

INTERVIEW

ROD GUMZ, co-owner, Gumz Muck Farms

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor,
Badger Common'Tater



NAME: Rod Gumz

TITLE: Co-owner

COMPANY: Gumz Muck Farms

LOCATION: Endeavor, Wisconsin

HOMETOWN: North Judson, Indiana

TIME IN PRESENT POSITION: 25 years

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Richard Gumz Farms

SCHOOLING: Bachelor of Science in economics, Purdue University, and grad school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: President of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Board of Directors; president of Wisconsin Muck Farmers Association; finance council chairman of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception & St. Mary Help of Christians Church in Portage, Wisconsin; past director of Divine Savior Healthcare; and past director of Greater Portage Youth Education Foundation

AWARDS/HONORS: WPVGA Young Farmer Award

FAMILY: Wife: Michelle, Children: Brandon (25), Jason (23) & Alexandra (21)

HOBBIES: Basketball, CrossFit and traveling with family

"In 1892, my great-grandfather bought his first 40 acres in northern Indiana. When my grandfather started farming, he gradually acquired land, expanding into Wisconsin in the 1940's," says Rod Gumz, who co-owns Gumz Muck Farms in Endeavor, Wisconsin, with his brother, Richard. There, they grow, store and pack red potatoes and yellow onions for retail.

The farm also raises carrots for processing, field corn, soybeans and over 1,000 acres of mint (primarily peppermint). The Gumz family has been raising mint in Indiana and Wisconsin for 90 years.

"In the late 1950's, my dad began managing the main farm in Indiana, while my grandfather oversaw the satellite farms in Indiana and Wisconsin," Rod explains. "Since there were management opportunities in Wisconsin, it was logical for Richard and me to move here after graduating from Purdue University."

Rod and Richard's father and two

brothers, Kevin and Dan, stayed in Indiana and bought the home farm.

"Looking back, it was a big step for us, but with family involved, the risk was strategic," Rod surmises. "We were fortunate to have had the opportunity."

"Since that time, we have been able to grow the farm both in size and in a vertical business model to where

Above: Promoting onions fresh from the field where they pose, in 2016, and kneeling in front are Gumz Muck Farms co-owners and brothers Rod (left) and Richard Gumz, along with Doug Bulgrin (standing, left) and Tom Bulgrin (right) who handle sales and marketing for the operation.

it is today," he adds. "Richard and I work well together to accomplish this. Our combined skills complement each other and have allowed us to be successful."

Is Gumz Muck Farms on the same fertile land that your grandfather bought in the 1940's?

Yes and no. Some of the land that now comprises Gumz Farms was my grandfather's, but we purchased more land when we acquired other operations.

In 1978, our grandfather initially bought the farm from Buller Brothers, which is the current location of our office and packing shed. We then purchased our Baraboo farm, in 1996, from our great-uncle and went on to purchase the Lewiston Corporation in 1998.

Additionally, we bought the remaining third-generation family-owned land in 2008. Our most recent acquisitions were P&R Packing and Shiprock Farms just a few years ago.

Are all your Wisconsin farming operations on muck soil? Most of our farming operations are done on muck soil. However, we do have some sandy muck with about 1,000 acres that we have irrigated.

What, in your own words, is muck soil, and what are its advantages for potato and vegetable farming, as well as for peppermint and spearmint? Disadvantages? Muck soil is a type of soil that is very high in organic matter. Rather than utilizing irrigation, we have improved moisture levels by adding tile that drains excess water, since muck soil has great water holding capacity.

This can be a disadvantage when we have a year with excessive rainfall, like in 2016, 2018 and 2019. On the contrary, this can be an advantage in dry years like 2012.

Most onions in Wisconsin, Michigan and New York are grown on muck soil. Additionally, red potatoes get great color when grown on muck soil.



Peppermint and spearmint require a lot of water, so they also do well on muck soil. Growing crops on muck soil can be very challenging, but in the end, rewarding.

