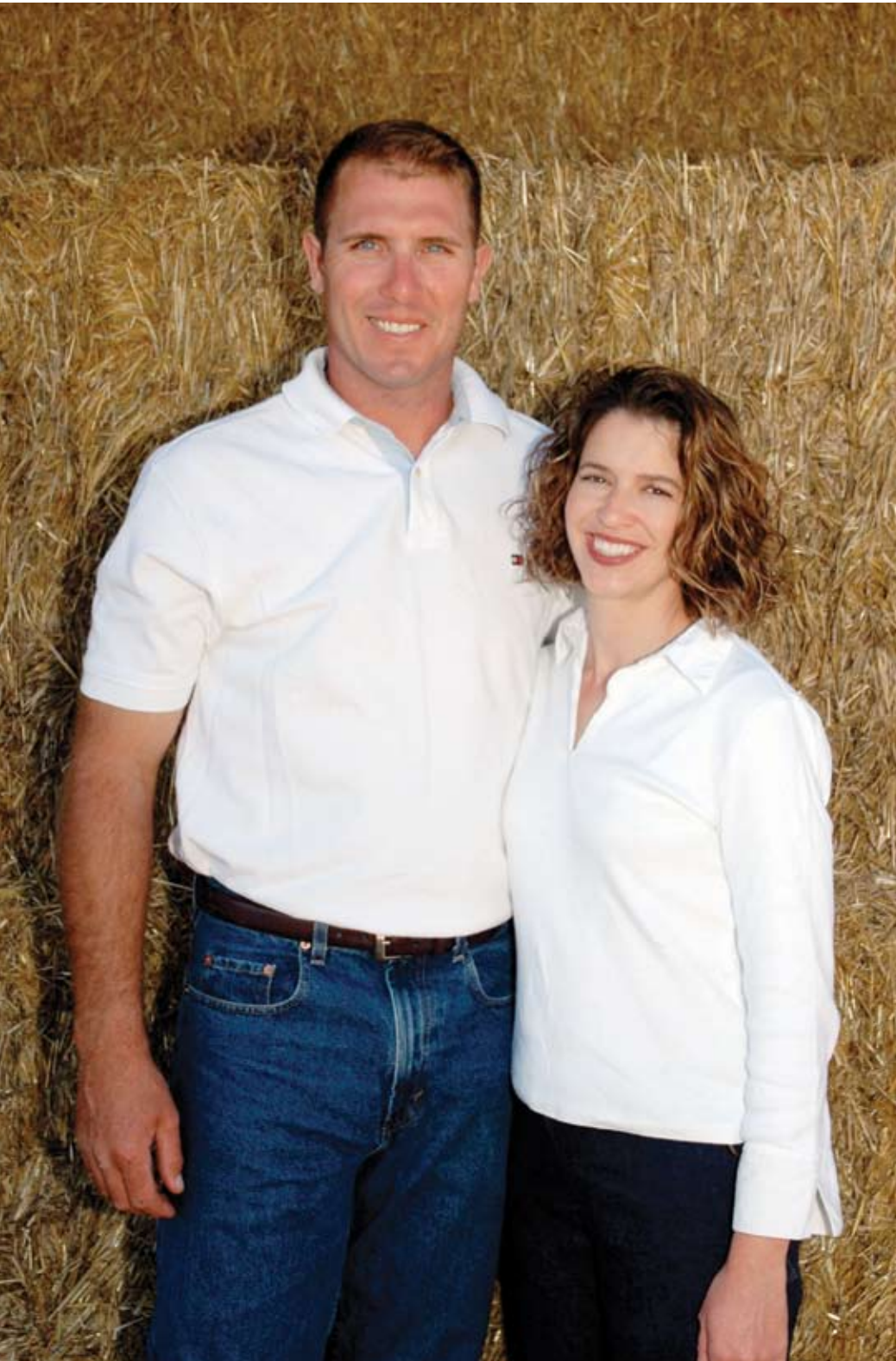


Cow Comfort is Key

OYDCs Aaron and Andrea Gasper focus on cow comfort to maintain high milk production and healthy cows



When Aaron Gasper entered Michigan State University's Dairy Science Ag Tech program, he wasn't sure he wanted to be a dairy farmer, but thought the program would be a good starting point to further his education and hoped it would provide him with opportunities he would not have experienced had he stayed on the family dairy farm.

