



featured

Diversity, adaptability key to bee,



Annette Viergets shows how individual plant species are specific to each tub in the greenhouse.

Perched on the bluffs above Historic Ranch A on the far northeast edge of Wyoming sits the Viergets Ranch.

Bees, Scottish Highland cattle, and vegetables are a few of the products Mark and Annette Viergets produce. Vegetables and beef are newer additions to their operations, while bees have been a mainstay since the 1990s.

Bee Beginnings

The Viergetses have a diverse bee operation. Mark started working with a veteran beekeeper in the early 1990s to learn the ins and outs of beekeeping. The Viergetses originally supported their bees across the border in South Dakota before returning the operation to Wyoming. (Mark is a fourth-generation Wyomingite.)

The Viergetses use a mix of Italian and Carniolan bees. Queens are ordered through various companies and replaced as needed. Beehives are placed on pallets to make it easier to move hives to different locations, reducing predation from mammals such as skunks, which sometimes eat bees leaving hives.

Rangeland and pasture plants keep the Viergetses' bees happy and healthy during Wyoming's growing season. The wide variety

landowner

beef, vegetable operation

of wildflowers provides the building blocks for tasty honey. Once Wyoming's harsh winter hits, bees are shipped on trucks to California, the same way many Wyomingites snowbird to the desert Southwest every winter. The bees do not make a lot of honey while pollinating almond trees in California but stay warm in the California sun. The Viergetses are paid for their bees' pollination of the low-nectar almond flowers.

In spring, bees are shipped home to start collecting pollen and nectar from Wyoming plants. Annette and Mark explain they lose some bees during travel, but the number is negligible compared with the annual loss from Wyoming's winters had they stayed home.

An in-house extracting facility allows the Viergetses to remove their honey, which is then sold to wholesale bottlers and at farmers markets. The facility provides greater flexibility and reduces travel costs for the operation. The bees making the wonderful Wyoming honey they sell at local farmers markets may be the same ones that have pollinated the trees to produce the almond milk sold at grocery stores.

Passing along the importance and husbandry of bees and general bee management is a passion of Mark and Annette's. They have bestowed



Vegetables are planted in large, recycled plastic tubs, which can be placed on pallets and moved in and out of the greenhouse depending upon temperature changes.

their love for bees upon their son, Graham, who now runs most of the operation. The Viergetses enjoy helping others promote and grow bee production in Wyoming. They note that, in general, bee health has declined noticeably since they became involved with bees. They want to see beekeeping continue, and they say involving others is an important part of beekeeping longevity.

Vigorous Greenhouse

When not moving hives to summer locations or collecting honey, maintaining a greenhouse for vegetable production is next on the Viergetses' plate. The Viergetses' greenhouse is built 3 feet into the surrounding land to help hold heat during colder temperatures.

Most gardeners plant directly into the soil in raised beds or on tables in a greenhouse. The Viergets instead



Scottish Highland cattle are marketed through local contracts or local markets.

use large plastic bins cut in half and recycled from a local company. The bins are kept on pallets so they can be moved in and out of the greenhouse in response to temperature changes and seasonality of specific vegetables. Vegetables are not produced during the coldest months when heating costs are prohibitive.

Individual plant species are specific to each tub – tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers are common species of choice. Annette says she enjoys starting plants and giving them to neighbors. The family enjoys frequenting farmers markets throughout the season to sell their vegetables and honey.

The local University of Wyoming Extension office, other farmers, and

gardening literature have helped the Viergetses tackle many problems. Annette joined the University of Wyoming Extension Master Gardener program to continue her education and help others with vegetable production.

Hardy Beef

Pastureland is also available on the property. The Viergetses graze Scottish Highland cattle in the area the bees frequent. Scottish Highland cattle are not the typical cattle breed roaming Wyoming, yet the Viergetses are pleased with their demeanor, low maintenance, size, and adaptability. These traits allow the Viergetses to focus on moving bees or harvesting vegetables during peak times. They

said the Scottish Highland breed deals with Wyoming winter conditions and finding forage very well. Their smaller size also allows the family to run more cattle on their property than would be possible with larger breeds. The cattle are marketed through local markets or kept for a fresh supply of meat.

Diversity and adaptability have shaped the Viergetses' bee, vegetable, and beef operation on the far eastern edge of Wyoming. Utilizing local and distant markets for their diverse goods has provided the Viergetses with many unique opportunities. Developing an operation with a wide array of goods helps the Viergetses cope with the variability of living and working in Wyoming.

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