



# INTERVIEW ALLAN BROOKS, manager, Brooks-Schardt Farms, LLC

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

**NAME:** Allan Brooks

**TITLE:** Manager

**COMPANY:** Brooks-Schardt Farms, LLC

**LOCATION:** Markesan, WI

**HOMETOWN:** Plainfield, WI

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** On the same farm since 1966

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** n/a

**SCHOOLING:** Tri-County High School, Plainfield, and University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison Bachelor of Science in agriculture, majoring in soil science

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:**

Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association Board for six years as a vegetable grower, served on the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection Grower Security Ad Hoc Committee, and Mt. Zion Lutheran Church, Ripon, Wisconsin

**AWARDS/HONORS:** Thirty-one years attending the National No-Till Conference

**FAMILY:** Wife, Janet; son, Bradley; daughter, Melissa; and six grandchildren

**HOBBIES:** Looking at new machines and production ideas

*When Allan Brooks was in first grade,* he waited for the school bus in front of the old milkhouse at the Hancock Agricultural Research Station (HARS), Hancock, Wisconsin, where the office is currently situated.

“Back then, the area had a lot of dairy farms, and even though the forward research was in vegetable production, there was still unirrigated work being done for dairy,” Brooks explains.

Allan’s father, Gilbert Brooks, served as superintendent of HARS from 1946-1955, at which time he bought land and built a house in Plainfield. There, he began growing green beans, peppers, tomatoes, strawberries, and cucumbers for Redgranite Pickle Company.

The house, which is now torn down, was located where James Burns & Sons Farms land is now.

“Dad commuted to the farm in Plainfield for a year or so before he resigned his position at HARS,” Allan relates. “He worked with 35-40 professors at the time, and when

I went to college, I met many of his cohorts.”

“One of them told me that when my dad resigned his position, half of them thought he might make it in vegetable production and the other half thought he was crazy,” Allan says. “About three years after Dad resigned, he was paying more in income tax than he was taking home in salary.”

### SHOWING PROFIT

Eventually, the farm began to show profit. “My folks both grew up in Berlin, and they had relatives here. They took a lot of their earnings, bought additional property down

**Above:** The beautiful aerial photograph shows Brooks-Schardt Farms, LLC, in Markesan, Wisconsin. Allan Brooks poses in front of one of several of the farm’s planting tractors, a John Deere 410 8RX.



here in 1964, and in 1966, began farming this land while continuing to grow crops up in the Central Sands," Allan details.

"In 1968, we moved to the farm's current location between Markesan and Ripon, in Green Lake County," he says. "It's like two different worlds. There are pluses and minuses to both locations."

"When real wet and rainy, you want to be in the sands, and when dry, we like it here," Allan explains. "Sandy soils are much more favorable to root crop production. The processors I work with have operations in both locations. No area is the epitome."

Allan has been farming the silt loam soils of three townships in Green Lake and Fond du Lac counties since 1968. He's proud to say that all the land, stretching eight miles in two directions, is owned, and none rented.

"The last land I bought was in 2020.

I'm 75 years old, and my wife wants me to slow down. In 2018, I bought 114 acres, and in 2020, I bought 40, so I'm slowing down," Allan jests.

With just two other full-time employees—the neighbor's grown sons, Alex and Allen Glover—he practices a no-till method of raising vegetables and some cover crops.

**Tell me about silt loam and why it's a good soil.** Historically, Plano and loam soils are considered some of the most productive in the state, particularly before there was irrigation or fertilization. We take the same tact as the 4H organization—we make the best better.

**Do you have any favorite memories of growing up on the farm?** I always liked it. In 1963, my dad and I were featured in John Deere's "The Furrow Magazine." My dad had three John Deere 4010 tractors. He was a forward-thinking, progressive farmer at that time. The publication outlined

**Left:** Allen Glover operates the John Deere 8310RT pulling a Case IH 335 VT vertical tillage machine "scratching in some cover crop" on Brooks-Schardt Farms, LLC.

**Right:** One of many implements in Allan Brooks' artillery is the Massey Ferguson tractor (left) for combining cover crops.

what he was doing.

I was a sophomore then and grew up with a new generation of John Deeres. My dad wanted me to go to college. He, of course, had gone, but I knew if I didn't go, he wouldn't have accepted me on the farm.

He said, "I want you to take a look at the rest of world, and if you choose to come back, you'll be more satisfied."

I liked farming and wanted to stay with it. It took me five-and-a-half years to get a four-year degree. I was also working on the farm. I only spent one weekend out of five-and-a-half years down in Madison.

*continued on pg. 10*



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## Interview . . .

continued from pg. 9



### I understand you grow a little over 2,000 acres of vegetables. What types and how many acres of each?

We have 1,500 acres of sweet corn this year; 205 acres each in peas and snap beans; 304 acres of lima beans; 24 acres planted with barley; and probably 20 acres of winter wheat, the latter two of which I'm growing because I use them for seed. I grow cover crops for seed. We use our own bin-run seed.

