Agroforestry Case Studies: Elderberry Business on Historic Farm

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Agroforestry Case Studies: Elderberry Business on Historic Farm

Abstract
This is a case study of East Grove Farm near Salem, Iowa, that specializes in elderberries and other heritage crops, in addition to starting a winery. The case study outlines management practices, lessons learned and marketing and economic concerns of the operation.

Disciplines
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“I want to do something on this farm that’s been in my family for 176 years. I want to not lose topsoil, in fact, to create topsoil. To be enduring, and to be profitable, so I can make a living here.” — Kurt Garretson, East Grove Farm

Farm management practices

Kurt Garretson and his family specialize in elderberries on the historic East Grove Farm, near Salem, Iowa.

The farm is a grower for River Hills Harvest, a processing and marketing cooperative. Kurt chose elderberry as a native plant that grows well in his area, even in places where row crops won’t grow. He likes that it’s a perennial, that doesn’t require the ground to be plowed up every year, and it is also a product with growing demand due to its health benefits.

Garretson started in 2010-11 with about 1,200 elderberry plants on just over an acre. He now has about five acres in production and will be adding 10 more acres in 2014. Elderberries were also planted along property boundaries and in two new shelter belts, along with hazelnuts and wild plums.

Other crops at East Grove’s Farm include native varieties of white peaches, persimmons and green gauge plum. They are also experimenting with Aronia berry and chestnuts, though Garretson says they “haven’t had much luck propagating chestnuts.”

Elderberry is in growing demand, due to research that has shown the berries have anti-viral, immunity-boosting properties that are at least partially credited to high levels of antioxidants, vitamins and minerals.

The Garretsons have been trying different elderberry varieties, including hybrids and local wild plants taken from cuttings. Some varieties were more drought-tolerant than others. The improved varieties had an excellent survival rate, according to Garretson, especially the cultivars “Bob Gordon” and “Ranch,” which came from the University of Minnesota. He found two wild varieties that performed “very well,” which the family has named “East Grove” and “Mae Berry” (named after a neighbor).

The Garretsons try to use equipment already on the farm. Kurt’s father Joel has restored several antiques to use, including old John Deer and Oliver tractors, a steel-wheel wagon, a seeder, and a two-bottom plow. They have also purchased new equipment, including a Rain-Flo mulch layer and water wheel planter. A new greenhouse is under construction to allow them to start green cuttings all year round.

About the farm

East Grove Farm is a family business managed by Kurt Garretson on Iowa’s oldest continuously settled farm, established in 1837 by his ancestors. Garretson started farming in 2009, and is working with other family members to create a farm business that specializes in elderberry products and other heritage crops. The family is:

• starting out small to learn what works and to properly prepare the soil for plantings;
• participating in an elderberry cooperative that assists with processing and marketing, and provides training and networking;
• working to obtain a wine-makers license and to gain organic certification;
• using old equipment when possible, and taking advantage of new technologies that make work easier and more efficient;
• working off the farm as necessary, doing farm-related services for others;
• prioritizing care for land and soil, and valuing family and community.

Kurt Garrison with elderberry flowers. Photos courtesy of East Grove Farm.
**Marketing & economics**

East Grove Farm's products include, or will soon include:

- River Hills Harvest® elderberry juice, cordial and jelly
- Elderberry and elderflower wine

In the future East Grove Farm also anticipates selling elderberry plants as cuttings and producing elderberry vinegar.

Regulations for juice processing are strict, says Garretson. Meeting the standards is one of the advantages of working with the River Hills Harvest Co-op, which works with farmers to provide a high quality product. At East Grove Farm, the freshly harvested elderberries will be quickly cleaned, packaged in 25-pound food-grade buckets, frozen, and then sent to Missouri for processing.

Most of the elderberry products are being marketed directly to the Iowa grocery chain, Hy-Vee, where the Garretsons have developed relationships through personal visits to stores. The River Hills Harvest elderberry products are also be marketed through the co-op. The juice is sold in cases of a dozen 11-ounce bottles. Smaller 4-packs, and individual bottles and jars of jelly, can be purchased from the River Hills Harvest website, at [http://riverhillsharvest.com](http://riverhillsharvest.com).

Another marketing avenue will be the winery, which the Garretsons envision as a focus of farm-related ecotourism. They are restoring a 114-year-old Victorian house on the land to serve as the farm's headquarters and the winery.

Sources of funding assistance have included family as well as the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The farm has utilized the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

**Goals of the farm**

- Create a viable and enduring business on historic family land.
- Build community with family, neighbors and other elderberry growers.
- Show people that farming is not all corn and soybeans.

**Lessons learned**

- Perennial crops that take a few years to get established require patience. “Sometimes it’s better to take your time,” says Garretson. “I believe it will pay off in the long run.”
- Start small and learn as you go. “For example, our first year, we started root cuttings in a greenhouse and in the spring, we transplanted them into fields that had been in corn and soybeans for more than a decade,” says Garretson. “We mulched them with cardboard covered with woodchips for weed control, but the wood chips ended up tying up soil nutrients, especially nitrogen, that the new plants needed. Now we’re looking ahead and doing more prep work, like planting into ground where cover crops have been growing to improve the soil. We’re using a plastic covering for weeds, which also warms the ground early. And we plan to get plants in the ground earlier to take advantage of spring rains. We’ve been getting better rooting this way, which gets the plants off to a better start.”
- Garretson appreciates the co-op model of River Hills Harvest, a project started by Terry Durham of Eridu Farm in Missouri. “The philosophy is the more elderberries, the better. Elderberries are such a new thing that everybody’s learning. The more growers we have nearby, the more we can help each other, share equipment costs and save by shipping together.”

**CONTACT MAAWG**

The Mid-American Agroforestry Working Group (MAAWG) sponsors networking and educational activities to advance regional agroforestry interests. To learn more about this farm, or find other case studies, visit www.midamericanagroforestry.net/agroforestry-case-studies. You can also follow @agrof_maawg on Twitter or contact us at maawg.agrof@gmail.com

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