



**NAME:**

Jeff Fassbender

**TITLE:**

Vice President

**COMPANY:**

Seidl Farms, Inc.

**LOCATION:**

Deerbrook, Wisconsin

**HOMETOWN:**

Bryant, Wisconsin

**TIME IN PRESENT POSITION:**

5 years

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** n/a

**SCHOOLING:** Agribusiness, Fox Valley Technical College

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:**

Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA), Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association (WSPIA), Bryant Ridge Runners Snowmobile Club and St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church

**AWARDS/HONORS:**

WPVGA 2020 Young Grower of the Year

**FAMILY:** Wife, Aly, and daughters, Paisley and Raelynn

**HOBBIES:** Camping, fishing, hunting and spending time with family

## INTERVIEW

### JEFF FASSBENDER, vice president, Seidl Farms, Inc.

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

*At just 30 years old*, Jeff Fassbender was elected president of the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association (WSPIA) Board of Directors, in January 2020.

Holding that position at such a young age is not surprising considering Fassbender's experience at Seidl Farms, Inc., in Deerbrook, Wisconsin, and what he has packed into his three-plus decades.

A respected certified seed potato operation, Seidl Farms has historic yet humble roots. Jeff's grandfather, Frank Seidl, grew up on his own parents' (Art and Evelyn Seidl) dairy farm in Bryant, Wisconsin, which also raised about 15 acres of table stock potatoes.

When he was 21 years old, in 1949, Frank planted and grew 20 acres of potatoes. For the next 30 years, he grew fresh and chipping potatoes, oats and clover, and in 1980, added

certified seed potatoes.

Frank's daughter, Peggy (Jeff's mom), married Jim Fassbender, who had been working on the farm since he graduated from high school in 1976.

**Above:** Vice president of Seidl Farms, Inc., Jeff Fassbender (right) poses with his wife, Aly (left), and daughters, Paisley (front and center) and Raelynn, in his arms. Working on Seidl Farms since he was 12 years old, Jeff studied agribusiness at Fox Valley Technical College for two years and then returned to the farm full time in the spring of 2010.





Peggy continues to work as the farm's secretary-treasurer.

Part of the fourth generation, Jeff joined the farm full-time, in 2010, after studying agribusiness at Fox Valley Technical College.

Now vice president of Seidl Farms, Jeff informs, "Today we grow 1,000 acres of potatoes, snap beans contracted through Seneca, barley contracted through Malt Europe, oats, field corn, clover and alfalfa."

"I actually started on the farm when I was 12 years old, working during the summer months washing the warehouse and fixing boxes," he says.

**I believe you went full-time as soon**

**as you graduated from school. Was there ever a doubt of what you were going to do for a living?** I studied agribusiness at Fox Valley Tech for two years and then returned to the farm full time in the spring of 2010.

There was never a doubt that farming was what I wanted to do for a living. My family jokes that it is in my blood. Farming was something I grew up loving to do.

When I was too young to help, I spent my days "farming" in my sandbox with toy versions of the trucks, tractors and equipment they were using on the farm.

My dad even hand-welded me a replica of our (then) two-row,

**Left:** Ryan Fassbender windrows Goldrush seed potatoes on Seidl Farms. Like his older brother, Jeff, Ryan returned to the farm full time after studying agronomy (Jeff studied agribusiness) at Fox Valley Technical College.

**Right:** Jeff Fassbender applies fungicide on seed potatoes using a Hagle STS10 self-propelled sprayer.

self-propelled Lenco harvester.

**Do you have any specific memories of working with your father, Jim, that you would like to share, or why you liked working alongside him, and still today with your mom, Peggy, and Art?** As anybody who works with family probably knows,

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it can be challenging to work with family day in and day out, but we have made a great team over the years.

I feel fortunate for the years I got to spend working alongside my dad. He taught me a lot about farming and agriculture and the character it takes to make it through the long haul.

Some of the earliest memories of

working with my dad include moving pivots and helping with irrigation when I was young. But he also spent a lot of time teaching me the ropes of running the potato planter, and I am thankful that he was able to share all his wisdom with me before he passed.

