

"The graphics and story development were the reasons this entry was selected as the winner as they really stood out."

— 2019 Iowa Newspaper Association Better Newspaper Contest

# Northeast Iowa Farmer



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## Chickasaw County woman expands involvement in agriculture with a fresh cut flower farm

When people think of agriculture and farming in Iowa, crops like corn and soybeans and livestock such as cattle and pigs come to mind, but one Chickasaw County woman has continued her involvement in agriculture with a different kind of crop. Jessica Rochford, New Hampton, is currently in her first season with her fresh cut flower farm called Hilltop Flower Farm.

Rochford has been involved in agriculture throughout her life and she grew up on a dairy farm down the road from where she lives with her husband northeast of New Hampton. Her parents still milk so along with dairy cows they also had row crops, hay and everything so Rochford was always into it.

"I also went to college at NICC in Calmar for dairy science. I milked for a bunch of dairies, wanted to be involved and then I got married and now we live out here," she explained. "We have hay and row crop and my husband is a John Deere tech mechanic. I work for Chickasaw and Howard County Farm Bureau on the federation side so I am the Ag in the Classroom coordinator and the outreach coordinator. I'm behind the scenes and with the Ag in the Classroom I go into all the classrooms in Howard and Chickasaw with ag lessons and teach about agriculture so I'm very involved."

Rochford's grandmother had five or six large garden-sized flower beds and a few gardens and she was very interested in flowers, so Rochford grew up watching her and loved it. Until moving to their property, she did not have any place for a flower garden and it wasn't something she saw as a business until seeing through social media it was doable. Rochford took the leap for the 2023 growing season.

She expressed with social media, people are able to see how other operations work instead of just using the Internet to search and receiving many different answers. There are

some flower farmers she follows which are very small so they use social media to share their stories.

"Flower farming can be so widespread because an acre of flowers is a ton. There are micro flower farmers and if you take the length and the width of the rows and you squish them together, it's not that much you are farming," commented Rochford. "They just shared their things and it was like, 'I might just give it a try.' I started very small so therefore my inputs are more attainable and controlled. Some people have hoop houses and greenhouses and I'm just starting very small. If it takes off, I can build up but for now it's a lower input."

This year along with her flowers Rochford also has a small garden and is mingling in specialty pumpkins, which has been a challenge due to lack of rain. She stated she isn't sure how much she will get from the pumpkins but she would like to do more next year. Around 80 percent were started in Rochford's basement with the flowers to give them the best chance of survival when planted outdoors but due to no rain they didn't take off. After conducting research, she now knows she needs to put more nitrogen on in the beginning, but everything is trial and error during the first year.

Rochford has about six flower beds which are four feet wide by around 80 feet long, but the size depends on the flowers. Some flowers need to be spaced six inches apart while others have to be nine inches or 12 inches apart, but the location is the flattest area. She commented she ran out of room so she had to till up a little more ground for the sunflowers, but she plans on adding a row or two in 2024.

"In February I started a bunch of seeds because some of them have to be six to eight weeks before you can put them outside. There are hardy annuals which can take a frost, but there are the tender annuals that if they get below 32 degrees they freeze," Rochford explained. "I had to start depending on the seed packet from February until there was no more chance of frost and then I could direct seem some also."

"It was continuous weekly sowings and some I did succession sowings. Some [flowers] get tired of blooming so long, so you start another pack or tray in four weeks so you are always guaranteed some. There are some flowers which are cut and come again or there are some which are one-and-done so you cut them once and that's it."

Rochford plans to continue to utilize seeds for her flowers, but she has a few lilies and perennials which aren't large yet. The seeds took over her basement earlier this year because they require grow lights and sometimes heat mats to germinate. Rochford had wire shelving with the LED lights and she used seed cell trays which are filled with dirt before the seeds are sown. The trays are placed under the grow lights and then watered from underneath to prevent the seedlings from molding or they don't like moisture on their leaves.

She commented the seeds have to be watered, fertilized and have a grow



JESSICA ROCHFORD  
Hilltop Flower Farm

light kept two inches above them, so as they grow the lights have to be adjusted. For Hilltop Flower Farm, she would move the seedlings up when she started another cell tray and stated it is a lot of work to keep everything watered every night. When moving the flowers outside, Rochford's biggest challenges were frost and weeds.

"I have a tiller, but I still used weed barrier fabric. I would lay down the fabric and we made a template for the six-, nine- and 12-inch holes so they are separate, and then I took a torch and burned the holes. Then I dug a little hole and planted the seedling," she stated. "You have to keep them weeded really well or the weeds will overtake them, but the frost is the biggest challenge. You don't want to start them or put them outside too early. I really didn't fight it at all because I didn't want to lose them all in my first year, so I kept them inside."

When preparing the ground for the growing season, Rochford explained with cut flowers, growers do not use any kind of spray. If she would have planned ahead she could have tarped the area so the weed pressure would be less but she "didn't have her ducks in a row yet." Rochford tilled the ground three times, going a week or so in between times to kill the grass which kept coming up, and then she laid down the weed fabric. This sat for a week before holes were burned for planting.

