market. This was often a family affair as Jennifer brought Kylie along to sell veggies.

The family sold apples from some of the first fruit tree varieties that had been planted along with a selection

landowners

CULTIVATING TREE, VEGETABLE BUSINESS

of vegetables. Some of the first varieties were Hazen and Wealthy. The Hazen apples are ready to harvest as early as late July but don't have as much flavor as the Wealthy. They recently added Honey Gold, Honey Crisp, and Wolf River apples, which are some of their favorites.

The Smidts were able to expand when they bought another 8-acre property 5 miles from the original location. Bruce built a new home on this land, and Freddie moved into the original farmhouse.

Making Old New Again

Most people notice the old silo converted into a roadside market stand. Bruce had driven by the silo, about a half-mile from the new place, day after day and finally stopped to ask the owner if he would be interested in selling. The silo had been sitting unused for 11 years, and the owner was ecstatic to sell.

Bruce invested \$500 to move the silo and modified it for use on the farm. Vegetables and up to 20 dozen ears of sweet corn harvested each day are left in the unmanned stand with an honor jar. They have received a few IOUs and the money has come

Bruce Smidt, driving, and, from left, Freddie, Kylie, and Jennifer harvest a tree.



out long a few times, but they say they have never come up short.

As they are planting, people drive by and wave or stop and ask when produce will be available. Regardless of when the crops are ready, there is always a line of people ready to purchase fresh produce in the middle of a state where fresh produce farms and local farmers markets are sparse.

The family tends to stick with the same selection of produce but like to add a few new ones or change varieties if they receive a lot of requests. They always grow sweet corn, beets, and carrots and run out before the season ends. They grow a variety of squash but didn't seem to have success with crook neck summer squash, so they quit growing it. Cantaloupe is planted each year, but the weather determines if they have a great crop of sweet, delicious melons or no crop at all.

Business continues to be good for the family. They harvest trees until the weather warms and the trees threaten to leaf out. After the last trees are dug, they put their efforts into growing and harvesting vegetables and taking orders for trees that will be planted after fall temperatures bring on dormancy.

Help Customers Learn about Soils, Watering

The Smidts take time to teach customers about soils, the necessity for significant tree watering, and why they do not harvest or plant trees in the summer. Freddie is proud their clients lose very few trees each year. Bruce and Kylie are both proud of the education they provide their clients so they can succeed in growing trees in central Wyoming where soil pH, moisture, and temperature are big issues.

Donna Cuin, the horticulturist in the Natrona County office of University of Wyoming Extension, knows the value of trees that can survive Wyoming's worst. She can be reached at (307) 235-9400 or at dmcuin@uwyo.edu.



Bruce Smidt revamped an old grain silo into a vegetable stand.

Jennifer – the quietest of the team – is proud of her family's success and enjoys being able to spend so much time together. One of her highlights of the year is their annual trip to New York City where they enjoy the food and seeing the vast selection of fresh produce on the vendor tables of farmers markets in the city.

The family has great memories from when they were just starting out in the new business venture and their young kids became involved in farming. They are also full of stories from last year's season and the winter just finished. The Smidts have great hopes for many more growing seasons full of memories, happy customers, and busy days spent with the closest people in their lives – their family.



'Apples anyone?' You could buy not only a basket of apples, but an entire tree in a container loaded with apples at the Farmers Market on Fairgrounds Road Saturdays. Bruce L. Smidt, who grows nursery stock on a 10-acre farm along Zero Road, said he'll deliver the tree for \$99 anywhere in the Casper area.

A 1998 Casper Journal photograph of Bruce Smidt and an apple tree – with fruit – he harvested for sale.