

# GROWING

## opportunities

the young farmers newsletter

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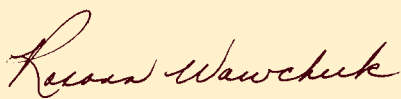
## Welcome

Welcome to the first issue of *Growing Opportunities: The Young Farmers Newsletter*. This publication will come out three times a year and will feature articles that reflect your own interests, and will strive to inform and entertain.

Each issue will profile young Manitoba farmers who are creating dynamic farming operations by using new management skills, new technology and up-to-date marketing tools. These young farmers will share their goals, plans, challenges and what they are learning along the way.

*Growing Opportunities* will also highlight programs and services offered by Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives to help young and beginning farmers access useful resources. Programs available through the Manitoba Crop Insurance Corporation and the Manitoba Agricultural Credit Corporation will also be listed.

I hope that you enjoy this first issue of *Growing Opportunities* and others to follow. I look forward to reading more exciting stories about Manitoba's young farmers. After all, you are the future of farming.



Rosann Wowchuk  
Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives



## Justin Griffiths

If you ask Justin Griffiths what he likes to do and what he does for a living, you'll get the same answer to both questions.

### He farms.

"As far as recreation, this is what we love to do," he says with a grin. "It's pretty exciting to grow a crop and see it grow all year."

Whether it is exploring the potential of new technology or looking for ways to address production problems using fewer inputs, Justin, 24, is energized by the dynamic nature of modern agriculture.

He farms with his parents Evelyn and John, and brother Michael on a 6,500-acre spread in southwestern Manitoba. His sisters, Melanie and Jill, come home to help during the busy seasons.

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Armed with a degree in plant and soil science from the University of Manitoba, Justin has taken on a major role in managing crop rotations, crop nutrition and pest management in the family operation. He's not simply interested in harnessing the soil's inherent productivity; he wants to grow it through careful management or rotations and fertility.

The Griffiths youngsters grew up feeling a part of the family farm, an operation in which everyone pitched in to do the work. "We weren't hired or paid a wage-type thing. I guess we felt we were responsible for part of the workload, so that's what we did and we liked doing it," Justin says.

His parents left the decision of what he would do with his life up to him. "They never really asked us if we wanted to farm or said we should or shouldn't, they just let us make up our own minds."

### **Farming became a passion**

Griffiths started buying land when he was 18, about the same time his passion for reading car magazines switched to articles about farming. "It wasn't just one day that it struck me type of thing, but all of a sudden I just had an interest in it," he said. "Just about learning about it, learning so many things about it - so I went into plant and soil sciences at the University of Manitoba."

**"They never really asked us if we wanted to farm or said we should or shouldn't, they just let us make up our own minds."**

Even though he knew instinctively how to grow crops, university opened a new world to him. It was like taking someone who knows how to drive a car and teaching him the mechanics under the hood.

"It's not like I came back with all these different ideas of ways to do things, or do things better," he says. "I learned how things work and I guess a lot of the science behind growing the crop - not just that you put this much N-P-K on and things will come up."

Justin wasted no time putting some of that knowledge to work in ways that potentially offer higher returns over the short term and reduced costs over the longer-term. While he was in university, he began experimenting with a concept called Pesticide Free Production, a hybrid between organic and conventional agriculture that produces crops without applying pest control products during the growing season.

He formed his own company, Eco-Farms Ltd., obtained labeling approval and a UPC code. Justin also consulted with the Food Product Development Centre in Portage la Prairie, which carried out the nutritional testing to give him the information he needed for his label. The Griffiths sort the sunflower seeds produced under PFP on the farm, selecting out the jumbo seeds and having them roasted and packaged at a Winkler plant. This year, he began marketing sunflowers produced on the farm through a B.C. broker and distribution network.

It's a niche marketing approach that promises to capture more value for at least some of the farm's production. But incorporating the PFP philosophy into day-to-day management promises some longer-term spin-offs too; it changes the way they address production problems on the farm.

Justin is starting to see pest management issues as symptoms of a larger problem. "That's the way we look at it - more why we have those weeds or insects or why they are there and then we try to look at solving the real problem."