What types of potatoes and vegetables are you growing, and how many acres of each? What's the total acreage of Gumz Muck Farms? We farm over 6,000 acres of cropland. We grow and market about

Above: Lifted onions are taken up with a Shuknecht double-row harvester, in the fall of 2018, at the Baraboo location of Gumz Muck Farms. Wagons are used to transport the onions to storage.

20 percent of the fresh market reds in Wisconsin and a few yellow potatoes.

We also grow and market about 40 percent of the onions in Wisconsin. We grow slicer and dicer varieties of

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Above: With muck soil not only being high in organic matter, but also having great water holding capacity, Gumz Muck Farms has improved moisture levels by adding tile that drains excess water.

Right: Rod Gumz (right) poses with his kids, from left to right, Alexandra, Brandon and Jason, at the St. Mary Golf Outing. Rod is finance council chairman of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception & St. Mary Help of Christians Church in Portage, Wisconsin.



carrots for processing (canned and frozen), field corn and soybeans, as well as peppermint and spearmint.

How do you market your potatoes and onions? An important part of our business is supplying the retail market. In order to maximize our marketing opportunities, we have a packing shed that we're very proud of.

We are fortunate to have two great people who run this side of the business—Doug Bulgrin manages the marketing of the onions, and Tom Bulgrin, the potatoes.

We pack year-round, so we have modern storage facilities to keep supply for an extended time throughout the year. When necessary, we supplement with

products from other growers.

We raise carrots that go to canning companies, and we distill mint for the oil, which is then used for flavoring in various industries.

Tell me about the peppermint and spearmint, starting with perhaps why your grandfather decided to grow it and why you and Richard continue today? Our great-grandfather started growing mint almost 100 years ago. He then expanded the acreage in the 1930's and '40s when other growing areas were struggling with disease.

That is one of the reasons he expanded into Wisconsin, to plant mint on soil that had never grown mint. Mint thrives with water, so muck soil can produce a great mint crop.

How many full- and part-time people does Gumz Muck Farms employ? It varies throughout the year, but our goal is to provide full-time work. We have diversified our crop mix and our marketing plan to achieve this. We have close to 100 people working for us now.



Rod Gumz (center) and two of his kids—Jason (left) and Alexandra (right)—walk through a carrot field north of Endeavor, Wisconsin, in August 2018.



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What do you take most pride in regarding the operation, Rod? We have tried to create a workplace environment that is positive and rewarding. We have a great team of employees who will do what it takes to keep us successful. I hope our reputation is one of having integrity and being fair.

What's your favorite part of the year? I am always nervous just before planting. There is a lot of pressure to take care of a crop from planting to harvest, to storing it. But once we start, it's nonstop until next season. I probably enjoy it the most when we



are busy. It's rewarding to see what can be accomplished when everyone is working together.

Tell me about onions and their challenges. Growing onions takes a high level of management. Timing is critical with many of the steps throughout the growing process.

The crop is weak at first and sensitive to wind and other stresses. There are

numerous opportunities throughout the growing season to hurt yield or quality. Like everything else, the greatest potential that a crop has is when the seed is in the bucket.

Rod, you're the president of the WPVGA Board of Directors, president of the Muck Board, and Richard is president of the Mint Board. Why is being involved in

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Top: The onion packing shed and a bin of Healthy Grown onions are shown at Gumz Muck Farms.

Left & Above: Mint plants are shown being grown and harvested—with cut mint being chopped into a tub prior to the oil distillation process—on Gumz Muck Farms, in 2017.



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not only the industry, but also the WPVGA important to you?

I feel fortunate that I'm able to be involved. It is rewarding to do my part in giving back to a community and industry that I am a part of and that I support.

Besides, being involved gives me a different perspective that allows me to work and learn from some very talented people.

You're also a WPVGA Healthy Grown member. Why is that important to you?

A positive image of agriculture is becoming a more critical message to convey to the public. The general population is further removed from farming and are presented with a lot of information.

