



INTERVIEW

DAN WILD, president, Wild Seed Farms, Inc

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



NAME: Dan Wild

TITLE: President

COMPANY: Wild Seed Farms, Inc.

LOCATION: Antigo, WI

HOMETOWN: Antigo

TIME IN PRESENT POSITION: 9 years

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: n/a

SCHOOLING: Bachelor of Science in agricultural economics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:

Insight FS Board of Directors and past board member, including a stint as president, of the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association

AWARDS/HONORS: 2011 Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Young Grower of the Year

FAMILY: Wife of 25 years, Connie, and daughters, Danielle and Julia (both aged 19)

HOBBIES: Hunting, snowmobiling, skiing and spending time on the lake with his family

"I like to say that I have an important but easier chapter in this farm's history," says Dan Wild, president of Wild Seed Farms, Inc., in Antigo, Wisconsin. "The hard work that my dad and grandfather put in earned a reputation of providing quality seed potatoes to customers, many of whom we still deal with today."

"I feel an obligation to maintain that reputation," Dan remarks.

Dan's grandfather, Leonard Wild, founded Wild Seed Farms in partnership with his father-in-law, Lukas Sikora, in 1948. The duo raised cows, chickens, pigs and about 20 acres of potatoes.

Leonard and Lukas bought their first certified seed potatoes—Chippewa and White Sebago varieties—from WPVGA Hall of Fame grower Bill Hoeft. A few years later, Leonard became a certified seed potato grower and bought seed from WPVGA Hall of Fame grower J.W. Mattek.

In 1958, Leonard grew his first crop of Sebago certified seed potatoes.

The farm has expanded in acreage and technology over the years, with Leonard's children becoming involved in the potato operation. Leonard's

son, Robert, has been with the farm since 1982. Leonard's oldest son, Tom, along with his wife, Caroline, took helm of Wild Seed Farms in 1995.

In 2012, Tom and Caroline's oldest son, Dan, along with his wife, Connie, took control, becoming the fourth generation to own and live on the farm.

Dan was honored with the WPVGA Young Grower of the Year Award, in 2011, and has served a term on the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association (WSPIA) Board of Directors, including a year as president.

Above: Three generations of the Wild family—from left to right, Dan, Leonard and Tom—pose for a picture during harvest, 2018. Current president of Wild Seed Farms, Inc., Dan is this issue's interviewee.



What does it mean to you, Dan, to represent the fourth generation of potato farmers on Wild Seed Farms, Inc.?

Twenty years ago, I remember being at a potato auction. As I was talking to an older gentleman, I introduced myself, stating that I was from Wild Seed Farms. After I said that, he commented "Oh, you have the good seed."

I remember my response was something like, "Oh, yeah, no one else has good seed." Then another farmer standing close by said, "No, he is telling the truth."

I told my dad about the conversation, not thinking much of it. The reputation that my Grandpa Leonard made for himself, my dad explained, was what helped sell our quality seed. From that day, I not only realized the hard work that it takes to build a reputation, but how easily it can be lost.

Have you always worked on the farm, and did you know it was what you wanted to do full time?

Growing up on the farm, it's hard to say exactly when I started working. Work can be a pretty loose term for a kid spending time with his dad, grandpa and uncles while they worked.

When I went to college, I found myself coming home to work on weekends during the spring and fall, and for the summers. I also found myself drawn back to my

farm background in my coursework.

It didn't take long to switch my major from pre-business to agricultural economics.

Any anecdotes of working on the farm as a kid or young adult? Thirty or 40 years ago, it took a big crew to run this farm. I learned a lot about work ethic from all the family members I worked with.

Above: Brian Bunnell takes care of potato planting on Wild Seed Farms, Inc., Antigo, Wisconsin.

There were also many non-family people that worked with us over the years. Each seemed to bring special skills or trades that I have learned from.

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As a certified seed potato operation, how are you preparing for the upcoming 2021 growing season?

We have just received our Florida winter grow-out results back from the seed certification agency. All FY4 (Field Year 4) seed is shipped off our farm. FY2 and FY3 are replanted, as well as incoming FY1 NFT (Nutrient Film Technique) hydroponic seed and seed from the State Farm.

We like to isolate and keep together FY1 and FY2 production, taking into consideration where our potato neighbors are planting. Besides isolating as best we can, keeping them together makes it easier to have a more intensive stylet oil spray program and timely insecticide applications.

Both help to reduce the spread of potato virus. We also plant our headlands in these fields in ryegrass.

How does your offseason differ as a certified seed grower than that of other farmers? Being in certified seed, most of our potatoes are shipped in March and April, and some while we are cutting and planting our own seed.

We have a separate grading line for our own seed. Sanitation is



Above: Red LaSoda seed is laid out for harvest on Wild Seed Farms.

imperative. Our own seed is all in storage that can be refrigerated. The last few years, we have started pre-grading our own seed to separate B-size and condition it prior to cutting. This has worked well.

We recently updated to a 72-inch Better Built seed cutter, which does an excellent job and is a big timesaver during a busy season.

Are you still growing approximately 500 acres of certified seed potatoes, and on what rotation? We are

growing 500 acres of certified and foundation seed potatoes each year. We follow up with oats under-seeded with clover. On the year of a clover crop, we cut it and leave it for organic matter.

This, along with deep tillage, track tractors and being conscious of compaction, have all improved our yield and quality.



