

NEBRASKA FARM PARTNERS WITH HENRY DOORLY ZOO

Located in Springfield, Neb., Turtle Creek Farm is a family-owned business operated by Kurt and Jenny Christensen. A passion for the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha, organic gardening, and the possibility of creating value-added products that could generate and sustain an agriculture-based business piqued Christensen's interest. He began investigating whether bamboo could be grown as a viable crop for Panda feed, as a decorative floral, and as an ornamental plant used in landscaping.



As a long time zoo volunteer, Christensen knew that a locally-grown crop, such as bamboo, available year-round, would better enable zoo staff to feed its more exotic animal species. Additionally, a specialty bamboo crop would generate an alternative revenue stream for small specialty crop, family and organic farmers.

After conferring with the zoo's horticultural and veterinary staff, a partnership was formed. Turtle Creek Farm worked with the zoo to provide samples of bamboo plants for inspection and updated reports on its growth. In return, the horticultural and veterinary staff evaluated the bamboo crop regarding its suitability as a diet staple for exotic animal species. For example, pandas require a year-round sustainable diet of bamboo, with the giant panda consuming about 75 pounds per day, preferring younger, tender bamboo shoots grown for a year or less. A local supply would considerably reduce shipping costs and assure an ongoing ready supply.

With a VAA grant, the Christensens built a greenhouse in 2008. Six species of plants—Scabrida, Denu-data, Nitida, Robusta, Dacocephala and Robusta Wolong— were purchased and planted. Initial reports indicate the bamboo can be successfully grown here and serve as a viable food source for pandas.

The Christensens continue studying each species of bamboo, and intend to equip the greenhouse with solar panels to help with heating. Additionally, they've discovered they can grow lettuce and spinach year-round and hope to grow other crops, too.

For more information, contact Kurt or Jenny Christensen at stocktanksecret@msn.com