I also have 40-plus acres of field corn planted in an area where Alex's brother and dad grow on shares. We're doing field corn and soybeans

over there on rotation, and some of it is organic soils.

I end up with more acreage of crops because of double cropping. I grow for Seneca, and down here we can have non-irrigated double-crop green beans, but Seneca wants to play it safe and requires irrigation. In all, I have 12 pivots on 10 high-cap wells. I also grow 192 acres of field corn.

On rotation, we grow sweet corn with a cover crop for three years, and vegetable legumes—either peas double-cropped to green beans or lima beans, which are about a 90-day crop, so that's a one-shot deal.

**Left:** Allen Glover uses the John Deere 7210R to pull a rolling cultivator on the first pass over green beans.

**Right:** Allan Brooks (left) poses with his two full-time employees, Alex (center) and Allen Glover, in front of a New Holland TV145 tractor.

Lima beans have their own problems. There's a lot more risk involved in weed control, and because of the additional time they're out there, more potential problems.

**What rotation are you on?** We're on a four-year rotation, or three years for non-legume crops, and I have an area west of Little Green Lake, more hilly land, and that's where field corn is being produced.

### Are most vegetables for canning or processing, and if so, for what companies?

I always use the term 'processing,' and that includes canning and freezing. Most of the vegetables end up at Lakeside Foods, and the majority are frozen. Seneca is green beans, and that's all canned.

**I understand you use no-till practices on your farm. Can you give me a brief explanation of the practice and why you prefer it?** "No-tillers" think we're tillage people, and tillage people think we're no-tillers.



The sprayer owned by Allan Brooks features RTK guidance, auto steer, 54 nozzles, and six 16-foot sections for 90 feet of boom.

**Interview . . .**

*continued from pg. 10*



I'm looking at a tillage operation to control weeds, so we run very shallow in firm, undisturbed soil where I'm planting.

We do cultivate, and the only thing we use tillage for is weed control. If we have a rank cover crop, I make sure we can cultivate that field.

I have a couple Garford cultivators, English cultivators, one is high-tech with cameras transmitting to a computer on the tractor, to a side shift unit. All the operator needs to do is go between rows, and the cultivator stays on track, side to side.

**Does it take special planters, or what do you need to do to accomplish your no-till goals?** No, but I utilize all the attachments that I can. Today, planters are designed much better



Hooked up to a John Deere 7210R, a Salford AirFlow with 60-foot booms is used to spread fertilizer in sweet corn, July 2021. *Image courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms Photography*



than they were 40 years ago. With attachments and adjustments, you can make a planter do what you desire.

A farmer south of here has a custom planter shop, and he has generally touched all the planters around here. I decided that, rather than investing more money in my existing planters, to have one built.

He started with a Harvest International bar and row tiller and put every conceivable precision planting attachment on there. Now, Precision Planting came out with a unique row cleaner, and we're going to add that.

**Does this take away from the profitability of the farm?** No, I view it as a way to enhance profitability



Sweet corn is cultivated on Brooks-Schardt Farms in July 2019. *Image courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms Photography*

**Left:** The picture was taken by Alex Glover from inside the cab of a John Deere 6150 as he made his last pass with the sweet corn cultivator on the Brooks-Schardt home farm. Tom Zick is in the New Holland bidirectional ahead.

**Right:** Sweet corn planting is underway on Brooks-Schardt Farms in June 2022. Allan Brooks' 24-row Harvest International planter is attached to a John Deere 8RX 410 operated by Alex Glover. *Images courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms Photography*

through the reduction of tillage. When we started farming down here, Green Giant had the most leased land in the area. In addition to company farms, there was a hoard of contracted growers.

In the Green Giant contract, there was a line asking if your plan was to plow in the fall or spring of the year. You were supposed to check the box that said "fall." That's what they wanted.

We came down, plowed in the spring, and then didn't plow again after that. My dad got a visit from the field man, and you could tell he was uneasy, shifting from one foot to the other. He said they told him up in Ripon that he had to come see us, and there'd be no more contracts if we didn't plow in the fall.

My dad was clever and asked, "Did

you ever try it? Why make decisions before you see the results?" He went back and left us to handle our operation that year. We made mistakes, but we were beating the yields of company farms. It was the epitome of production.

The next year, they wanted us to be under contract. We had four farms then, and the Green Giant people pre-filled in the contracts, marking "fall" in the boxes asking when we planned to plow. We didn't do any plowing that year, not in spring or fall.

The only thing we do for vegetable harvest, in the headlands where you exit the field, the loading areas, there is compaction. We simply look at those areas and loosen them up if they need it.

If we don't use cover crops, fields don't grow out as well. We're saving time and machinery. We use herbicides, fungicides, and fertilizers,

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*"I'm 75 years old, and my wife wants me to slow down. In 2018, I bought 114 acres, and in 2020, I bought 40, so I'm slowing down."*

**- Allan Brooks ,**  
*Brooks-Schardt Farms, LLC*

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but soil manipulation and cultivation are part of our weed control program.

