



GROWING SUCCESS: Todd Young (right), with wife Heidi and son Chase, work together at Sandyland Farms in Howard City. Todd is partners with his brother, Tim. The two have expanded their farm to include 4,000 acres. Todd is being recognized as a 2008 Master Farmer.

Young sets pace

By JENNIFER VINCENT

ON a wintry December morning, Todd Young starts his day at 5:30 a.m. Usually he's in the office meeting with his business partner and brother, Tim, and preparing a written plan for the day. But, this day, snowplowing comes first.

Todd has a routine for running Sandyland Farms in Howard City, but it's also his forward-thinking and ad hoc ability to tackle challenges and changes that has allowed the business to grow.

Todd is being honored as a 2008 Master Farmer.

"The organization of planting, irrigation scheduling, harvesting and everything in between is done in a precise manner and is impressive," says Dale Dosenberry of the Wilbur-Ellis Co., who nominated Todd for the award. "The crops all get everything they need to maximize production and limit risk."

The original family farm of 80 acres was established in the 1850s. Todd and Tim operated the multigenerational farm with their father, Larry, for several years before he retired in 2000, when the brothers went into partnership.

Todd describes himself as the "outside" guy, managing and working more on the production side, while Tim's the "inside guy," working mostly in the office and with finances. The original 80-acre farm is now 4,000 acres, and they rent another 200 acres. Todd grows 1,500 acres of potatoes, 300 acres of carrots,

1,400 acres of seed corn and 500 acres of irrigated corn in Montcalm, Mecosta and Manistee counties. The balance of the acreage is kept out of farming for permanent wildlife habitat. The irrigated farm includes 53 center pivots.

Building projects keep the summer months busy. This year, they added another toolshed and a lunchroom that includes restrooms, an office and a room to fry samples.

Organization is key

Once the snow is cleared, Todd starts to put the day on track by developing a potato loading schedule. Ninety percent of Sandyland's potato harvest is used for chips and is shipped from August to May to processors in Pennsylvania, Ohio, North Carolina, Virginia, Indiana, Florida and Michigan. Unlike many other Michigan potato growers, Sandyland farms does not grow for a national company, like Frito Lay. "We ship to 10 different regional companies," he says.

The remaining 10% is russet potatoes for the fresh market.

Once the loading schedule is complete, he maps out what the storage crew will be doing after loading is finished. "There's repairs and washing and other activity at the warehouse," he says.

In the shop, there's lots of maintenance and modifications to prepare for the growing season. "Every piece of equipment we have gets looked at in the wintertime," Todd says.

Farm management requires great

Outside expertise

TODD Young is far from claiming he knows it all and credits a portion of the farm's success to good outside advice.

He has worked with Mike Salisbury of Salisbury Management Services for more than 30 years to provide advice on management issues, farm succession and employee retirement options.

Also, "Al Marshal is our marketing consultant," he adds, "and we work with Dale Dosenberry to buy a tremendous amount of inputs from Wilbur-Ellis. He and Denny Stratton are great guys to work with, and we've worked with them for more than 20 years."

Controlling bugs is a high priority for all farmers, but especially vegetable growers. Todd heavily utilizes Integrated Pest Management and contracts with Jawad Hassen, who works independently and with Citizens Elevator, to do the scouting. "We scout heavily, and it pays," Todd says.

The farm also uses Virgil Biggs, out of Saranac, for tax services.

organization, and Todd has his own version of a PalmPilot — color-coded index cards. "I write down what needs to get done, and I usually have a stack of cards," he says. "Some are color-coordinated, some aren't, according to what the hot activities are for the day. It's the game plan for the day. It's going to change, but it's a plan."

Optimum soils

Todd samples the soil every year to determine nutrient needs. "We use management zones instead of grids," he says. He contracted to have overlays of aerial photos, and used satellite imagery to document the different color spectrums of fields when there is bare ground and when crops are growing.

"What those lands have done over the years tends to follow the different types of soil," Todd explains. "We feel it's better than grid sampling."

Soil sampling is then done by zones. "We do all the sampling ourselves, and we may have eight or 15 different zones

Master Farmer profile

TODD YOUNG

Age: 45

Wife: Heidi

Children: Ashley, 23, and Chase, 19

Farm: 1,500 acres potatoes, 300 acres carrots, 1,400 acres seed corn and 500 acres corn

Award nominator: Dale Dosenberry of Wilbur-Ellis Co.

Leadership/awards: Winfield Township Planning and Zoning Board, five years' service on the Michigan Seed Potato Association and several years on the Michigan Carrot Committee, Master Farmer in 1995 by the Michigan Vegetable Council, FFA American Farmer Degree, member of the Michigan Potato Management Board, 2006 National Potato Council Environmental Stewardship Award, member of the National Snack Food Association, 1997 Regional Potato Grower of the Year. His father, Larry Young, is past president of the National Potato Council, and brother and business partner, Tim Young, is on the U.S. Potato Board and the National Chip Committee.

in one field," he says.

Each zone is treated or not treated, according to the soil needs by using a computer-controlled variable-rate spreader for fertilizer and lime. "We've been doing this for seven or eight years now, and we're really seeing an evening out of the fields. It not only makes good environmental sense, it provides a cost savings. Our yields have also improved."

Environmental stewardship

Sandyland Farms has a chemical containment building and diked tanks. The Youngs also participated with the Natural Resources Conservation District to install a load-out pad.

The farm won one of only two National Potato Council environmental stewardship awards in 2006.

"I have known Sandyland Farms and Todd Young for almost two and a half decades," says Ben Kudwa, executive director of the Michigan Potato Industry Commission. "Todd is a farm innovator. That reaches all the way from crops selected to grow, as well as farming practices, managing employees, marketing and involvement in industry activities."

Production practices

The farm uses an old practice of moldboard plowing for potatoes and carrots with an unusual 12-bottom rollover. "Moldboard plowing is a management tool for scab of potatoes," Todd explains. "We've tried less tillage, but combined with crop rotation, different varieties and irrigation schedule, we're better able to manage scab."

Sandyland Farms plants with a European-belt planter. It also has claim to having the first-made LenCo harvester with a 65-inch air head.

"During harvest, there's only four guys in the field using two eight-row, self-propelled windrowers and two four-row harvesters," Todd says. "Most people are using all four-row equipment or some six-row equipment pulled by tractors. Out of 24 rows, we have only four narrow tires in the field, which helps prevent embedded stones in the potatoes," he adds.

Kudwa says, "Todd and his brother, Tim, expanded Sandyland into new ventures that are a credit to Michigan agriculture and in the mainstream of modern agriculture."

Employees' strengths help operation

Todd Young credits his employees for the success of Sandyland Farms.

While the farm employs one main mechanic for more involved projects, "we have a lot of guys with different expertise that can do a lot of things," Todd says. "One shining star in our operation is our employees. They are amazing in what they do, what they are willing to accomplish and their dedication."

Average years of service at Sandyland Farms is at least 15 years. Three employees have more than 30 years of service, including Dianne Wheeler, who is the sales and logistics coordinator; semitruck driver Jerry Finch; and Scott Bouck, who works in the warehouse.

In total, the farm has 15 full-time employees and more than 30 part-time workers during the busy planting and harvesting seasons.

"I don't manage from the office, and I wouldn't ask anyone to do anything that I wouldn't do myself," Todd says.

Todd also boasts that most of his workers are certified private pesticide applicators by choice.