

For the birds: Growers raise sunflowers for birdseed

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

CLAYTON, Wash. — Pristine white snow shimmered in the sunlight on Dennis Urbat's field the morning of March 1, but come summer it will be awash in a golden wave of sunflowers whose seeds are bound for a feathered clientele.

Urbat primarily raises the striking yellow flowers for their seeds, which are used in bird feeders around the world.

He doesn't grow the flowers solely because of a love for birds. During last year's drought, sunflowers were his only crop that was profitable, Urbat said.

Urbat farms with his son, Blaine, 20 miles north of Spokane. He also raises alfalfa, timothy, oats, hard red wheat, soft white wheat and canola.

He typically plants sunflowers the last week of April or first week of May, and then harvests them in late September or early October. They can reach a height of 6 feet.

Urbat started raising sunflowers about nine years ago. He was the first farmer in the area to raise them as a rotational crop.

"Everyone else was kind of onlookers and seeing if I would be successful with it," he said.

A friend in North Dakota was raising sunflowers for birdseed, so Urbat decided to plant 40 acres of the crop to see how it would grow.

He got about 2,600 pounds per acre, which penciled out to \$600 per acre. He estimates the cost of production is about \$100 per acre.

"It was quite profitable," he said.

The following year, Urbat increased his acreage to 120 acres.

Since then, he has grown 250 to 1,000 acres of sunflowers each year on his land and for neighbors.

Sunflowers for birdseed make up about 20% of his total operation, he said.

"It's an amazing plant, how it survives in drought-tolerant conditions," he said. "It actu-



A field of sunflowers, raised by Dennis Urbat in the Clayton, Washington, area for birdseed. Urbat was the first farmer in the area to try growing sunflowers as a rotation crop.



Blaine Urbat and his father, Dennis, stand in the snow with their dog Remy in a field March 1 in Clayton, Washington. Come summer, the field will be filled with sunflowers raised for birdseed.

ally surprised us."

More people feeding birds

The company Urbat grows sunflowers for, Global Harvest Foods, is the No. 1 wild bird food manufacturer in the world.

"If the average tube-style bird feeder holds one pound, we sold enough bird food to fill 500 million feeders" last year, said Judy Hoysak, vice president of product development and marketing.

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in feeding wild birds surged, Hoysak said.

"With people spending more time at home, and working from home, bird food and feeder sales shot up," she said. "Initially, it was a real struggle to keep up with demand."

Many people who picked it up have stuck with it, she said.

"There have been studies that show the positive effects

of wild bird feeding on mental health and how it helps alleviate depression and anxiety," she said. "I think it's a rewarding hobby that has brought a great deal of comfort and peace to people, especially over the last couple years."

Sales have not slowed down, Hoysak said.

"We are seeing a new generation of birders that are excited to feed their backyard birds and share this rewarding hobby with their own children," she said.

Most popular food

Of the hundreds of millions of pounds of birdseed Global Harvest Foods produced last year, the largest single crop input is black oil sunflower seed, the most popular food among wild birds, Hoysak said.

"It's extremely nutritious for birds, containing high levels of healthy fat and protein, as well as vitamins and miner-

als," she said. "Birds also like it because black oil sunflower shells are thin and easy for them to open. Birds love to eat it, and consumers know it will attract a broad variety of birds to their backyard."

Consumers look for different birdseed blends depending on their geographic region, the birds they are trying to attract, and their budget, Hoysak said.

"We have decades of scientific research on the best types of seeds to offer wild birds, and we work with ornithologists to make sure our foods are best for bird health," Hoysak said.

The company has its headquarters in Seattle and Spokane and manufacturing plants in Mead, Wash.; Akron, Colo.; Roscoe, S.D.; Harrod, S.D.; Reynolds, Ind.; and Allentown, Pa.

The company supplies bird food to major retailers across the country — mass market, discount, big box, grocery, hardware and garden stores.

U.S. farmers produced 1.3 million acres of sunflowers last year, said John Sandbakken, executive director of the National Sunflower Association, based in Mandan, N.D.

About 40% to 50% of the crop goes to birdseed each year, he said.

