

Opinion

Trial, error and success with produce

LEAD COMMENT



By **TANNIE DANIELS, LEAD CLASS XXV (2005-07), 37831 205TH ST., COLUMBUS, NE 68601-6500**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tannie Daniels grew up on a farm in eastern Nebraska where her family operated a Grade A dairy and raised corn and soybeans. She and her husband, Andy, own and operate Daniels Produce, which specializes in fresh-market produce. She is a member and past president of the Nebraska Vegetable Growers Association and the Buy Fresh, Buy Local Association.

Daniels is also a member of Saint Stanislaus Church and has served on the parish council. The Danielses have three children, Holly, Jason and Kelly. Jason and Kelly are still involved in the family business.

QUESTION

What major obstacles did you overcome in developing markets for fresh produce?

ANSWER

To understand the trials of marketing our fresh-market produce, you need to know a little history about our company. In the 1980s, we had some severe floods that decreased our corn and bean yields for three consecutive harvests, altering considerably our income. So my husband and I began to explore other avenues for income, first by getting "normal" jobs in town. But as the ground began to dry up, we decided to raise some watermelons.

At first, our marketing technique was simple: Load the ripe watermelons in the back of a pickup and sit in a parking lot of a well-trafficked business until they were gone. Although we didn't sell that many watermelons, the income we received began to make quite a difference for our family, which included our three young children. We began to plant more watermelons, and then we started dabbling in other produce: sweet corn, tomatoes, cantaloupe and cucumbers. Our marketing began to branch out to newspaper ads and local radio commercials.

The ads paid off, and our sweet corn became a hit in our hometown of Columbus. Every year we found ourselves planting more of it. We got calls from the local grocery stores wanting to know if we could stock their shelves

with our sweet corn. As the local interest for our product began to increase, we explored other markets. We began making the 70-mile trip every Saturday to Lincoln for the Haymarket Farmers Market. There we found we were competing with many farmers who had the same produce that we were trying to sell. So we had to stop and brainstorm how to make our produce stand out over the competition's.

This was probably one of our biggest obstacles in marketing our corn, especially in wholesale markets. Any farmer can set aside a little patch for sweet corn and sell it when it's ready, but how do you get a customer to buy your corn when there are so many other growers with the same product?

The key is to prove yourself to your customer. To do so, you have to consistently provide them with the highest-quality product possible. In order to accomplish this, we needed to educate ourselves. We went to vegetable conferences in the winter, we tested new varieties on plots and checked out new seed companies, we talked with agronomy professors at different universities, and ultimately, we learned by trial and error. It took many seasons to perfect our growing methods, harvesting methods, pesticide program and cooling system.

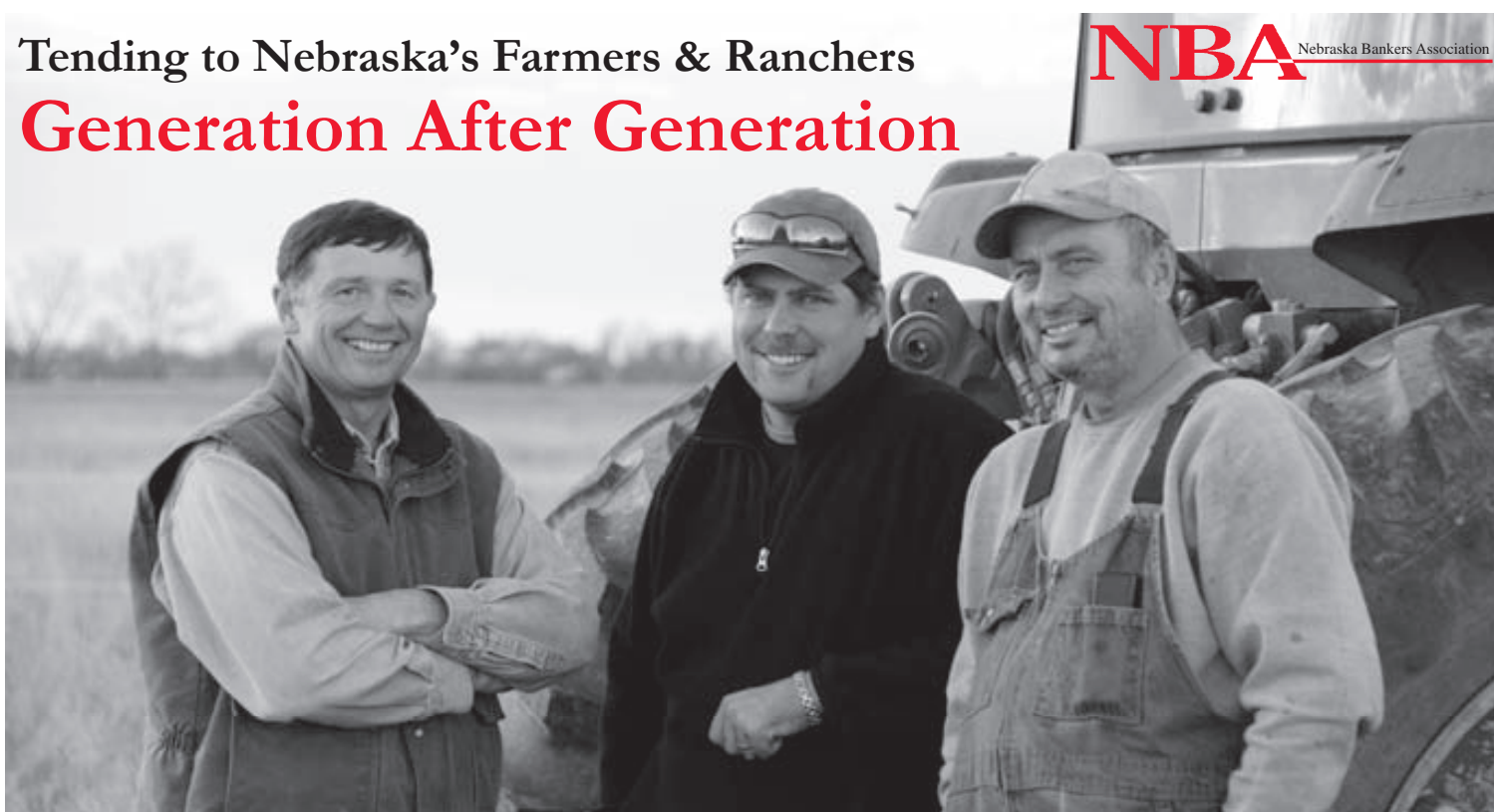
Our cooling system is unique, and

it has been a great selling point for our corn. We used this to our advantage in our advertising and as we talked to potential clients. We got our foot in the door with a few major buyers in the state and proved to them that we were an excellent source for fresh-market corn. Every season we added a few more buyers to our cliental and slowly began to build a name for ourselves. Our buyers know they can depend on us to get their corn fresh, cold and on time every time, and for that reason they come back year after year. As Daniels Produce becomes better known around the Midwest, buyers have begun to call us, thanks in part to our advertising and our company Web site, www.danielsproduce.com.

Our operation has blossomed into a complex business. We now raise 530 acres of sweet corn and 230 acres of pumpkins, most of which we wholesale to committed buyers throughout the Midwest. We also raise tomatoes, cucumbers, melons and other produce for our seven retail stands and markets in eastern Nebraska. Through the past 25 years, we have overcome an insurmountable number of obstacles, including flood, hail, disease, insects, labor and marketing. In spite of these difficulties, we have found that if you put your whole heart into what you raise, it shows, making it a whole lot easier to sell.

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