Healthy Grown is a program that unites Wisconsin growers and helps to bridge that gap, giving consumers a transparent look into our operations.

Wisconsin farmers are good stewards of the land. They are conscientious and progressive. Healthy Grown is a standard that has been branded to convey this to the public.

What do Wisconsin potato and vegetable growers do well as an industry? The WPVGA has helped to foster communication among growers in our industry, which is important for market stability, crop



health and more. The industry has been a great advocate for farmers.

How has technology changed or advanced Gumz Muck Farms in the past 26 years?

We have made a lot of improvements over the past couple of decades. The packing shed has become more automated to provide a consistent quality with the additional capacity.

In the field, we use GPS technology to guide and monitor operations. Along with this, we use multiple apps to monitor storage, field operation, irrigation, weather condition, etc.

Weather forecasts are more accurate. Technology has allowed for more

Top & Bottom: After onions are harvested at Gumz Muck Farms, they are conveyed into a storage bay with slotted floors and fans to allow for humidity and temperature control until time to pack and ship.

efficient communication and better coordination of people and resources. This has allowed us to farm more acres more efficiently over time.

What changes do you see on the horizon for potato and vegetable growing, and your operation specifically? I think there will always be opportunities as time goes on. We will continually look for ways to evolve and grow.

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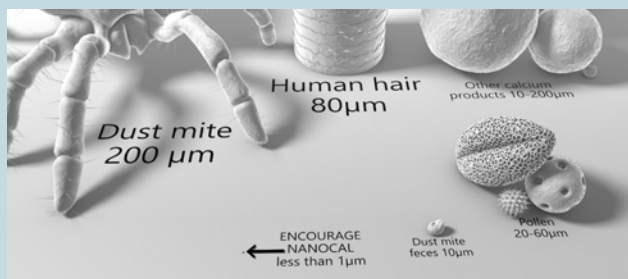
The scientific explanation.

Calcium is a required element for tuber development.

A calcium deficiency in plants results in dividing cells being unable to stay bound together. This causes poor quality potatoes such as reduced size, growth cracks and hollow heart.

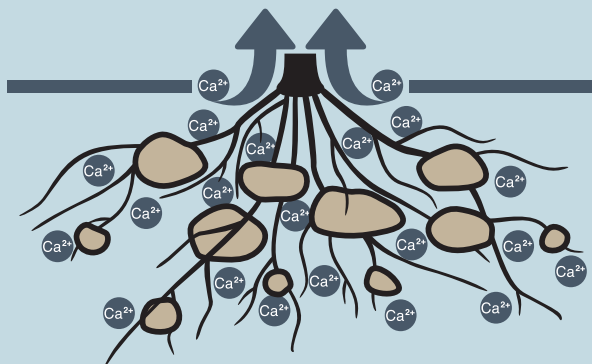
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Gumz Muck Farms also stores and packs potatoes. You have a lot on your plate. Does this make you a full-service operation? Yes, we are proud to be able to operate year-round and provide high-quality potatoes and onions to our customers.

It is beneficial for us to be able to pack and sell the produce that we grow. We control all aspects from planting to harvest and packing to ensure quality. We strive to give our customers what they want, when

Above: Rod Gumz poses in a potato field about a mile from the main office, in 2015; potatoes are windrowed in Endeavor, Wisconsin, using a Double L windrower during the 2016 harvest; and potatoes are graded for size and quality prior to getting packed in consumer bags.

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What do you hope for the future of the operation? I hope that we can continue to grow and adapt to the changing environment, such that we will provide an opportunity for the next generation to be successful and to want to continue the family farm.

Is there anything you'd like to add, Rod, that I might have missed? We are thankful to be part of an industry that still has opportunities for success.

We have been very fortunate to be able to work with great farmers, customers and suppliers throughout the nation. We are grateful and attribute much of our success to our employees who eagerly continue to learn and grow. **BCT**



Rod (left) and Richard Gumz (right) walk through the storage, in spring 2018, where seed potatoes are delivered in the spring and cut prior to planting.

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