My dad was a meticulous note keeper. He always had a notepad in

**Left:** The Spudnik 8400 planter is filled with seed potatoes on Seidl Farms.

**Right:** Jim Fassbender fills the old Kverneland 3600 planter in this mid-1990's photo. Having since passed on, Jim was married to Frank Seidl's daughter, Peggy, who continues her roles as secretary/treasurer and loving grandma. Jim had been working for Seidl Farms, Inc. since he graduated from high school in 1976.

his shirt pocket, truck and tractor, and was constantly jotting down thoughts, notes and lessons learned.

So, like I said, I am thankful that he was able to pass on his many years of experience and wisdom to the next generation.

**Your younger brother, Ryan, works on the farm, too, is that correct?**

Yes, Ryan works on the farm as well. He returned to the farm full time, in the spring of 2015, after studying agronomy at Fox Valley Tech.

Ryan is a jack of all trades and picks up and fills in wherever there is a need, but some of his regular responsibilities include driving windrower during harvest and running the warehouse at planting season.

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## Interview . . .

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My mom, Peg, also works for the farm and has for almost 40 years. In addition to working another part-time office job, raising our family, and now carrying out all her responsibilities as a loving grandma, she handles our bookkeeping.

My uncle, Art Seidl, also continues to be an active and vital part of the farm.

### **Art was always active on WPVGA and WSPIA boards, and now you are the WSPIA Board president. Why is it important for you to be involved?**

Agriculture is not only an industry, but a lifestyle, and it is important for me to surround myself with like-minded people to learn from and grow with.

Being a part of the WPVGA and WSPIA offers me an opportunity to connect with other people and promote quality growth and innovation throughout the potato industry.

Being a part of these communities is mutually beneficial, as it also helps us as a farm to stay up to date with the best growing practices and other growers in the state.



Art Seidl digs potatoes with a Lenco self-propelled harvester.

Not only does it keep us informed, but it also gives us a voice and influence in the important conversations that impact us, as well as our fellow farmers and the industry.

### **I believe Seidl Farms, Inc. raises Atlantic, Snowden, Goldrush, Russet**

### **Norkotah and Red Norland certified seed potatoes, is that correct? And are they all certified seed potatoes?**

We recently stopped growing Red Norland and now grow Manistee. All the potatoes we grow are certified seed potatoes.

**What is the acreage breakdown of the potatoes you grow, and on what kind of rotation? Is all the farmland in the Deerbrook area?** We grow about 1,000 acres total, and all farmland is around the Deerbrook area. The acreage breakdown:

1. 225 acres of potatoes
2. 250 acres of snap beans
3. 160 of barley
4. 60 in field corn
5. 210 acres of clover and alfalfa
6. 100 acres of oats

Our rotation typically looks something like potatoes, beans, barley and back to potatoes; or potatoes, beans, oats, alfalfa and potatoes, on a three-to-four-year rotation.

A promotional graphic for Chippewa Valley Beans. It features a pile of dark red kidney beans in the top left. In the center is a circular logo with a Native American profile and the text "Chippewa Valley Bean" and "50 YEARS". To the right of the logo is the handwritten-style text "Better than high quality. It's Chippewa quality." Below this is a paragraph about Russell Doane's legacy. At the bottom, it says "GROW WITH US." and provides a phone number and website. The background is a landscape of green bean fields under a clear sky.

Russell Doane's kidney bean legacy started in 1969 when he grew his first crop of dark red kidney beans. Learning as he went, he generously shared his knowledge. Today, multiple generations of growers have benefited from his expertise. Fifty years later, the Chippewa Valley Bean Team is grateful for his continued guidance.

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## Interview . . .

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Sometimes, depending on location and what is available to that field, things like irrigation and the ability to spray impact the rotation.

**Who are your customers and where are they located?** We have customers across the United States, as close as Minnesota and as far as

Florida. Most of our customers grow chipping potatoes, but some grow a combination of chip and table stock.

**How did the growing season go for certified seed potatoes this year?** Planting and harvest went considerably well. The growing season was somewhat challenging with all of rain we had.

Considering the challenges of the 2019 harvest season, 2020's harvest felt incredibly smooth. The weather was favorable, our equipment worked well, and the yield was good.

**What were the main challenges? Successes?** Challenge: trying to maintain our weekly spray regiment that includes fungicide application and two applications of Aphoil. The wet weather made it difficult to get into the fields with the sprayer and forced us to slow down while in the fields.

**Above Left:** Proud papa Jeff Fassbender poses with his daughters, Paisley, in front, and Raelynn, in his arms, while standing before the 2020 Russet Norkotah seed potato crop.

