



# INTERVIEW

## JESSE JAMES TEAL

owner, Jesse James Teal Farms

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

**NAME:** Jesse James Teal

**TITLE:** Owner

**COMPANY:** Jesse James Teal Farms

**LOCATION:** Antigo, WI

**HOMETOWN:** Antigo

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** Purchased the farm from his parents in 2004

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** Working for his dad, James Teal, on the farm, and in the off-season driving semi for the neighbors

**SCHOOLING:** Antigo High School

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association member, and lifetime member of the National Rifle Association and Pheasants Forever

**AWARDS/HONORS:** Honored in FFA and traveled quite a bit for the organization, to Washington, D.C., Kansas City, and throughout Wisconsin judging animals

**FAMILY:** Father, James Teal, who passed away February 7, 2024, and mother, Janice

**HOBBIES:** Hunting, fishing and the outdoors

**Above:** Jesse Teal stands in front of a Landoll tillage machine he uses for planting. Jesse James Teal Farms is a potato, vegetable, straw, oats, hay and beef cattle operation in Antigo, Wisconsin.

*The late 1960's was a bustling time* for James Teal, who purchased a farm in 1967, a tavern that was subsequently named Teal's Bar, in 1968, and married Janice (Strandberg) that same year. He ran the bar until 1990 and the farm until 2004, when he sold it to his son, Jesse James Teal.

James A. Teal passed away at the age of 80 on February 7, 2024.

Jesse says the original family homestead where his dad was born and raised and where his grandpa grew potatoes and kept dairy cows is just south of his own operation, Jesse James Teal Farms, in Antigo, Wisconsin.

"Dad built this house and bought the farm from the three Yankee brothers," Jesse explains. "Dad farmed on his own, and Dad and Grandpa swapped equipment for a while before Dad branched off and went 100 percent on his own."

### Is Jesse James Teal Farms mostly a table stock potato operation?

Yes. When I started, it was table and chipping potatoes, but I switched to just table stock recently, mainly because of supply and demand.

In the chip market, you need to operate a washing line, and I got away from that. Plus, Superiors,



Atlantics, and russet potatoes in general, are difficult for me to sell. Reds and yellows are in higher demand from my customers, with yellow potatoes gaining the most interest. Everyone is leaning toward yellows, and I have buyers for them.

I don't work with any canning companies, but I grow corn, beans,



**Top Left:** Jesse James Teal poses with his dad, Jim Teal, in front of one of three 1066 International tractors the farming operation owned and used for tillage, windrowing, and harvesting when this photo was taken in 1983.

**Above & Left:** Red potatoes are harvested at Jesse James Teal Farms, Antigo, Wisconsin. Drone photos courtesy of Datonn Ammel-Sopa, Swiderski Equipment

and a lot of hay and oats. I also run beef cattle, mostly Red Angus. At one point, I was up to 150 cow/calves, but I've since backed down to 50 in my cow/calf operation. I calve and then finish them out and sell them as quarters, halves or full sides, kind of a dual thing with growing potatoes. You can't put all your eggs in one basket.

**How many acres of potatoes do you grow, and what varieties?** Usually just shy of 300 acres of red and yellow potatoes, having tried and discontinued many varieties in favor of others. I'm always trying new varieties. Quite a while ago, I worked with a guy out of Rhinelander who'd bring down 2,000 pounds of potato varieties that I'd try. We tried purples, yellows, reds, and sometimes there'd only be 25 pounds of one variety.

A few years ago, I switched to red Modoc and yellow Colombas, and last year I tried a yellow variety named Natascha from Maine. I'm getting

more seed potatoes from Maine again this year so I can continue trying new up-and-coming varieties in the red, dark red, and yellow markets.

**What rotation are you potatoes on and with what other crops?** I'm trying to do a four-year rotation of potatoes, corn, soybeans and oats, with clover under-seeding the oats.

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Sometimes I'll eliminate soybeans, go to oats, and let clover grow for a year as cattle feed.

I'm a firm believer in introducing microbes into a fertilizer program. I run tests on the soil and work with one guy out of Minnesota and several local agronomists. They run tests for me in our effort to balance microbes

for better soil health.

No different from the human body, plants do better on a balanced diet of microbes. Our bodies need Vitamins C and D, and potatoes benefit from zinc, copper, magnesium, boron, and a host of other minerals.

A big problem now with reds and yellows is silver scurf. I've been

**Above:** A cold storage building (left) and shop (right) provide ample room for not only fresh produce, but also equipment like the New Holland T8 tillage tractor.