On one row in her garden, Rochford did not use weed fabric to test out if straw and shredded paper would work to help with weed control around her sunflowers. She wanted to see which would work better or if either one would help at all and she noticed the weed fabric worked the best. This fall Rochford isn't sure if she will use a cover crop and till it up in the spring or place manure to fertilize the ground.

"With having [the weed fabric] it helps with weeding and is more attainable, otherwise if I was weeding everything with the straw and paper it would be too much. The weed fabric helped with time management and being able to get it done," she added.

(Continued on page 8)



The flower beds at Jessica Rochford's Hilltop Flower Farm northeast of New Hampton includes many different types of annuals. Rochford has been involved in agriculture her entire life and expanded her involvement in 2023 with fresh cut flowers.

### A Look at Agricultural Law...

By Patrick B. Dillon, Attorney

*Disclaimer: Matters discussed in this column are of a general nature and should not be construed as applying to any particular fact pattern. Readers are encouraged to seek legal counsel regarding the issues discussed in this column. No attorney-client relationship is established by this general news article nor should it be taken as legal advice.*

#### Farm Bill Smarm Bill

It is becoming increasingly clear ag is losing some clout in the hallowed halls of D.C. Many provisions of the permanent law known collectively as the "Farm Bill" are set to expire Sept. 30. Many times that means we revert back to some really out-of-date provisions and nobody is really excited about that.

This likely means the Farm Bill will get an extension to kick it past key political events, likely to include early primaries in the presidential election. The official statement from the Senate is no later than end of the year, but I don't buy it. The delay has been anticipated all summer, it is still a disappointment our gridlocked government cannot handle basic food and fiber policy. The bill covers commodities, research, food programs, rural development, crop insurance, food aid and land stewardship provisions.

Part of the problem is the food portion of the Farm Bill (which is included to get votes on rural policies from urban politicians) has become a whipping post for political rhetoric. Conservative Republicans are expected to fight with liberal Democrats on access to food aid (aka food stamps). The Farm Bill takes back seat to annual government funding legislation, which is also in limbo. Those fights get more eyeballs and views than fights about limits on food stamps, conservation payments and crop insurance.

#### We are the government, we don't make mistakes.

A case out of South Dakota should be of interest to all farm operators who utilize FSA or NRCS programs. The fight of the case is an old erroneous determination of a wetland. The new operator found out the wet area was caused by the installation of a shelter belt of trees many moons ago, not hydric wetland soils. Ironically, the government pushed and helped install many shelterbelt plantings in that time period. When the landowner obtained new information and presented it to the government for a review, the government said no thanks, we are good. Essentially indicating unless they want to acknowledge the error, they don't have to.

#### Money talks

In response to California's Prop 12 production rule being upheld, and therefore requiring all producers in the U.S. to conform to that state's rules if you want to sell in that state, federal legislation was suggested. It is referred to as the EATS Act. Ironically, the big producer companies seem to be indicating they will just comply with Prop 12. This is despite the National Pork Producers group being among the largest opponents to the California law.

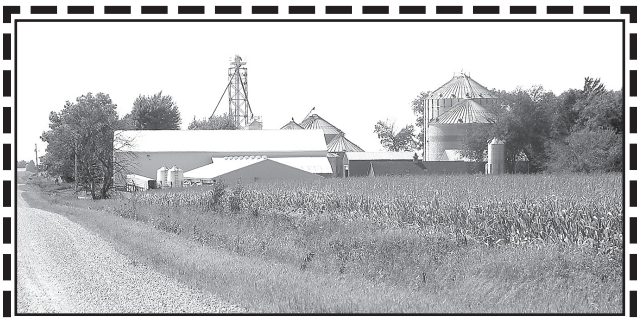
Perhaps, the big guys have already invested in complying and have considered the lack of market distinction and invalidation of the state and local regulations the proposed federal legislation might bring.



CALVIN AND JEAN KUKER, TRIPOLI

### Jacob Busch wins July mystery farm contest

Jacob Busch, Tripoli, was the winner drawn for the July mystery farm contest. The contest proved to be a challenge as the winning entry was drawn from five correct entries submitted. The July mystery farm is owned by Calvin and Jean Kuker, Tripoli. Busch has won a \$25 gift card to Norby's Farm Fleet.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
Mystery Farm: \_\_\_\_\_

### Guess the owner of this farm and win a \$25 Gift Certificate to Norby's Farm Fleet

Drop off all contest entries at the Tripoli Leader or Sumner Gazette offices, or Fredericksburg Review drop box at the Food Center or mail your entries to: Sumner Gazette, Mystery Farm Contest, P.O. Box 208, Sumner, IA 50674. Entries must be postmarked by 15th of the month. In the event of a tie, a winner will be drawn randomly from all correct entries. Limit one entry per person. No entry form reproductions accepted.



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