



An ear for business

Enterprising teens learn life's lessons in a sweet corn field

By Ed Deener

Teaching children skills that will help them grow into successful adults is no small job. Parents across the country are using part of their land as classrooms to teach the important life lessons of responsibility, the benefits of hard work, the ability to communicate and get along with others, the importance of keeping good records, and the rewards that come with risk.

Allen and Sarah Jarosz have set aside a portion of their 135-acre farm in rural Milan,

Above: Jesse Dodds proudly shows the fruits of his labor—sweet, yellow-and-white ears of corn.

Ill., and Bob and Mary Dodds of Montrose, Iowa, are devoting several of their 40 acres to their sons to raise and market produce.

Different strokes. Though each family does things a little differently, the lessons learned are much the same.

The Jaroszes have rented a small building from which they sell sweet corn and other

PHOTO: MIKE NEWELL



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Above: Keeping good records creates a history that will be used to plan next year's crop. Jesse, left, and Bob Dodds look at this year's numbers.

produce as well as silk flowers designed by Sarah and greeting cards created by 13-year-old daughter Megan. The planting, cultivating, and harvesting are the responsibility of 16-year-old Mathew, under the watchful eye of his father.

The Dodds are strictly sweet-corn growers, with son Jesse doing most of the work and his mother, Mary, helping with sales. They sell the roasting ears at farmers' markets in Fort Madison and Keokuk, Iowa.

Quality counts. Having a quality product is important to gaining loyal customers, and freshness is *the* key to high-quality sweet corn. With the Jarosz farm just a couple miles down the road from their stand, produce gets picked several times a day.

The Dodds' guarantee that their corn is picked the day it's sold. That often means that Jesse is in the field filling up the bed of his pickup truck at 4 a.m.

Jesse Dodds markets his corn's flavor—and it works. While his price is sometimes as much as a dollar more than his competitors, he still sells out before most. "People come up to me and try to get my price down," he says, "but I tell them that my corn is the best, of the highest quality, and is worth the extra price. I'll even give them a free ear or two and challenge them to taste it and see. Most times they're back the next week, and there's

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—Jesse Dodds



PHOTO: LARRY VOLBRUCK

Above: Selling directly to customers develops communication skills required in most careers. Megan Jarosz helps a customer weigh her produce. **Right:** Mathew Jarosz makes several harvesting trips to the field each day to ensure fresh corn for his customers.

no more discussion about the price."

Dodds plans his fields to make sure there is a continuous flow of mature corn. Each of his four acres is divided into seven sections, each with eight rows of corn. Each section is planted with different varieties of corn that mature at different time intervals.

He also records planting depth and spacing, fertilizer application, chemical use, earworm populations, and yields. He uses the information to tweak his production practices and plan the next year's crop.

The Jaroszes echo the importance of good record keeping, tracking similar items as the Dodds'. In their case, crop rotation is one of the key items they track. "It's how we control pests and how we organically add nitrogen and other nutrients to the soil," says Jesse.

Both Mathew Jarosz and Jesse Dodds are well known at the bank, as they come in to

make their deposits and get the change for their cash drawer. "It's good for them to know about banking and understand the paperwork that goes with it," says Allen Jarosz.

Jesse also knows his way to the loan department. "The first year I grew sweet corn, I needed a planter and found a real nice John Deere four-row machine. I took out a \$1,500 loan and paid it back the same year."

The next year he purchased a sprayer and the following year a cultivator, each paid for in full by the end of the season.

Farm work is dangerous in many ways, and fathers' watchful eyes ensure that their sons develop good safety habits. "Dad's big on safety," says Mathew Jarosz. "He's taught me about speed control and operating in hilly terrain, and he's a real stickler on seat belts."

As part of his regimen to deliver the best product to his customers, Jesse Dodds sprays when earworms show up. Understanding the

dangers that accompany working with chemicals, he takes all the necessary precautions when mixing and applying. Safety glasses; rubber gloves; a full-body, moisture-proof set of coveralls; and a respirator are tools of the trade.

College-bound. Jesse Dodds is attending Iowa State University this fall. Mathew Jarosz has another year of high school before he goes to college. Has their participation in their families' produce businesses helped mold their plans for the future?

In Dodds' case, his involvement in growing sweet corn is leading him to the doors of the school's engineering department. Two



PHOTO: LARRY VOLBRUCK



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Above: Jesse Dodds uses a trap to catch moths that produce earworms. If he catches eight moths in one day, he knows it's time to treat for them and out comes the sprayer. **Right:** Jesse Dodds convinces a customer that his corn is worth \$3 a dozen when some of his competitors are charging less.



tools he invented for his enterprise sparked an interest in machine design.

The first invention was a sprayer boom that mounts to the loader forks on a tractor. The boom reaches into a field and so he can apply chemicals to four rows of corn without touching other rows. Sprayer tips hang down so chemicals can be applied directly to the corn ear silks. He merely raises or lowers the loader for different corn heights.

"I just did some sketches on paper," Dodds recalls of his project. "I took the drawing to a local welding shop. They helped me find a boom from a junked sprayer and

welded it up for me. It works really well."

His latest invention is a basket carrier that mounts to the loader's forks and is used to speed the harvesting process.

Dodds' real-world, in-the-field problem-solving is laying a solid foundation for his chosen field of study, ag engineering.

Mathew Jarosz' experience in the family business and what he is learning in his high school ag education program and FFA is pointing him to an ag-related career as well. The skills he has learned on the crop-judging team have peaked an interest in the technical side of agriculture such as soil chemistry. But according to his father, Mathew likes to tinker, so he may be steered to a machine-design or engineering curriculum.

A bonus. The income from these teen-run businesses will go to pay for college tuition. "The extra income is a big bonus," says Bob Dodds. While the money certainly helps, teaching their children life's lessons and sending them off to college well-prepared to meet the challenges they may face is the largest reward for these parents. **H**

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