"There was a great upturn as far as bird feeding (during the pandemic) because obviously people were stuck at home," Sandbakken said. "The future's bright for bird feeding because it's a great hobby."

The association is always looking for opportunities to expand acreage, Sandbakken said.

Helping small farmers

As part of Global Harvest Foods' black oil sunflower program, the company seeks smaller farms, supplies them with seed and commits to buying their crop.

"They have a guaranteed customer every year and sunflowers offer great long-term benefits to the soil," Hoysak said. "Sunflower roots grow deep into the ground and pull up nutrients that other crops

are unable to reach. This fertilizes the soil and makes it fruitful for future crops, so farmers can continue to farm their land for generations to come."

The company buys about 45% of its primary grains directly from farmers. About 10 to 12 farmers around the Pacific Northwest are in the sunflower program.

Urbat says the company is "definitely" helpful. It helps a farmer locate the seed and provides answers to questions about marketing, delivery, handling, varieties, fertilizer and chemical recommendations, he said.

The Mead plant

"I am an enthusiast, I do have bird feeders at my house," said Bud Hansen, business unit manager at the Global Harvest Foods plant in Mead.

The plant produces more than 50 million pounds of birdseed each year. The main ingredients are sunflower seeds, millet, milo, wheat, barley and corn.

The company does not regularly source any other major ingredients from Washington farmers, Hoysak said.

"Occasionally maybe a truckload of something here or there, but mostly it is grown in other areas," she said.

The minor ingredients — "gosh, there's a lot," Hansen said — include fruit pieces, whole or broken peanuts, "confectionary" sunflower kernels without the shell and thistle seeds.

Most farmers consider thistle a weed, but the seeds are sterilized before they arrive at the company, Hansen said.

"Finches enjoy thistles," he said.

Mixes also include cherries, raisins, mangos and tree nuts such as walnuts and almonds.

But people should not eat the birdseed, Hansen said.

"It's very well-documented on all of our packaging — the product is from the field, so it's raw," he said. "It's not human food because there's no process to make sure that

it's consumable for humans."

As grain comes in from the field, it is weighed and run through an aspirator to pull light material off with air. Then it goes through a tumbling aspirator to remove more stems and sticks.

The grain drops into a multi-deck screener, removing sticks and cob on top and allowing seeds to fall through the screens.

A second deck sifts out all of the small pieces, such as dirt particles, dust and broken kernels, considered "sub-prime" materials, Hansen said.

"Sometimes you get product from the Midwest or some place like that, it's coming out of an elevator and it's not always the highest cleanliness. We have to process it when we get it into the facility," he said. "These local guys, they take great pride in trying to bring us the cleanest stuff they can."

Hansen enjoys watching local farmers evolve in the program, as they work to provide the best birdseed possible.

"I enjoy the fact that you can drive a very short distance and go out and see a field of sunflowers," he said. "That is just not seen in this area. It causes some backups on the road, people taking pictures."

Attracting attention

The sunflowers are a big draw indeed. Urbat, the farmer, said the response can be "overwhelming."

"People for the most part are pretty good about staying out of them," he said. "Probably the worst thing is if they just let their kids run wild. It's public access to a playground for them, but it's our livelihood."

Urbat puts up signs, and local news media advise people to stay out of the fields.

Birds, deer and elk do a lot of damage, Urbat said. He estimated he had more than 160 elk cause \$30,000 worth of damage last year. He expects to be compensated through a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife program.

Urbat particularly appreciates sunflowers for how the plant grows.

"It's just an incredible crop to watch throughout the stages of its growth," he said.

While demand is high, the bird seed plant accepts grain on a capacity basis, said Hansen, the Mead plant manager. He recommends farmers contact the company's purchasing group in Spokane to learn more.

Urbat plans to grow 250 to 300 acres again this year, dictated partly by the availability of land from his neighbors.

He estimates the immediate area could handle close to 7,000 acres of sunflower production.

"We've had as much as 3,500 acres, but we could easily double that," he said.

Any advice to a new farmer?

"It's well-worth the enjoyment of growing them, and it's profitable," Urbat said.

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