

# Couple's wild idea a success

*Small farm blossoms west of Bloomer.*

BY PHIL HOYER  
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BLOOMER — Steve and Janelle Sykora are going against the grain by supporting themselves by tilling only 7-1/2 acres of land, using no big machinery, silo, or livestock.

The Sykoras' Jubilee Nursery, nestled in the hills west of Bloomer, simply nurtures what comes naturally so that people who like wildflowers don't have to leave to chance what comes up in their gardens or prairie restoration projects.

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, and planted some hay, 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



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**Operators of Jubilee Nursery, Steve and Janelle Sykora, check a crop of native wildflowers they grew to sell seeds to a Minnesota company for prairie restoration.**

of the country.

"I planted 50,000 cells but only had 25,000 plants that germinated," he said. "I start all my plants in the greenhouse now, and don't plant any seeds in the field."

"The perennials grow so slow that the weeds took over there (in the field). I have honey bees to help with pollination," he said.

Although the flowers take a lot of work to start, many are perennials that come back year after year.

Most of the plants are started in the 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, and packed up by Steve and Janelle.

The seeds are then delivered to a 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. Since the seeds are so tiny, the Sykora's entire crop can be stored in a small room. No grain truck is necessary to take their crop to a mill. The family car works fine.

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

Last year, Steve traveled to Idaho to marry Janelle. Now the couple work side-by-side tending their crops, raising some 50 varieties of native flowers that once dotted the prairies in Wisconsin and neighboring states.

Even the names of some of these plants reflect their prairie heritage — flowers like obedient plant, rattlesnake master, large-flowered tongue, butterfly weed, and Indian paint brush. There's another nature bonus, too. Butterflies, as well as honey bees, love to flock to the fields of Jubilee Nursery.

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

Stimulated by land conservation grants, several rural property owners in Wisconsin and Minnesota are returning their vacant fields to old-fashioned prairies.

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