

Dedicated Work By Sykora's Help Restore Prairie Flowers In Midwest

by Phil Hoyer

Contrary to almost every practice of current farming, Steve and Janelle Sykora are supporting themselves tilling only 7-1/2 acres of land—with no big machinery, silo, or livestock. Their farm, Jubilee Nursery, is nestled in the hills west of Bloomer. And, unlike almost all other farms in the area, they're surviving the present drought quite well.

Even when he was working on a computer helping to draw plans for dairy farms with 1,000 to 2,000 cows, Steve Sykora knew he wanted a farm of his own. "But I knew a young guy like me couldn't make it planting corn and soybeans."

In 1996 Steve's family bought some land six miles west of Bloomer. He had some bees, got a plow for an old John Deere he'd fixed up, planted some hay "and stuff like that," he said.

He found a company that was looking for growers to supply the firm with wildflower seeds.

"I planted the stuff, and it bloomed in '98," Sykora said. "Most of the wildflowers take two years before they bloom. I had cone flowers, bell flowers, and blazing star in less than a quarter acre."

His first sale to the seed company was only four to five pounds of seeds,

Steve said. In 2000, he went full time growing wildflowers native to this part of the country. "I planted 50,000 cells but only had 25,000 plants that germinated," he explained.

"I start all my plants in the greenhouse now, and don't plant any seeds in the field," Sykora said.

"The perennials grow so slow that the weeds took over there (in the field). I have honey bees to help with pollination," he says. Although the flowers take a lot of work to start, many are perennials that come back year after year, he adds.

First, most of the plants are started in their greenhouse in the winter, germinating in late February or March. Then, the seedlings must be carefully transplanted, some by hand, and cultivated by hoeing or with a small rototiller. The seeds are harvested by hand in midsummer and fall, packed up by Steve and Janelle, and delivered to a seed company in Winona, Minn., that specializes in selling prairie flower and grass seeds native to the Midwest. Many of these seeds are so tiny you need a magnifying glass to examine them.

There's a plus side to harvesting these seeds from a variety of native wildflowers. Since the seeds are so tiny and lightweight, the Sykora's entire crop can be stored in a small room. No big barn or silo is needed.

And no grain truck is necessary to transport their crop to the mill. The family car works fine to carry their crop to Winona.

There was some bad luck when a windstorm leveled Steve's first greenhouse and he had to rebuild it from scratch—stronger this time with heavy pipe framework, big fans, and a furnace heater.

A year ago, he traveled to Idaho to marry Janelle. And now she works side-by-side with Steve tending their crops, raising some 50 varieties of native flowers that once dotted the prairies in Wisconsin and neighboring states. Some of the more unusual names for flowers raised at Jubilee Nursery are obedient plant, rattle-snake master, large-flowered beard tongue, butterfly weed, and Indian paint brush. The farm not only is a haven for bees; butterflies can be found there in abundance, too.

The present booming interest in restoring wildflowers is helping promote their business. In fact, right next door to Sykora's nursery, Dan Schwab has planted some 30 acres of wildflowers and prairie grasses on his farm.

Steve Sykora sums up his life on the farm this way: "There's just something about working closely with God's creation that keeps us blooming."



Operators of Jubilee Nursery, Steve and Janelle Sykora, check a crop of native wildflowers they're growing to sell seeds to a Minnesota company for prairie restoration, or just a nice front lawn.