Left: Frito-Lay seed potatoes grow on the Wild family home farm.

Right: Drone footage shows 2018 harvest of Frito-Lay seed potatoes at Wild Seed Farms.

I believe you raise Atlantic, Red LaSoda 10-3, Superior and Frito-Lay varieties, is that correct? All certified seed? And for fresh and process?

Yes. All are foundation or certified seed. Eighty percent of our seed goes to chip growers. Our Red LaSodas go mostly into Florida for seed. Being a seed supplier for Frito-Lay has been a good fit for us and has worked out well.

Any favorite variety as far as taste or growing that you like? We feel that we have our varieties figured out since we have been raising them for many years. From cutting to planting, every variety is different, from the amount of water required to harvest time after kill, harvest temps and storage.

Frito-Lay has been an asset for raising their varieties.

As far as potatoes to eat, we use Red LaSodas. Connie makes a top-notch loaded twice-baked potato.

“As far as potatoes to eat, we use Red LaSodas. Connie makes a top-notch loaded twice-baked potato.”

– Dan Wild

Any off-season machinery or technology purchases, and regardless, what are your newest tools and technologies? This past season, we switched to blind hilling right behind our planter. We recently visited T.I.P., Inc. to work with Steve Tatro on a hill shaper with a diking attachment. This will be a single-pass machine that puts down our side-dress fertilizer.

We keep our equipment quite current so we can do more in less time with less people. We upgraded our harvesting equipment a couple years ago with a six-row Spudnik

windrower and a new Lenco harvester.

The harvester has an Advanced Farm Equipment table, Spudnik Sep table and a holding bin. We also use a Greentronics yield monitor with John Deere's mapping, a big help in analyzing our farming practices.

How has potato growing changed in your time, and maybe even in the time since your dad, Tom, and grandpa, Leonard, were active in the operation? Besides all the technological advances in equipment

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that save us time and labor, we are farming with so much more information than they had in the past.

From simple things like live radar to all the university research that can be found online, to how easy it is to network with other farmers—all of this leads to less wasted resources.

Tom is a member of the Wisconsin Potato Industry Board and you were

on the WSPIA Board, with one term as president. Why is it important to be involved?

My dad was very involved, from our local boards to the national level where he served as president of the U.S. Potato Board (now the Potatoes USA Board of Directors). He always stressed the importance of being involved and having your voice heard.

Left: The Wild family, from left to right, Danielle, Julia, Dan and Connie, takes a selfie on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus. Danielle and Julia are freshmen at UW-Madison.

Right: On Wild Seed Farms, Brian Bunnell sprays flowering Frito-Lay seed potato plants.

I think this is extremely important today. Farmers' stories need to be told when consumers know so little about how potatoes are produced.

I believe your dad is retired now. Besides yourself, who in your family works the farm and in what capacity(ies)? My dad does call himself retired. That means he takes a little more time off. He is usually here to work when he is in town. My wife, Connie, retired from teaching 10 years ago and now takes care of all our accounting and anything else that needs to be done.

My daughters have helped on the farm for a few years and are now freshmen at UW-Madison. I have hopes that I might have inspired a farmer since they both have interest in science. They tell me not to hold my breath.

I have worked with my uncle, Rob, my whole life, and I am convinced there isn't much he can't fix. I have several



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employees who have worked here for many years and are key to the operation.

Work is more enjoyable when you surround yourself with good people.

What do you most take pride in, Dan, in growing certified seed potatoes and other crops? I take the most pride in sending quality seed to

my customers. I can almost always say that I have seen every load of seed that leaves my farm.

What have been your biggest successes and challenges? I believe our biggest success is the good relationships we have with our customers. I like to think we have contributed to the success of their farms, and in turn, we have been

Left: A 72-inch Better Built seed cutter is put to work on Wild Seed Farms. Dan Wild says the new seed cutter does an excellent job and is a big timesaver during a busy season.

Right: From L-R, Dan, Rob and Tom (driving tractor) Wild plant hydroponic Nutrient Film Technique (NFT) seed potatoes using a modified Monosem air planter.

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fortunate enough to continue being a supplier for them year after year.

The biggest challenges have been the extreme weather conditions seen in the last couple of years. You do the best job you can, but weather will sometimes dictate the outcome of your crop.

What technologies do you see on the horizon, or changes in the ways of doing things? I believe the newest technologies are going to be in the area of conserving resources. There has been a big push in the last couple

of years to show that we are raising our potatoes in a sustainable way.

From water management, reduced fertilizer inputs and the reduction in electricity and fuel, these are concerns of the companies we deal with and of their customers.

Do you hope to expand your farming operation, and what do you hope for Wild Seed Farms in the future?

From my background in economics, I know our farm could have better efficiencies if we would grow an additional couple hundred acres of

Left: Red LaSoda seed is put into storage after harvest on Wild Seed Farms.

Right: Dan Wild tops off a truck of seed oats headed to Schumitsch Seed, a family-owned and operated grain milling business, in Antigo.

seed per year. This would improve return on invested capital. For the time being, I am content where we are at.

My hope is that I see a fifth and sixth generation enjoying this way of life.

BCT



Tom Wild windrows seed potatoes. Wild Seed Farms upgraded its harvesting equipment a couple years ago with a six-row Spudnik windrower and a new Lenco harvester.



Parting shot: Wild Seed Farms trucks are lined up in the farmyard at the end of the day.



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