**Below:** Jesse James Teal can store up to 60,000 cwt. (hundredweight) of potatoes between his old and new storage facilities, which also house machinery like the Double L bin piler, John Deere 7930 tillage and hay baling tractor, Spudnik planter, and Lenco harvester.



in touch with my contact from Minnesota and a guy out of Maine, as well as the researchers working with them, about silver scurf, and they all say the same thing—keep your microbes in check, all of them.

**Is the soil on your farm Antigo silt loam?** No, the soil here is a little heavier and doesn't drain as well as on the Antigo flats. Then, if you go a mile to the west, across the west branch of the Eau Claire River, the soil gets rockier and has more of a clay-like consistency.

Here, you have sandy spots that can't get enough water, and the next spot is flooding. In wet years like 2024, I had a lot of drown-outs and seed loss from the water in the spring. Yields were struggling.

The soil here holds fertilizer better, though, so you don't get any leaching. It also holds the moisture, so in drier years, it is better. Still, as dry as we were in the fall of the year,

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*“I’m a firm believer in introducing microbes into a fertilizer program. I run tests on the soil and work with one guy out of Minnesota and several local agronomists. They run tests for me in our effort to balance microbes for better soil health.”*

**– Jesse James Teal**

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there was a lot of crop irrigation going on just before harvest. I was running a couple of irrigators. About 50 percent of my fields are under irrigation.

**Do you have siblings or other family members who work on the farm and in what capacity?** My mom still helps on the farm and keeps everyone in line. She's the hardest worker of any of us, and at 77 years old, is active and still loves to hunt.

**How many employees do you have, and how about temp workers during planting and harvest?** I have one full-time worker and a couple part-time guys right now, and I'm going to be down to one, probably, in the spring. I usually hire one extra guy to help in the fall, though we could use more. The labor market is tight.

Ideally, for the farm to run efficiently, I could use a total of 10-12 workers

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for potato harvest. I've been hiring locally, but as times are getting more challenging as far as labor, I've looked to different places in and out of the country to get help.

I recently traveled with Steve Tatro from T.I.P. Inc. to Michigan so I could see a new Raytec optical sorter in action. There's a farm over there that eliminated eight employees through the purchase of an optical sorter. I've been looking into it. If I could afford it, I'd have one ordered for next fall. The prices of parts, equipment and labor are outrageous.

**With this being the planting issue of the Badger Common'Tater, have you started preparing for the 2025 growing season, and if so, in what ways?** I just got done grading the 2024 crop in late January and now I'm prepping—we'll pressure wash and



disinfect our facility to get it ready for bringing in seed, order seed, order fertilizer, and maintain equipment for spring.

I put up a warehouse 8 years ago, and the new facility holds 60,000 hundredweight of potatoes, so there's always work to do in loading, shipping, cleaning and maintaining the buildings and equipment.

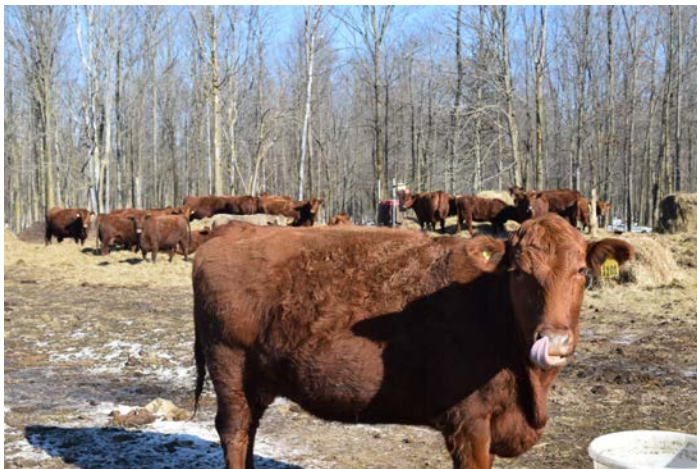
**Did you always know you wanted to be full-time on the farm, Jesse, or what swayed you to take over the family farm?** Yeah, I always had the itch to farm. The government regulations and lack of help make you wonder sometimes why you're doing

**Left:** Not only did they grow potatoes on the old Teal family farmstead, but they also grilled and ate them right in the field.

**Right:** Jesse James Teal's dad, Jim, proudly stands in front of the barn he had moved onto the farm, painted and shingled. It features all hand-hewn lumber.

what you do. But it was still a good move.