"When I was younger, I didn't think I wanted to dairy farm, but I knew I liked cows, and thought I might want to be a vet," Aaron says. "I didn't want to go through a lot of school, so I went into the two-year program at MSU to start."

An MSU internship took him cross-country to a 2,800 cow dairy farm in Ontario, Calif., – quite different from the 185 cow dairy he grew up on. While there, he learned he could earn a bachelor's degree in Dairy Science at the nearby California Polytechnic State University, so Aaron decided to stay in California and pursue his degree.

"Cal Poly is very hands-on," Aaron remarks of the university, "The students run the dairy. I started out milking there, moved up to a feed person and was later the herdsman of the Cal Poly herd which was about 300 cows - half Jerseys and Holsteins."

Aaron earned his degree and gained something more during his years in California – the affection of another Dairy Science student – his future wife, Andrea, who grew up on a dairy farm in California. As fate would have it, Andrea's college internship took her to Michigan. When she later began looking for employment, she found a position in the communications department at NorthStar Cooperative in Lansing.

"I knew I wanted to be involved in the dairy industry from the time I was involved in the FFA dairy products judging team in high school," Andrea says. "I always wanted to be involved in the dairy promotion side of things." While at Cal Poly, Andrea helped to organize annual tours of the dairy farm for young school age children.

Aaron and Andrea were recently named MMPA's 2007 Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperators following the OYDC Conference in August. The Gaspers will represent MMPA at various events throughout the next year.

Aaron and Andrea say they are excited and honored to represent MMPA in the year to come and the opportunity to learn more about the cooperative.

Aaron farms with his father, Ken, at Lew-Max Holsteins in Belding. The Gaspers milk 400 cows, keeping a keen eye on their comfort by paying attention to the details. Aaron credits his employees for keeping up with the important tasks that allow for maximum cow comfort.

"Cow comfort is very important to us," says Aaron, who manages the cow side of the farm. Cows on the farm benefit from large sand bedded freestalls, a water sprinkler cooling system, fans, shade covers and close monitoring of dry matter intakes.

When they laid out the plans for the dairy's new 280-stall freestall barn, Aaron and Ken designed the stall size to fit with the age of the cows.

"The stalls are built for the cow's size," Aaron comments. "The older cow freestalls are 51 inches wide with a 39 inch loop – larger than most. On the 2-year old side, the stalls are 48 inches wide."

All stalls in the new barn are 8 feet long and bedded with at least 6-8 inches of sand. In fact, all cow housing on the farm is sand bedded, including the maternity pen. Calf hutches are sand bedded in the summer and in the winter, have a top layer of straw or sawdust with 4-6 inches of sand beneath for drainage. Alleys are scraped and stalls are raked three times per day, coinciding with milking times.

Whether they are lounging in the barn or waiting to be milked, the Gasper's cows are kept cool through evaporation by a sprinkler system. Whenever temperatures reach 70 degrees or above, the misters, which are located throughout the freestall barns, will run for 30 seconds every five minutes. In hotter temperatures, they run for up to one minute. Fans placed throughout the barns and holding pen help to aid in the evaporation. Sprinklers in the holding pen where the cows wait to be milked follow the same temperature guide, but run every four minutes due to the concentration of cows in a small space.

The Gaspers began installing sprinklers for one group of cows in 2002 and noticed a big difference in cow comfort and production immediately. They continued to install the misting systems in other cow areas and incorporated them into the new freestall barn plans.

"The sprinklers made a huge difference on milk produc-

Continued on page 14

~ Lew-Max Holsteins ~



Aaron and Andrea Gasper with their children: Quinn, 3 and Grant, 2

One Thing that Makes a Difference on Our Farm is...

our passion that we have for what we do.

