

# Master Farmers



## Patterson uses careful strategy

By JOSH FLINT

**A**LMOST 30 years ago, Jim Patterson delivered his entire soybean crop to

### Master at a glance

**Name:** Jim Patterson

**Age:** 63

**Family:** Wife Pat and three children — Joni Patterson-Diggins, a volunteer services coordinator, and husband Charles Diggins have two children; Jamie Peterson, a real estate agent and office manager, and husband Patrick Peterson have three daughters; Jordan, an equipment operator, and wife Kacie have one daughter

**Farm snapshot:** 1,900 acres in northern Saline County

**Leadership mark:** Served as Tate Township supervisor since 1980; continues to serve as Saline County Farm Bureau director, something he's done since 1995

the local elevator in Junction. While he awaited payment, tragedy struck.

The elevator went under, and the grain was sold to pay back creditors. Jim was looking at an enormous loss, since the grain insurance fund wouldn't be established until 1983. This experience helped shape him into the Master Farmer he is today.

"I guess we made it out OK," Jim says. "We were blessed with some good years before that happened."

The experience has influenced Jim's marketing strategy ever since. While many farmers forward contract half their crop, Jim sells hardly any in advance. "I've seen a few years where we didn't have much of a crop," he says.

Instead, he prefers to store his crop in his own bins. In December, he begins selling and finishes up just before planting.

Despite his conservative strategy, Jim did forward sell some wheat this year. He says he couldn't resist the extraordi-

nary prices offered for soft red winter wheat.

Jim began farming in 1964, when he graduated from high school. He began by renting 240 acres from his parents. Three years later, Jim financed 120 acres and a new 1968 John Deere 4020, which is still in perfect working condition.

Jim built up his operation over the years to its current size of 1,090 acres. He rents another 1,000 acres. Jim raises corn, soybeans, wheat and hay, and has a 100-cow-calf operation. The land is classified as highly erodible, but he combats it with grass waterways, no-till planting, dam structures and other techniques.

Although he financed his first couple of purchases (\$300 per acre for the land and \$6,800 for 4020), for the most part Jim tries to keep his debt very low. His wife, Pat, remembers living in a single-wide trailer until they could save enough money for their first house. In the mid-'70s, Jim and his father-in-law

built the house that he and Pat still live in.

"I always like to be safe and not have to worry about if I can pay for things," Jim notes. Pat adds he got his first credit card only a year ago.

### Community work

When he's not farming,

Jim stays busy with his involvement in community organizations. He currently serves as the Tate Township supervisor, a position he's held since 1980. Jim's also on the Saline County Farm Bureau Board and previously served 20 years on the county committee for the Farm Service Agency.

In 2000, he and other parishioners built a fellowship hall onto the Lebanon Cumberland Presbyterian Church, where he serves as an elder and superintendent. The original building dates back to 1868.

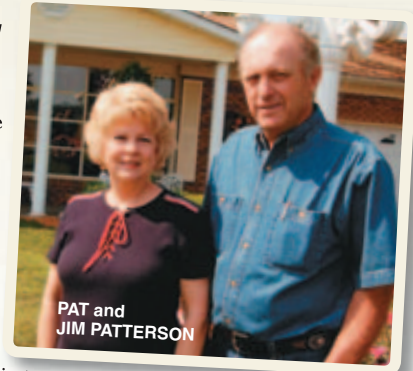
Jim also serves as the caretaker for the church's cem-

etry, where his father and many other family members are buried. A couple of years ago, he donated a 5-acre annex for the cemetery.

Jim assists his mom, Wenona, 86, who lives just down the road in the house where he was raised. "She goes out and checks the cattle with me every morning," Jim says.

Jim and Pat have three children: Joni, Jamie and Jordan.

Pat retired in December 2007 from USDA Shawnee National Forest after 25 years of service. She continues to keep the farm records, something she's done since the beginning.



PAT and JIM PATTERSON

## Wachtel passes on farm tradition

By JOSH FLINT

**W**HEN Gary and Lynn Wachtel got married almost 40 years ago, Gary's dream was to farm 1,000 acres. Considering he started with a tract of 100 acres, cultivating 1,000 acres seemed like a pretty lofty goal. Fast-forward to 2008, and Gary's family-owned and operated company, Wachtel Farms Inc., currently tends 5,700 acres.

"I guess sometimes you just

don't dream big enough," Gary says.

Gary started farming as a child, when he helped his father, Kenneth, on the family farm. After obtaining his associate's degree in agricultural economics from Wabash Valley Junior College, Gary took a job as sales manager for Fayette Service Co.

After purchasing his first tract of land in 1972, he moved back to the farm to continue his family's legacy of farming, which goes back many generations.

"I remember hearing that my great-grandfather was gored by a bull," Gary says. "He was setting fence posts. When they found him, there was a bent fence post nearby. I guess he tried to beat the bull off of him."

In 1975, Gary

and his father brought on Calvin, Gary's brother. The three created Wachtel Farms Inc. in 1984. Gary says his time at Fayette Service taught him something, as he required his son, Todd, to take a job outside of farming.

"We told him he could come back, but we thought it would be beneficial for him to live off the farm for a while to see how the rest of the world lives," Lynn adds. In 1999, Todd returned to the farm after working for FS for six years.

Before Todd joined the team, the Wachtel operation was just big enough for three full-time farmers. Darrell Dunteman, Gary's accountant, remembers a meeting where a local retiring producer wanted Wachtel Farms to farm his land. However, the land was 20 miles away. "They said they wanted a family like the Wachtels to farm their operation even though there were other good farmers in their community," Dunteman says.

The addition of these 600

acres created a need for Todd to come back to carry on the family legacy.

### Adapting over the years

Throughout the years, Gary has been an early adopter of new techniques and technologies, such as GPS yield data and soil surveys for precise fertilizer application. From 1986 to 2008, Gary sold Pioneer brand seed.

"We do a lot of our own research," Gary adds. "When we were selling seed, I always felt I needed to do my own research. I wouldn't sell something that I wouldn't buy myself."

Earlier in his career, Gary raised hogs. He remembers exiting the hog business in the 1990s.

In recent years, he has developed a recreational interest in hunting and fishing. On the original 100 acres he purchased in the early '70s, he's added a dove patch, a pond and a deer hunting spot. On slow days, Gary likes to take his grandkids fishing at the pond, which is

### Master at a glance

**Name:** Gary Wachtel

**Age:** 60

**Family:** Wife Lynn and two children — Todd, a farmer, and wife Lynelle have one child; Jodi Strauch, an elementary-school teacher, and husband Daniel Strauch have one child

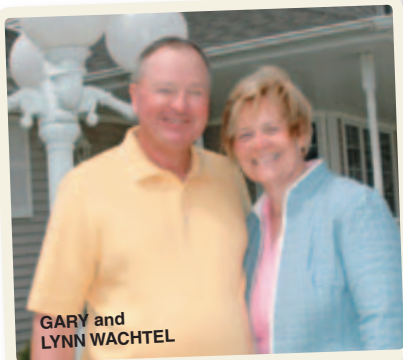
**Farm snapshot:** 5,700 acres in western Effingham County with his father, brother and son

**Leadership mark:** Serves on the board of directors for National Trail Bio-diesel; serves on the Lutheran Care Center nursing home board

stocked with bass, bluegills and catfish.

His grandson Connor (Todd's son) enjoys the leisurely fishing trips with his grandpa. Gary can't help but wonder if Connor will become the next generation of Wachtels to take over the family farm.

"He hasn't shown a lot of interest in it so far," Gary says. "But then again, neither did Todd at that age."



GARY and LYNN WACHTEL