**What's your favorite part of growing potatoes and vegetables in Antigo, Wisconsin?** Working the soil up in the spring of the year—there's something about that fresh dirt smell. Combine that with the appreciation of harvesting a crop in the fall, seeing



Jesse James Teal has a Red Angus cow/calf operation and makes and bales quite a bit of hay, working with Mitch Nelson on roughly 700-1,000 acres of hay a year.

it come out of the ground, that's why I love farming.

I also love calving the Red Angus in the spring. There's nothing better than that.

As far as Antigo, Wisconsin, Mike Baginski is my cousin and the same age as I am, and all the other potato growers like Dan Wild, Keith Wolter, Chad Fleischman, Adam Bula, and the Schroeder and Mattek boys. I know all the growers in Antigo and their dads and families. John Hartman, for one, married my cousin. I won't name everyone, but you get the point.

I work with a couple neighbors, swap land with them, and then I also rent land. I have a good relationship with my neighbors. We all work together, but they don't grow potatoes, and I do, so we swap land for crop rotation.

**Who are your customers for potatoes and vegetables?** I usually ship potatoes to two re-packers each year, with Larry Alsum of Alsum



The harvest photo shows Jesse James Teal in the tractor and his dad, Jim, on top of the harvester at left, and Jamie Adamski at right.

Farms & Produce taking around 90 percent of my crop. I work with Rod and Richard Gumz of Gumz Muck Farms, the Okray's, and I have worked with the Bushman's,

all the big packers.

Corn and soybeans go to feed mills, specifically ADM and River Country Co-Op.

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**How do you maintain a good working relationship with them?**

It comes down to honesty between me and Larry. We work together through the ups and downs knowing that not every year is a perfect crop. Anything growing in the dirt is going to be challenging, so we talk through

it as best as we can.

**How many total acres do you farm, and do you rent land?** I farm around 600 acres of potatoes and vegetables, and of that, I own 500. I farm on rented ground, and if you add hay and everything in, I probably work

**Above:** It took a lot of axles for the round bales to ride on, in 1967, when Jesse James Teal's dad, Jim, bought the farm from the Yankee brothers.

around 1,500 acres, mostly around this area. I make and custom bale quite a bit of hay, working with Mitch



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Nelson on roughly 700-1,000 acres of hay a year. That takes our summer.

**Looking ahead to 2025, will you do anything differently as far as planting, growing and harvesting than in 2024?** I'm always trying different fertilizers and potato varieties. I'm constantly attempting to find the next golden potato or the next hot potato, because there's no one yellow yet that everyone likes and can get behind.

What I've been noticing is that the newer potato varieties are finicky regarding fertilizer use. Some of the newer varieties of yellows take less fertilizer, so they're more sensitive to the fertilizer.

There's one guy I talked to out of New York who works with a lot of varieties, and he changes his fertilizer program according to potato variety. That's the sort of thing you need to figure out. It's a never-ending challenge—what fertilizer program is best for what varieties. Some varieties work well in my soil and others in sandy soil.

**Have you expanded the farm over the years in acreage, technology, buildings or machinery?** Yes, all the above—the equipment is getting bigger and more efficient, and the same thing with buildings regarding new technology and better airflow systems. The bar has been raised in storage technology.

My father started out raising 100 acres of chip stock, so I've more than doubled the potato end of the



business, concentrating on table stock.

**Do you want to continue expanding the farm?** No, I don't want to expand because the cost is not in my budget, and I'm 49 years old with no kids.

**What are your biggest challenges going forward?** It sounds like a broken record, but labor—that's everyone's problem. Keeping up with food safety regulations is another challenge. The cost is no different for a smaller operation like mine than it is for a big operation, so it's proportionally higher for me.

**What about your father's legacy do you hope to carry into the future?** Keeping the farm going is my main goal. I feel like I have a good group of guys who I work with on all

**Above:** An old James Teal & Sons delivery truck, with the words "Raw Spuds" painted toward the top of the box, is parked in front of Teal's Bar. Jesse's dad, James, ran both the tavern and farm.

ends—from the Antigo growers who I buy all my certified seed from to my neighbors, employees and the packers and feed mills where I sell potatoes and vegetables.

Dad built this up from nothing, so I'm proud of what he accomplished in his life. Literally, he started with nothing and eventually had a successful farm and a booming bar business. The bar in Deerbrook is still open. It's Held's bar now, with the current owner, Chris Held, buying it from my uncle. So, I guess Dad's legacy continues. **BCT**



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