

To bean or not to bean?

Written by Darci Tomky



Combines run by Jim and Bill Tomky are going strong Friday, Sept. 3 on family farm ground in Chase County, Neb. Each year the Tomkys devote a portion of their land to growing dry edible beans. —Enterprise photo

A day in the life of...
A bean farmer

Not everyone likes their jobs, that's for sure, but after spending "a day in the life of" one local farmer, area residents don't hesitate a bit in pointing out he absolutely loves his job. In between knifing, combining and hauling, Jim Tomky took some time to spill the beans about pinto bean harvest.

Jim is very passionate about farming, and since dry edible beans are not very plentiful in the area, he was thrilled to educate the so called "city folk" about all the ins and outs of the job.

Spencer and Rhiannon Kimble beat the Enterprise to the punch when they spent a day with Jim in the field. Spencer and his wife moved to Holyoke a few months ago when he became the new pharmacist at Pamida. After connecting with Jim and his wife Mary, they jumped at the opportunity to spend "a day in the life of" a farmer.

"Jim's one of those people that really likes his job," said Spencer. "The moment the combine door opened, he talked about farming."

For the couple originally from Wyoming, it was definitely an eye-opening experience to spend some time at the Tomky farm.

"It's a lot of hard, dirty work, but people are detached from how much work it takes to put food

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on the table,” said Spencer.

Jim explained the bean market is driven by consumers. Since pinto beans are just one type of dry edible beans, there are many different options for farmers looking to plant beans. “It’s kind of a niche market.”

Other dry edible beans are kidney, navy and black beans. Pinto beans are called mottled because of their spots (think pinto horse...). They are often times used in refried beans as well as sent worldwide for humanitarian aide.

Jim, who farms with his two brothers, Bill and Kenny, said they devote one-fourth to one-third of their land to a bean crop. It’s just another crop to spread out their risk, he said. It also spreads out the labor so they aren’t so busy during wheat or corn harvest.

Jim’s pinto beans were planted around the end of May to the beginning of June. He said the beans don’t really like water and they love the sun. They take less than half as much water as irrigated corn and not as much fertilizer either.

When the beans are ready for harvest, the Tomkys use the knifing method where the beans are undercut and rodded out of the dirt. The cutting takes place at night when dew is on the plant which helps reduce seed shattering.

“My absolute favorite part is when the sun is just about ready to peak over the horizon,” said Jim. “Watching the sun come up over the field makes me feel like I’m a small part of God’s creation. When you just happen to catch the sunrise—it’s breathtaking.”

A few days after the pinto beans are cut, it’s time to harvest them. Farmers pray for no rain during this time because it could discolor the beans.

Spencer and Rhiannon were excited to learn about harvest and the different ways farmers

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collect a variety of crops. They each got to take turns riding in the combine with Jim, and before they knew it, it was their turn to take the wheel and drive!

“If you can put pants on one leg at a time, you can drive a combine,” Jim told them.

The two new farmers collected the beans and unloaded them into the truck.

“I got to say that I drove a combine!” said Rhiannon.

The experience wouldn't be complete without a trip to Grainland to unload the newly harvested pinto beans.

Darrell Krieg of Grainland is the go-to guy on beans, said Jim. He educates farmers on trends in the bean industry, and the Tomkys rely on his experience.

Krieg grades the beans based on their quality. Dockages can come from split beans, hauling in dirt with the beans and foreign materials like beans that are too small.

“You want a nice, clean sample—that's what the consumer wants and that's what we have to deliver,” said Jim. Beans that are clean, bright and whole is the ultimate goal.

After the beans are graded, Kenny explained how they are dumped from the bottom of the truck and then moved into a bin through a conveyor belt before they are unloaded into another truck that will haul them to Brush.

Eventually, those beans will make their way to consumers and onto the dinner table. The Kimbles pointed out how interesting it is to see where food comes from since most Americans are so disconnected from how food is produced.

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Rhiannon got to take home a bag of pinto beans and is very excited to cook the fresh, local crop. “Fresh food just tastes so much better!” she said.

Since they now know about crops other than corn and wheat, Spencer and Rhiannon said it’s been fun to drive around the area and try to identify the fields with beans.

The Tomkys have been farming in northeast Colorado and western Nebraska since around 1975. Will Tomky and his family moved then because of the bad water situation in southeast Colorado.

Jim, Bill and Kenny now handle the family farming operation. “As long as we take care of Dad first, harvest goes smoother,” said Jim with a smile.

“I don’t know what I’d be doing if I wasn’t farming,” said Jim. Some days he wonders why he farms, but it’s evident he loves his job by the way he talks about it.

Jim certainly enjoys his voice in agriculture, and as his wife puts it, he is always eager to “show and tell” people about his farming.

“It’s up to farmers to educate,” he said. “How do you know about agriculture if you don’t learn the active part of it?”

He pointed out agriculture in the United States is shrinking. “It’s the natural progression of the industry.” It seems like there are lots of opportunities in ag, but some of those deal with things like GPS systems and biogenetics so there aren’t as many farmers in production agriculture.

Each year Jim and Mary host two high school seniors with the Colorado Farm Bureau’s Bear Creek School program. The kids, who most times have never been on a farm, get to experience

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life in agriculture for 10 days.

“We’ve been in that program for five years already, and it’s a great learning experience for Jim and myself too,” said Mary.

Jim is always eager to educate people about farming. Besides hanging out with Holyoke’s pharmacist and a newspaper reporter, he has shared his passion with young adults from the Air Force as well as a few Iowa visitors Mary met at the welcome center.

After such a great exposure to pinto bean harvest, Jim even teased Spencer and Rhiannon about returning for corn harvest. But one thing is for sure, the next time pinto bean harvest rolls around, the Kimbles can certainly say they’ve “bean” there, done that!