"If you do have a problem it's not a quick fix like you can solve with inputs, it's more of a long-term approach with crop rotation and building up fertility of your soil and that kind of stuff," he said. "You have to have a bit of patience and a few more weeds in your field than the neighbours."

Thinking PFP has focused the decision-making process more clearly on economic thresholds. "Rather than spray as an insurance approach you look at it the other way. You may give up some yield in order to not perform that spray operation," he said.

Sometimes the decision is made to spray, as was the case with some of the planned PFP sunflowers this past summer. Those sunflowers will be marketed through traditional channels.

### **Decision-making is a family affair**

Managing a large operation that involves several family partners can make the decision-making process complicated. Discussion - and sometimes argument - goes with the territory.

"We have lots of disagreements over how things should be done or the way it should be done," he said. "Sometimes in the end, Dad knows best and we listen to him. Other times, my brother and I are more stubborn."

"But we know that you have to make things work, we have to get along at the end of the day," he said. "In the end, everyone understands why the decision was made that way. Farming with each other for as long as we have, we kind of know what the other person's decision would be on certain things without even asking."

Michael, 25, graduated from the University of Manitoba with a diploma in agriculture ahead of Justin and also plays an active role in the farm management decisions. The two brothers and the parents all own separate holdings but farm together. Their father, John, takes responsibility for managing the business.

His parents are a decade or so away from retirement age and are in no hurry to hand over the reins. Justin is comfortable with that; he appreciates the value his parents' experience and financial stability contribute to the operation.

"We need them as much as they need us to help run the farm, so seeding, spraying, and harvesting, we need everyone there to help," Justin said. "I guess they seem to give us more responsibility all the time and I guess we feel that that's our job to take some of the pressure off them, put in the longer hours so they don't have to."

### **New ideas and technology enhance productivity**

They are constantly on the lookout for ideas to make better use of their time and resources. "We use the Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives (MAFRI) website quite a bit. There's a lot of good information on there and links to other websites," he said. They also attend extension meetings in the area, the annual Ag Days in Brandon and the annual



crop scouting school in Carman, sponsored by the Soils and Crops Branch of MAFRI and the University of Manitoba.

The Griffiths have incorporated GPS tracking systems into their operations and Justin doesn't know now how they'd survive without it.

"We are so much more efficient in the field with that - wasting less inputs," he says. "For one thing, we can use it for night operations, if we do have weather delays in getting the crop in, we do a lot of our spraying in the dark at night when the wind's gone down and with that type of technology we can spray all night with just two-inch overlap."

Another advantage it brings to the operation is that it allows less experienced operators to run equipment effectively. Justin's fiancée and his sisters often help out during the busy seasons on the farm.

"It lets a less experienced operator do a perfect job and even people that are experienced, it lets them put in longer hours in the field."

Time management and the changeable weather are his two biggest worries as he looks towards the future. "It seems like every year we are busier and busier and we're not sure why," he said. "It seems like there's more effort or input put into crops than there was 10 years ago. We have higher goals for yields and that, and so I guess it's just more intensive farming and that seems to take that much more time I guess."

As for the weather, he sees a worrisome trend unfolding, beginning with 1999 - when only 15 per cent of the farm's land base was planted due to an extraordinarily wet spring.

"My grandpa farmed here since the early 1900s, and he always told us stories that the crop was sowed this late or harvested this late in the year, but he never told us a year when he didn't get the crop in," he said. "Ever since then, we've always been extremely wet in the spring. Getting the crop in on time has been tough. There isn't too much you can do when it is too wet in the spring."

At the same time, that annual dance with nature is one of the elements that add excitement to the job. "Every year you have a new chance to grow another crop and start fresh again." ☺

Justin Griffiths' sunflower seeds are produced using Pesticide Free Production (PFP) techniques. Justin is also a director of Pesticide Free Farmers' Co-op Ltd. For more information about the concept and issues around PFP and the Pesticide Free Farmers' Co-op Ltd., read on.

## The Ins and Outs of Pesticide Free Production

Pesticide Free Production (PFP) is not a new concept. Farmers of previous generations all had to farm without manufactured pesticides by using various methods of pest control. Proponents of PFP hope to recapture some of these lost methods.