~ MMPA Members of ~

District 6

Mid-Michigan Local

~ Herd size ~

450 milking and dry

~ Replacements ~

300

~ Acres Farmed ~

1,000

~ Milking Set-Up ~

Double-8 herringbone

~ Ag and Dairy Involvement ~

Through MMPA, Aaron is a delegate and a member of the State Resolutions Committee. He was the former vice-president of the MMPA Saranac Local and is active in the Ionia County Farm Bureau and a former board member of the Ionia Co. Soil Conservation District.

tion and reproduction right away,” Aaron says. “Between the fans and sprinklers, they helped immensely in the summer to keep the cows’ milk production levels up.”

Prior to the new freestall barn being finished, cows at Lew-Max were 45 to 50 percent overcrowded. Reproduction suffered in the cramped conditions, but Aaron says the misters helped to keep milk production levels up.

“We keep a close record of the cows’ milk production, butterfat and dry matter intake to find the fine line between high production and crashing the cows,” Aaron says.

The addition of a computer-operated sort gate linked to the AFI farm system has reduced stress on both cows and the people handling them. The system places certain cows, picked through pre-set system parameters or by manual input along a management rail that is just outside the parlor. The system was costly, causing Aaron to wonder if he would be able to recoup the cost when they purchased it.

“The nicest thing about the program is that we set up a fresh cow check that picks up on potential problems before we can usually see them,” Aaron says. “If any fresh cow that is 1-40 days in milk drops 10 percent in milk production, the computer sorts her out to the management rail for us to examine the cows. That alone has paid for the sort gate.”

Pedometers linked to the computer system and sort gate determine when cows should be bred. Cows

are sorted to the management rail when they are at 95 percent above the cows’ average activity.

“The sort gate helps to accelerate our management style,” Aaron comments. “If we are singeing udders, etc., we will use the headlocks in the freestalls, but, if I only need four cows to give injections to or breed, it is a waste to let them all stand there when we only need four of them.”

To synchronize breeding, Aaron or the farm’s herd manager, Larry Shockney, administer the G6G Ovsynch protocol. They are able to manually enter the cows’ identification numbers in the computer that need to be sorted to the management rail for injections.

“We are having pretty good luck with the G6G program for reproduction,” Aaron says. “We have an approximate 32-35 percent conception rate with that program.”

The NorthStar Select Mating System is used when mating the cows, and Julie Ainsworth of NorthStar assists the Gaspers by helping them analyze their records and determining body scoring.

With a good management system in place and cow comfort concerns taken care of, the Gaspers’ 5-10 year plan is to gradually expand the herd, and increase cow housing facilities.

“Everything is set up so we can expand,” Aaron explains of his plans for Lew-Max. “There will be another barn next to the new freestall barn and we hope to build a new parlor in the next 5-10 years.”

From Hobby to Business: Contained Gardens



Andrea offers an all-season design service for her clients’ homes and businesses, specializing in outdoor flower planters.

Andrea Gasper’s shift from a career in dairy communications occurred when her hobby of arranging flower planters for all seasons evolved into growing business called Contained Gardens.

“I thought it would be somewhat of a hobby,” Andrea remarks of her business that now employs five during the busy spring and summer seasons.

Andrea earned a horticulture degree from Lansing Community College before she and Aaron were married. When she moved to the Lowell area, she rented some ground from Aaron’s grandfather to put up a greenhouse.

She grew annual flowers in the greenhouse, made up some

pretty flower filled containers and asked an ice cream shop in a nearby town if she could put up a “Created by Contained Gardens” sign in exchange for letting them display the flowers.

“It spread from there,” Andrea says. “It has been all word of mouth.”

Andrea and her team not only create beautiful plantings in containers for her clients, they also maintain them as well as changing out the plants for each season.

“I offer an all-season design service for my clients’ homes and businesses, specializing in outdoor flower planters,” she says.