Georgian Central
Soil & Crop Improvement Association
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Zettler Family Farms, Bruce SCIA
Barb and Harold Zettler and Family

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Member Spotlight


An aerial photo of Zettler Family Farms from 2004.

Harold and Barb Zettler purchased their 100 acre farm in 1982 in Culross Township now the Municipality of South Bruce. They have 3 children Jonathan, Brendan and Christine, who helped with cropping and livestock. This interest and skills learned led them to pursue their B.Sc. Agr at the University of Guelph. Currently in addition to their off-farm jobs, they rent land and cash crop together as JBC Agri.

Harold commented that a family focus has been of paramount importance to them. He said that all the children played an integral part in chores and responsibilities while growing up. He feels that lessons learned from farming were significant for developing lifelong skillsets and finding their individual paths. Harold said that letting kids get involved as young as possible is important in developing a passion for agriculture, but that safety on the farm also needs to be respected. Their grandkids, all of whom are under 10, now like to help with chores where possible – tasks like feeding bottle lambs are safe and fun!


Quinn feeding the bottle lambs.

The farm was initially a small dairy operation with swine, beef and crops playing an important role as well. Over time they've transitioned the business to now being centred on 150-200 head of feedlot cattle and a flock of 150-175 Dorset ewes who lamb every 9 months. They grow enough forages and corn to support the majority of their livestock's needs. Harold noted that their main crop has always been forage and he believes it is paramount for soil health.

The Zettlers try to keep their rotation simple, with the farm being split into four sections, three of which are in forage and one of which is in corn. They have grown wheat and soybeans as well, but not very frequently. Forages and corn supply their feed needs for the livestock, and the systems fills the rotation needs of the crops. A triticale and pea mix is used as a nurse crop for their hay when seeded down. They harvest the cover crop within sixty days of planting and then are able to take a cut of hay in the establishment year. Each of their hay fields is then kept in production for two years after establishment before being rotated back into corn. Harold said that a lot of people feel that harvesting a hay crop for only two years wouldn't be economical, but the production that they see, and the soil health value of rotating into their corn fields pays off.

He stressed that he feels forages in a rotation are integral for good soil health. Harold explained that the 'fauna' in the soil – everything from earthworms to bacteria and all microbial organisms in between, rely on plant matter to survive. If row crops are harvested and the soil is left without living plants for periods of months at a time, that fauna has nothing to live on and soil health takes a nosedive. Cover crops are a good step towards keeping live plants in the ground throughout the year, but forages trump all. He commented that alfalfa especially is deep rooted and opens soil, contributing a lot towards soil health on a farm. He'd like to see more farms incorporating forages in rotations and tries to champion that concept through his role in Soil & Crop and similar organizations.

Following the soil health vein of thought, Harold noted that they had always been fairly conventional in their tillage practices, plowing as needed for example. With input from his kids, they have incorporated strip till and no till practices as well. He said that sometimes he's been nervous to try new ideas that they've put forward, but it's always a good learning experience in the end.

The Zettlers do soil sampling a minimum of every three years. Harold called this the bank account for their farm, saying they need to know what they have in order to make plans. That idea isn't restricted to soil sampling only; they also put a lot of value on testing feeds for their livestock rations, and manure testing before applying. Their son Jonathan does SWAT zone mapping in his agronomy work and has mapped all of Harold and Barb's farm. Harold said that the kids use variable rate technology for their own fields, and that tech has now also been applied to the home farm with Harold and Barb.

Harold had a great perspective that helped to explain his view of testing and quantifying data. He said, "average scares me, if I'm only average I'm not going to survive." He explained that using average values to estimate available nutrients isn't good enough, hence testing everything they are able to. He feels that especially as a smaller producer, they need production and output to be above average to be competitive.

The last challenge that Harold touched on with regards to soil health was compaction. He talked about the number of trips a hay field is crossed within a season, and the importance of knowing the correct tire pressure for the implement you're driving and the job you're doing. A vehicle travelling on the road can use different tire pressures than the one you'll be spreading manure within the field. Minimizing wheel tracks is important as well – Harold explained that the first pass from equipment always causes the most compaction. If you cross every part of the field with your tractor, it all suffers. If you pick a path and funnel most of your traffic along that (where possible), you can minimize the amount of area that is damaged.

When asked about anything unique to their farm, Harold mentioned that "there aren't many lottery winners," meaning those who get the one big ticket and make huge strides in a simple step. He said that incremental growth is the secret to improvement, and stressed that that improvement should be "small, managed, planned steps." A goal of one percent growth each year doesn't sound like much, but over the years it adds up. He also talked about needing the right skill sets to put good products to use, whether that means maximizing equipment, genetics or something else.

Preparing planter for spring planting- split row planter used for planting 30 inch corn rows and 15 inch soybean rows.

His words of advice for others started with the importance of remembering that mother nature always has the "trump card" and we need to work with her. Sometimes seasons don't line up with the calendar date we think they should. The best a producer can do is to get the work done when they can and trust that mother nature will even things out for us at the other end.

He also talked about the value of having a team in your corner, saying that farming can be both isolating and competitive. Having people you trust with expertise in things like financial or mechanical work, or just personal friends to draw on for support can make all the difference. Sometimes professional advice costs money, but it is very worthwhile. Harold noted that at times friends and mentors have been colleagues in the farming industry, and other times they have been people who were not involved with agriculture at all, but whose advice or perspective he valued all the same. There are nuggets of information to be found everywhere!

Harold and Barb are currently in the process of transitioning their farm to their son Brendan and his wife Lisa Holland. He said that it is a process that has been 10 years in the making and is still changing all the time. They've had family meetings and engaged professional support for the journey. He feels everyone with a farm or business should think about what their exit plan will be, right from the first day they start their work – detours to that plan happen, but at least it keeps you thinking about where you're going. He also talked about needing to recreate yourself; continuing to accommodate for life, vision of purpose, or the end goal as you go. Harold said producers should realize it's important to not just be identified by the job – things like value to yourself and the community, and what your new purpose is once you've left the farm are integral to making a good transition. Consider what your new role will be – whether you stay involved but in an adapted capacity, or whether you will be walking away entirely. Lastly, especially when transitioning within family; a lot of flexibility, dialogue and communication is essential.

The Zettlers are in the process of transitioning the farm to Brendan and Lisa, pictured above.

In talking about the biggest challenges that Harold sees for agriculture, he noted concerns with large companies holding a lot of power when it comes to ag supply. He commented that competition between suppliers helps to moderate a supply chain and worried that with few, very large companies, competition becomes diminished.

As far as opportunities go, Harold talked about the potential for an excellent lifestyle when working in agriculture. He said that it is a very challenging industry that requires producers to work hard to learn it. In the end though, if you enjoy the job, it isn't work – it's a reward.

His final thoughts centered on the concept of soil health with the important question of how we recognize what is there and build on it, and the thought that in the end we are all working in partnership to produce food that will benefit society. The most important mission of farming is to make sure that everyone gets their day's meal.

I'd like to thank Harold for taking the time to share with me about his and Barb's farm, their family, and their views on the industry. One of the most valuable aspects of Soil and Crop membership is being able to learn from and share with other farmers, and I'm very grateful to have members willing to do so through this spotlight!

(Left) May 2022 photo of planting soybeans direct into green cover crop which was sprayed after planting. Notice knife seed trench at bottom of photo.
(Right) May 2022 planting green - soybeans into 6 variety cover crops.