The working definition for PFP is "crops bred using conventional techniques, that have not been treated with pesticides and have not been genetically modified, from the time of crop emergence until the time of marketing. In addition, such crops cannot be grown where residual pesticides are considered to be commercially active."

This definition, along with the research and extension to support this concept, comes from a group called PFP Canada. PFP Canada is a diverse group of producers, researchers, and extension people that first came together five years ago to define, develop and promote this concept. PFP Canada is based at the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Agriculture and is managed by Allison Schoofs (1-800-432-1960). PFP Canada also coordinates the field inspection requirements for the PFP certification process.

With PFP, farmers can incorporate non-pesticide control methods in certain years or on certain fields, while allowing conventional control methods on the rest of the farm. This greatly increases the variability and options for pest control and should make

one's whole farming system more sustainable. PFP can also be useful for farmers making the transition in and out of the different forms of organic farming. PFP allows the full use of conventional fertilizers. If pests have been controlled through non-pesticide methods, PFP crops will often yield as good or better than those crops grown on conventional fields.

PFP is poised to capture premium markets as consumers are increasingly looking towards foods with fewer pesticides. The Pesticide Free Farmers' Co-op Ltd. was formed last year to help its members capture some of this emerging market and it has just completed its second production season. They have had success with flax and sunflowers, however markets for other PFP crops remain elusive. The PFP Farmers' Co-op Ltd. has been granted exclusive rights to the Trademarks "PFP" and "Pesticide Free Production," as registered by the University of Manitoba.

The PFP Farmers' Co-op's main method for capturing premiums for its members is through overseeing the certification of PFP production. A field inspection is required prior to harvest (coordinated by PFP Canada), and, if successful, the farmer applies to the Co-op for full certification for that specific production. Once the crop is certified PFP it can be marketed with the PFP trademarks and this marketing term:

*Pesticide Free Production (PFP) certifies that the farmer did not apply pesticides to the growing crop. However, this does not guarantee the crop to be entirely free of pest control products.*

The potential for many other PFP crops looks very good. However, the Co-op has been challenged with labeling restrictions and has not been able to commit resources to pursuing other opportunities.

Directors of the Co-op are:

- Colin Rosengren - Midale, Saskatchewan
- Justin Griffiths - Waskada, Manitoba
- Gaston Boulanger - Grande Clairiere, Manitoba
- Kevin Archibald - Killarney, Manitoba, and
- Scott Day - Boissevain, Manitoba.

There are 45 members in the Co-op from Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

For more information on Co-op membership or PFP Canada, please contact the PFP Farmers' Co-op Ltd. Secretary-Treasurer, Scott Day, at the Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives office in Boissevain 204-534-2010 or check out [www.pfpcanada.com](http://www.pfpcanada.com).



## Todd and Julie Racher

It doesn't matter when you arrive at the Racher farm, it's bound to be abuzz with activity.

Aside from running a commercial grain farming operation, a greenhouse that supplies tomatoes and cucumbers to area grocers, and volunteering for local community organizations, Todd and Julie are busy raising an energetic crop of kids.

Raising Ashley, nearly 5, Tyler, almost 3 and their most recent addition, Charlie, on the farm - with them - is one of the things the Rachers like best about the farming lifestyle.

"There's no better place to raise kids," says Todd, 29. Julie, 28, couldn't agree more. "I would not want to raise my kids anywhere else. You're not in it for the money. You are in it for the lifestyle."

"And for the goals," said Todd.

"And for the challenges. There's lots of challenges," added Julie.

This couple works as a team, whether it is mapping out a future for their farm together or preparing the evening meal - juggling hungry and tuckered-out toddlers between them.

The Rachers are well aware that modern grain farms aren't the place they knew as they grew up alongside their parents on family farming operations, Todd at Elgin, and Julie, near Hamiota.

The equipment is larger; the pressures are greater. The farm can be a dangerous place for young children. They are keenly aware that the safety message isn't just imbedded in what they say, it's in how they do everything they do.

But they also know their love of farming grew from their own experiences working alongside their parents. They already see it in their middle son, Tyler. There's an ongoing debate in the family whether "tractor" was his first word or third, after "mommy" and "daddy." But there's no argument over how keen he is about farming.

