

A Family Affair

District 2 OYDC John & Amanda Jackson plan to keep their family farm small and profitable by spending less than they earn



As the next generation of farmers looks at the future of their family's operations and how they will derive an income from farming, many see expansion as an answer to their problems. Others, like John and Amanda Jackson, set aside funds in the good times to weather the bad.

"I am proud to say that this farm was started in 1949," John says. "Watching my Uncle Wes and dad as they worked together was the beginning of my desire to continue in their footsteps. While they didn't face the same issues we do today – urban sprawl, manure management, and the continuing rise of the cost of farming, – dad and I talk, think things out together and plan ahead while we're milking cows."

John echoes the philosophy John's parents, Jim and Jody Jackson, instilled in him while growing up and working on the farm. Jim and John have worked together full time on the farm since 1997 when John returned from college.

"When you are away from farming, you realize what you miss," John says. "I think it took getting away for me to appreciate what we were doing."

To keep costs down, the Jacksons keep equipment maintained and save for large expenses.

"We tend to be able to fix things which helps us save money," John explains. "When the price of milk is low, we spend only what is needed to run the farm. New tractors, trucks, and equipment are expensive. When milk prices go higher, we save for these larger expenses."

The Jackson's facility holds 80 milking cows and all of their dairy replacements. According to John, there's plenty for two people to take care of on a daily basis. With no employees,

John and Jim are in charge of everything on the farm from milking and breeding the cows to planting and harvesting the crops. Aside from supplements, all of the cows' feed is produced on the farm.

Keeping the herd at 80 cows requires careful management decisions. Most years, the Jacksons have a good heifer-to-bull calving ratio.

"We have over 80 animals freshen some years, so we usually have some extra cows and heifers to sell," John says. "By not expanding the milking herd, we have enough replacements to cull cows and sell breeding stock."

In addition to the obvious removal of high somatic cell count cows or those with health issues, John and Jim have come up with a set of guidelines they follow when determining which cows and replacements will stay on their farm:

- 25-30 heifer calves per year are kept out of the best cows.
- If there are enough quality replacements, daughters of first-time heifers are sold.
- Cows that don't produce up to a 70-pound average are replaced with heifers.

"We keep detailed records of each cow," John says. "Most of the time good cows equal good offspring."

The surplus heifers generate additional farm income for the Jacksons. If feed stores allow, there is enough barn space to keep heifer calves until they are old enough to be bred and sold.

Cows that are lucky enough to make the cut and enter the Jacksons' milking herd are on probation until they prove their performance. After that, they are given a name.

"It is bad luck for us to name a cow before she is a proven performer," Amanda says, explaining that when that has occurred in the past, the cow has had health or behavior problems. She also says that John knows every cow in the herd, the year they were born, and who their mother was.

"Knowing all that information about each cow helps me understand why they are doing what they are doing or what their problem might be," John says.

John and Amanda are hopeful their two young children, Alexandra, 2 1/2 and Owen, 1, will someday share their passion for farming and will want to join the family operation.

"Our small operation is sufficient for our way of life," the couple says. "That's how we see farming – as a way of life – not our job."

For now, the couple is just happy raising the kids in a farming environment.

"Our kids already get a lot of exposure to farming," John says. "I enjoyed it when I grew up here, and I think they do too."

A closer Look



Jackson Dairy Farm

John and Amanda Jackson
with their children: Alexandra,
2 1/2 and Owen, 1

Location: Allegan, Michigan

MMPA Members of: MMPA District 2
and the Kalamazoo Local

Herd Size: 80 milking and dry

Replacements: 55

Acres Farmed: 300

Milking set-up: Double-4 Parlor

Agriculture and dairy involvement:

John's father, Jim, is the Kalamazoo Local President and Chairman of District 2. With no employees, John stays home to care for the cows so his father can carry out his elected duties.

The thing that makes a difference on

our farm is: We love to farm. We get enjoyment from seeing the growth of a new year's crop and milking a nice new batch of heifers. Most of all, farming allows us to be together as a family each and every day, and for us, that's what makes the difference on our farm.