**What other technologies does Brooks-Schardt Farms take advantage of for increased production and yield?** That planter was a huge step in the right direction. Two of my pivots have Lindsey VRI (variable rate irrigation), and if I replace pivots in other areas, they will be VRI pivots.

Down here, we don't get the kind of irrigation response as they do in the sands, but Lakeside Foods gives us a bonus for irrigating sweet corn. I have unirrigated and irrigated lands. This soil is not as uniform as one might think. There are inclusions, and inclusions will start to stress when very dry.

The processors take care of the harvesting, and they'll jump on the

*continued on pg. 14*

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irrigated land, picking it early. They have a lot of competition and quality is huge to them.

There's not a lot of irrigation down here, so they have me purposely scatter my plantings throughout the season with sweet corn so they can harvest early if they need to.

This soil gets a little stickier. They work with me and help watch the irrigation scheduling so I'm OK when it comes time to harvest.

I bought a BBI Sniper pull-type spinner fertilizer spreader last spring with a 120-foot spread and six sections on each side. It will walk itself down and spread perfectly

down to 10 feet on each side, but the sides don't have to be even. One side might be 60 feet long, and the other might be 10.

It has an onboard scale that controls chain speeds and the spinner speed, as well as movable drop pans, and the computer in that spreader is awfully powerful.

**What do you like about farming in Markesan, Wisconsin?** Relative to growing up, it's different. Our soil holds more water, so irrigation has different parameters than in the sands. Wind erosion is not really a factor here, but up there, blowing sand could damage crops.

**Above:** This gorgeous shot is of lima bean planting on Brooks-Schardt Farms.

**Any disadvantages to the area?** The wetter it gets, the more challenging it becomes. It's not that you can't do it. But if we get rain, we often can't get back into the field a half-a-day or a day later like they can in the sands.

Though we're limited by rain, we can practice no-till techniques because the soil is firmer. That helps in harvest because the water filtrates and we can get back in quicker.

At first, when everyone else was tilling in the area, and we weren't, the processors realized we could harvest sooner. Today, most people here employ limited tillage techniques.

**What are your biggest challenges?**

I think economics will be a real challenge going forward with high interest rates and costs. I just ordered a sprayer for next year with new technologies on it—the same brand of sprayer and the same width as one I bought three or four years ago, and it's double the money it was back then.

In 2022, I bought a new tractor. At that time, through John Deere, when you signed, they guaranteed and locked in a price and terms. They said it would be about a year before I got it. A year later, I was sitting down signing papers, and in one year, the price had gone up \$60,000.

**What do you consider your biggest**

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**Above:** Lakeside Foods sweet corn harvest is in full swing, September 2021. *Image courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms Photography*

**successes?** Everything is incremental. We're using machinery more efficiently. But more importantly, when my dad passed away, neighbors came to the visitation, and a few of them said, "Do you know your dad taught us how to farm differently than what we had been?"

We were considered radical back then. Today we're not. I thought that was a real compliment. It's changed that much in 50 years.

**Would you encourage others to go into vegetable farming?** I think that what you need, like my employee, Alex, for example, unless you have a lot of capital, you need to partner with someone.

We're working on a transition process. Alex is my right-hand man. He's been with me since he wasn't quite 14 years old. He'll have a part of this; we're working toward that.

You have to love it. If the person doesn't love farming, they better not even think about it. Even after that, they need someone they can work with and are comfortable with, and it's a two-way street.

My daughter, Melissa, and son-in-law, Paul Schardt, are now partners. They haven't been running the farm but acquiring knowledge. They do recordkeeping, and my son-in-law is learning as much as he can.

My daughter has a double major from UW-Madison in agronomy

and horticulture, and my son-in-law is an electrical engineer at IBM in Rochester.

**You're a long-time member of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association. Why is that important to you?** My father was a member for ages, and because he had a membership, I wasn't a member for years.

I want to support some of the legislative-type initiatives, and the knowledge I'm gaining through the *Badger Common'Tater* is high-end. Sometimes the WPVGA will sponsor educational meetings that I attend. I enjoy a lot of those opportunities.

**In addition to Alex and Allen, do you employ others such as seasonal workers?** Alex and Allen are pretty much full time, and I have a couple of retired fellows who like to grind stones and cultivate. I have equipment that eats stones so that they don't hurt the equipment. We



**Above:** Parting shot: Alex Glover's dog, Winnie, sits on watch as the crew at Brooks-Schardt Farms fills the grain drill.

can grind up stones on glacial till.

I have grandsons—my son's kids—one who is a graduate in the computer field and the other who goes to college. During the summertime, they've each come out to help. We start before they can in the morning, and they quit early, but they help.

**What are your hopes for the future of Brooks-Schardt Farms?** I hope that my son-in-law and daughter take hold of it and enjoy it as much as I am. My son-in-law welcomes this; he likes challenges. It's a process.

They're looking to maintain it, and I still enjoy it. As long as I can be a part of the farm, I want to help them be more successful.

Alex and Allen like to do the things it takes to get a crop in the ground and take it through to harvest. They're happy and they sure like the best of technologies. **BC'T**

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