**Above Right:** The aerial shot shows Jeff Fassbender planting seed potatoes using a Spudnik 8040 four-row planter pulled by a Case IH Puma 225 tractor.



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Success: Despite the less than ideal growing conditions, our yield seems very good.

**What are your main duties during the growing season?** I'm responsible for coordinating and carrying out our regimented spray program, so I spend a fair amount of time in the sprayer during those months.

I am also responsible for setting up and monitoring irrigation. Later in the growing season, we inspect and prepare all the equipment to make sure it is ready for the harvest season.

These are the main things that occupy my time and mind, but there are also some behind the scenes paperwork and recordkeeping that I'm responsible for.

**What do you like most, and least, about growing certified seed potatoes in and around Deerbrook, Wisconsin?** I really enjoy the community in which we farm. Not

*"I feel fortunate for the years I got to spend working alongside my dad. He taught me a lot about farming and agriculture and the character it takes to make it through the long haul."*

**– Jeff Fassbender**

only are we fortunate to have a great community of farmers, but we also have the special privilege and advantage of growing our crops in the state's silt loam soil.

We hear over and over that the potatoes people get from this part of the state taste unlike potatoes from anywhere else.

Least – It is not necessarily unique to farming in Deerbrook or Wisconsin but being at the mercy of Mother Nature can be challenging and frustrating. We have a pretty short

window of time to work with in terms of getting our crops into and out of the ground.

**How has the industry or farm changed in the short time you have been there?** One of the biggest things is the automation and advanced technology of equipment, i.e. autosteer for planting, being able to monitor our air systems from the convenience of home via our phones and starting and monitoring irrigation systems from our phones.

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## Interview . . .

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Another significant change has been to our grading efficiency in the spring. This is mostly due to upgraded equipment and facility enhancements.

Since we have added a grading shed and upgraded our equipment, we are able to cut grading time in more than half. We went from grading about 300 bags per hour to now grading upwards of 600 bags per hour. This has also allowed us to manage the time of our employees better.

By utilizing a holding tank, we can continue to grade while waiting for the next truck to arrive. What would have taken us an entire day to ship in the past can now easily be shipped in less than half a day.

**What types of rules or regulations do you have to follow as a certified seed grower that other potato and vegetable growers do not?** We are required to plant foundation seed, which we get from the Wisconsin State Farm each year.

In order to maintain our certification, each year we send multiple sample lots of every variety to Florida or Hawaii to be grown, monitored, inspected and tested to ensure the seed we are selling to customers is clean and meets the highest quality standards set by the state.

We also have two yearly inspections done by the state to look for disease, and additionally, each load is

inspected as it is being graded to be shipped out as seed.

**I know cleanliness is king in the certified seed potato business—what fail-safes do you have in place that ensure your certification every year?** While there is no 100 percent fail-safe, we have multiple safeguards in place that help us keep our facility and crops as clean as possible.

Our warehouse is washed, disinfected and inspected by the state before potatoes go into storage each year.

Disinfectant pans are placed at each entry of the warehouse to help prevent the possible transmission of diseases, and our equipment is washed and disinfected before the cutting and planting season begins, and also between each variety throughout the planting season. The planter itself is disinfected after each variety as well.

We also hire an independent agronomy agency to create a specialized nutrient management plan specific to our crops and soil compositions, and we hire this same agency to scout our crops weekly.

While this is not a requirement of maintaining certification, it is an investment we feel is critical to the health and longevity of quality crop production.

**What do you most take pride in, Jeff, regarding the business?**

I take great pride in maintaining



With the sun glowing bright orange on the horizon, Snowden seed potatoes are irrigated on Seidl Farms.

our farm's reputation of providing clean, quality seed. The generations before me have invested a multitude of resources, skill, time and energy to get our farm and the crops we produce to the quality point we're at today.

**Do you hope to grow the business or take it to another level?** I would like to eventually expand some. I think a farm must continue to grow at some rate to stay in the game.

My present quest is to find a couple new growers to partner with. Eventually, I'd also like to expand our crop production, but we're currently at capacity, so increasing our yield would require a long-term investment of adding more storage and facility space.

**What do you hope for the future of Seidl Farms?** I hope it continues as a proud, family-owned producer of clean, quality certified seed. **BCT**

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