



Entrepreneurial Farmers

Faced with land unsuitable for crop production, these growers develop profit-generating enterprises. **BY VIRGINIA H. HARRIS**

Nearly every farmer deals with a few unproductive acres not suited for traditional row crops. Jo Lynn Mitchell and Ward Wilkins are no exception. But rather than idling the land they saw an opportunity to transform their respective acreage into successful enterprises. Mitchell and Wilkins offer two starkly different examples, but share one similarity—value-added income.

Jo Lynn Mitchell has a habit of proving people wrong, including herself. The Mississippi native grew up on a small farm that supplied her family's kitchen with fresh vegetables, eggs and milk. But, in her words, she "had no intentions of farming."

Today, you'll find her managing the agritourism operations at Mitchell Farms, which offer a pumpkin patch, farm tours, field trips, and a wedding venue. This sister business to the Mitchell family's row crop farm brought a new venture along with 10,000 visitors annually to the Collins, Miss. farm, a feat Mitchell says her husband and father-in-law wouldn't have believed until it happened.



Jo Lynn Mitchell

HATCH A PLAN.

Mitchell was working as a medical sales representative when she married husband Don. He farmed with his father, growing corn, wheat, soybeans and peanuts on 1,800 acres. The farm also hosted a you-pick garden during the summers for 30 years. Mitchell began helping with the garden when she could, and found her sales skills worked just as well on the farm as they did in her off-farm job. Though the farm wasn't actively looking for new opportunities, Mitchell wanted to create a job for herself on the farm to be closer to her family. Enter her idea to start an agritourism operation that offers activities for children and adults, with a little education thrown in.

Mitchell Farms opened in 2006 for the month of October with a single pumpkin patch. Invitations were sent to local schools to help attract customers. Fast forward 8 years later, and pumpkins have now replaced the you-pick vegetable harvest and visitors from around Mississippi and neighboring states make their way through the farm each year.

Establishing a successful agritourism business, Mitchell says, can take three to four years to turn a profit. She advises fellow entrepreneurs to take small steps. "We started out with a couple of picnic tables, one trailer and just a few of our family members just to see if

Mitchell Farms opened a pumpkin patch in 2006, creating a job for Jo Lynn Mitchell and new revenue for the farm.



Natural Resource Enterprises workshops show landowners alternative income possibilities for less-productive ag land.

we liked it or not," she says, laughing.

The success of Mitchell Farms didn't happen overnight. Mitchell sought the advice of Daryl Jones about how their agritourism operation could expand from that first pumpkin patch and attract more visitors. The two met through the state's agritourism board.

Jones is an associate professor in the department of wildlife, fisheries and aquaculture and the coordinator of the Natural Resource Enterprises program (NRE) at Mississippi State University. The program provides advice to landowners to develop niche enterprises on land not well suited for crop production.

Jones, along with a team of NRE associates, travels the country leading workshops about private land stewardship and income-generating, nature-based enterprises. These enterprises encompass everything from fee hunting and angling to wildlife viewing and agritourism. He notes the program wants landowners to implement enterprises that put less productive ground in natural habitat. Jones explains this is a "win-win scenario" because native habitat "increases aesthetics and benefits wildlife and fish and water quality."

Landowners learn about marketable enterprises in their location, as well as receive legal advice and business plan guidance. Local lawyers, Extension agents, state wildlife agents and NRCS agents speak at each workshop to give an overview of their respective expertise.

USE WHAT YOU HAVE. Jones stresses the importance of looking locally for the types of enterprises in demand. He says landowners should "use what they have" available on their land.

Ward Wilkins, who farms just outside of Lafayette, Ind., spoke at one of the first NRE workshops held in the state. He farms 620 acres of corn, soybeans, wheat, alfalfa and brome grass with his brother. The two fifth-generation farmers also manage 36 acres of timber. Wilkins recalls going down to a local sawmill as a child and watching lumber harvested from his family's woods be milled ▶



and sold. When bandsaw mills came on the market, Wilkins and his brother saw an opportunity to keep the growth, harvest and production on-farm, rather than clear-cutting the land for more farm ground. Wilkins now harvests the wood and mills it specifically for furniture makers and wood workers.

As you talk to Wilkins, you can hear his admiration for his ancestors who had the foresight to manage the woodland for future generations. This area of Indiana is well-known for its historical prevalence of white oak and black walnut, which he notes attract worldwide demand. He says carrying that legacy for his children and grandchildren keeps him mindful of his role in managing the woodland and its wildlife.

THE RIGHT ADVICE. Wilkins emphasizes gaining professional advice early helps build knowledge and lowers the chances of making mistakes. He enlisted the help of local foresters and attended Purdue Extension workshops to grasp the intricacies of forest management, lumber harvest and wood milling. He says veterans in the business also offer a helpful resource. "It's a lot to learn all at once, about the milling and the drying and storage," he explains.

Managing timber for lumber requires you to "make sure you're harvesting the right trees at the right time,"

Wilkins says. "If you don't manage it right, you can change things for a generation.

"Every piece of lumber has value," he continues. "You want to make sure you know where each piece should go so you can get the most out of it." Even low-grade lumber can go to a pallet mill, which only brings cents per board foot, as opposed to dollars per board foot. Regardless, "It's income," he says.

LEAVE A LEGACY. Wilkins proudly points out his children and grandchildren will harvest the trees he planted over the course of his life. "It's a lot of satisfaction in that because the woods were handed to me in a really good condition, so we're trying to keep it that way or improve it if we can," he explains.

Starting a non-traditional agriculture business like Wilkins and Mitchell takes a lot of creativity and thought. Mississippi State's Jones acknowledges it's not for everyone. Landowners must think long and hard about their goals for their property. "The people I talk out of doing this, I feel just as good about as the ones I talk into doing it," Jones says laughing. "If I save somebody from losing money or it being a flop, I figure that's a success, too."

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