"Right now, the way Tyler is, I couldn't see him doing anything else," Julie said.

While they would never force that choice upon him, one of their goals is to ensure their children have the same opportunity to farm that they were given. As the couple looks back on how the fourth generation family farm has been managed over time, they realize succession planning is an ongoing process - not just something to consider as they near retirement.

"Both my father and grandfather, when it was time for their children to start farming the farm was in a good management and financial position so that it was positive outlook rather than a constant negative," Todd said.

Managing debt is key. Todd draws distinction between managing debt and avoiding it. Strategic use of debt is essential nowadays to keeping a farm current and sustainable.

"Part of it is our succession plan. That's the way our fathers have farmed. They are never totally out of debt, but they seem to get to a point where they are comfortable," he said.

Todd said farming was always talked about in his home as a positive way of life, but he was never sheltered from the fact that farming has its ups and downs. And there were no ifs, buts, or maybes - if he was going to farm, he needed a post-secondary education. He took the two-year diploma program at the University of Manitoba School of Agriculture, which he credits for giving him some strong financial management skills.

"What they really drilled into us was the whole farm plan for the upcoming year with budgets and objectives, where you are going short and long. It was really good," he said. "I think it's probably saved me money from not making mistakes."

### **Farm succession a careful, gradual process**

Todd sowed his first crop in 1996. Julie became his partner in 1998. She has since put her training in horticulture and greenhouse management to work developing a fresh vegetable business on site. His parents, Gary and Sandy, developed a succession plan that was then vetted with all family members before it was implemented.

"He wants some money out the farm and at the same time he'd like to see the farm stay structurally sound and financially sound and not hurt it for expansion too," Todd said.

At the same time, it was very important to Todd for the two family operations to remain separate entities. "Part of it was I

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wanted to run my own business and at the same time, if I failed, I didn't want to hurt Mom and Dad," he said. "I didn't want to take their business down. I didn't want to hurt them at all for their retirement."

Todd and Julie own their own land, but farm together with the senior Rachers. Todd is gradually acquiring more of his own machinery and taking on a larger role in day-to-day management.

The young couple recently took over the farmyard, including the modern, well-equipped farmhouse his parents built. Todd said his father continues to be around to offer labour and expertise.

"Every year he's let part of the management side of it go more and more," he said. "As far as I understand it, in five years he wants to be out of the management side of the farm."

The operation is one Julie can manage in conjunction with raising a young family. It also provides diversification to the farm base - the equivalent of an off-farm income right in their backyard.

### **Growing their operation through diversification**

The Rachers want their farm to grow, but they aren't necessarily keen on acquiring more land, which has become prohibitively expensive in the area.

They see opportunities to expand the greenhouse business - as Julie's time allows - as well as expanding the farm's profitability through the production of higher-value crops. In recent years, they've focused on adding new crops to the farm's traditional rotation of wheat, canola and peas. They don't have their own seed cleaning plant, but they have taken on contracts growing seed for other wholesalers.

Food and Rural Initiatives representative Marc Boulanger for help researching new crops and production techniques for the area. Julie attends horticulture industry meetings for the same reason, sometimes coming home with valuable contacts for the farm's operations. Todd wants to be the first to know about new technology, although he's not necessarily the first in line to try it.

"I like seeing the new ideas and the new information coming out so that when it is affordable and tried, tested and true, we can adopt it," he said.

They worry about the shrinking farm population and the impact government policies can have on their futures. They are also keenly aware that the number of people their age that have chosen to farm is small, which puts a heavier load on them to keep the community



"I think he feels confident that we can do it, which is nice, because we're young and we're raring to rip," he said. "With some operations it's sad that the father is not letting the son make the decisions. I think that's why we like doing it - because we're free to go."

The couple built a greenhouse on their yard last year and recently harvested their first crop of cucumbers and tomatoes, selling 250 pounds a week through local grocery stores.

"The market demand was strong. The support from local community has been great," Todd said.

The Rachers measure the value of these crops in two ways - their cash crop potential and their impact in enriching the soil. For example, they have turned to alfalfa production as a means of controlling salinity and improving fertility. They've also been experimenting with seed production of other forage species. Sunflowers and corn have also been incorporated into the farm's rotation.

Todd and Julie are strong advocates of attending farm information and production meetings, not only to pick up new ideas but to network with other farmers and find out what they are trying on their farms. Todd counts on his local Manitoba Agriculture,

organizations in the area alive. Todd volunteers on the local volunteer fire brigade and for the local community rink committee. Julie is active in the children's activities in nearby communities.

Despite the gloom and doom often used to describe the plight of rural communities and family farming, the Rachers are optimistic about the future. Farming is allowing their family to live life the way they feel it should be lived.

As Julie describes it, "even when the days are hard and you can barely get to the end of the day because you are tired and everybody's grumpy, it's still a good day." ☺

# Farming with Young Children

Todd and Julie Racher have introduced an important issue. How do you raise young children on the farm while keeping them safe? For additional thoughts on this subject, keep reading.

The healthy atmosphere that rural Manitoba presents for raising our children can be dangerous if not carefully monitored.

In the first six years of their lives children are entirely dependent upon an adult to care for them and require constant supervision. For parents working on the farm, this is not always possible—especially during busy seasons.

Often off-farm child care is not available or unsuitable because of the location, hours or seasons when it is needed. Therefore, the safest



place for a child to be when their parent is busy is in a designated play area under the supervision of a competent caregiver.

On the other hand, letting a young child help with a simple task in a safe environment may help with developing skills and knowledge. For example, if a child helps to plant the garden it may take twice as long and the rows may not be as straight or well spaced as usual, but the child will delight in watching their efforts grow throughout the summer. In a few years, it may be a task the child can handle on their own.

To safely introduce a child to any work activity it is critical that:

- the parent honestly assesses the child's physical and cognitive abilities including:
  - the child's strength, body size and stamina
  - the child's ability to remember and repeat a series of instructions and describe the risks
  - the child's understanding of the purpose and value of the work to be done
- the parent explains and demonstrates a safe process for the child to use

(Note: If the parent tells or shows the child a different process than the one the child has seen the parent use, the parent will need to explain the reasons for the differences.)

- the parent watches the child perform a 'dry-run' of the task and provides feedback
- the parent stays close by to supervise, so that the parent can intervene at any time in case of an inappropriate action or unanticipated hazard. The parent is not supervising if the child is operating a piece of equipment and the parent is 30 metres away.

Parents want their children to grow up having an appreciation and love of the farm, but it is equally important to ensure that they grow up on the farm safely.

## 10 Ways to Encourage Your Kids to be Safe on the Farm

- Lead by example
- Explain what can happen
- Keep it real
- Use the resources
- Encourage them
- Follow their advice
- Correct any hazards
- Analyze the close calls
- Be consistent
- Make it easy

### For further educational resources about farm safety for children, call the Farm Safety 4 Just Kids – Manitoba Chapters:

Assiniboine Chapter:  
Sherry Boyd (204) 746-6771

Vita District Chapter:  
Justina Hop (204) 427-2708

South Central:  
Donna Riddell (204) 435-2725

Waldersee Chapter:  
Diane Mauthe (204) 352-4414

Turtle Mountain Chapter:  
Tanya Unrau (204) 534-6799

or Cathy Vanstone, Provincial Farm Safety Extension Specialist at (204) 239-3354.

### Check out our fun and educational farm safety website for kids at

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/farmsafety/kids/index.html>

*Information prepared by Jill Falloon, Family Living Specialist and Glen Blahey, Provincial Farm Safety Co-ordinator*



### **Did we miss anyone?**

If you know a young farmer who did not receive a copy of *Growing Opportunities – The Young Farmers Newsletter*, have them contact us at [Growingopportunities@gov.mb.ca](mailto:Growingopportunities@gov.mb.ca). We will gladly send a copy to them.

### **Share your thoughts**

We'd like to know what you think of *Growing Opportunities – The Young Farmers Newsletter*, and what you'd like to read about in future issues. Email your comments to us at [Growingopportunities@gov.mb.ca](mailto:Growingopportunities@gov.mb.ca)

**Manitoba** 

*Building for the Future*