



# Virginia Beginning Farmer Profiles

The purpose of the *Virginia Beginning Farmer Profiles* is to help beginning farmers and ranchers in Virginia gain knowledge about farm start-up and planning from first-hand, personal experiences shared by other beginning farmers. This educational resource is component of the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program's *Whole Farm Planning* curriculum.

The beginning farmers featured throughout this document share their stories, candidly answer questions and provide helpful information, having all undertaken farming operations. From its illustrations, you will find that there is a lot to consider before or while initiating a farm enterprise.



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## Steering Committee

The Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Steering Committee comprise seven committed individuals from the Coalition who represent both farmer and service provider perspectives in Virginia. This elected committee is responsible for guiding program activity to best address the expressed needs of the Coalition.

- Alvin Blaha, Laurel Farm
- Donna Westfall-Rudd, Virginia Tech
- William Crutchfield, Virginia State University
- Kim Niewolny, Virginia Tech
- Megan Seibel, Mountain View Farm and Vineyard
- Scott Sink, Hethwood Market
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## Management Team

The Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program Management Team is housed at Virginia Tech. This team is primarily responsible for the management and evaluation of program activity.

- Kim Niewolny, Department of Agricultural and Extension Education (Program Director)
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[www.vabeginningfarmer.org](http://www.vabeginningfarmer.org)



## The Beginning Farmer Situation

Emerging trends in U.S. agriculture suggest that in order to enhance our agricultural resource base we need to establish, sustain, and preserve our farms, farmers, and farmland. A growing number of nongovernmental groups, Cooperative Extension Services, and USDA agencies are working to improve the viability of new farms, and the economic, social, and environmental fabric in which they are entrenched (Niewolny & Lillard, 2010). These new initiatives are responding to an overwhelming concern of a steady decline in the number of individuals entering into agriculture coupled by an increase in the number of exiting farmers and ranchers (Ruhf, 2001).

The current population of beginning farmers and ranchers is diverse and varies by location across the nation (Ahearn & Newton, 2009). Beginning farmers on average operate smaller farms—in size and gross dollars—compared to established farmers (Ahearn, Yee, & Korb, 2005). While beginning farmers tend to be younger than established farmers, about a third of beginning farmers are at least 55 years or older (Ahearn & Newton, 2009). Beginning farmers, along with limited-resource and socially disadvantaged farmers, make up at least 40 percent of all U.S. farms (Nickerson & Hand, 2009).

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009) recently reported a large job decline for farmers and ranchers, and projects an 8 percent decrease in the number of farmers and ranchers between 2008 and 2018. The age distribution of today's farmers and ranchers is also a critical issue. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, the average age of a principal farmer is 57 years old. More than 63 percent of all established farms in 2007 comprised a principal farmer of 55 years of age or older; only 5 percent of all principal farmers were under 35 years or younger (Ahearn & Newton, 2009). This aging population of U.S. farmers and ranchers is expected to increase by the next census while the number of young farmers is likely to decline. The 2007 Census for Virginia also illustrates a significant need to establish and retain beginning farmers and ranchers based on the economic structuring of the industry. Agriculture provides \$55 billion in income per year and about 357,000 jobs, making it an important industry for the Commonwealth. Of the 47,383 total farms in Virginia, 92 percent reported less than \$100,000 in value of sales, while 8 percent of the total farms account for 85 percent of total farm sales. Virginia is also among the most expensive states for farmland, making it difficult for aspiring agriculturists to purchase suitable acreage. The average farm comprises 171 acres, while 77 percent of the total farms in Virginia operate on less than 180 acres.

Little is known about 13,206 principal farmers in Virginia who have been on their current farms or ranches nine or fewer years. The majority of all farmers in Virginia are white males, though such minority farmers as women and African Americans are on the rise. Production crops and practices differ regionally and culturally, especially between rural and urban centers. Consumer demand for local and regional food, however, is growing at an increasing rate throughout Virginia.

## Background on USDA Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Program (BFRDP)

Beginning farmer education for adult and young audiences in the United States can be generally traced back to the advent of the 1862 and the 1890 Morrill Land Grant Acts. But for the first time, the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (The 2008 Farm Bill), appropriated \$75 million for Fiscal Year 2009 to Fiscal Year 2012 to develop and offer education, training, outreach and mentoring programs to enhance the sustainability of the next generation of farmers.

The reasons for the renewed interest in beginning farmer and rancher programs are: the rising average age of U.S. farmers; the 8% projected decrease in the number of farmers and ranchers between 2008 and 2018; and the growing recognition that new programs are needed to address the needs of the next generation of beginning farmers and ranchers. According to the Farm Bill, a beginning farm is considered to be one that is operated by one or more operators who have 10 years or less of experience operating a farm or ranch. In 2007, approximately 21 percent of family farms met that definition.

According to the USDA, since its inception, BFRDP has funded many projects to train, educate, and provide outreach and technical assistance to beginning farmers on one or more of the following topics:

- Production and management strategies to enhance land stewardship by beginning farmers and ranchers.
- Business management and decision support strategies that enhance the financial viability of beginning farmers and ranchers.
- Marketing strategies that enhance the competitiveness of beginning farmers and ranchers.
- Legal strategies that assist beginning farmers with farm or land acquisition and transfer.
- Other Priority Topics to enhance competitiveness and sustainability of beginning farmers and ranchers for the next generation.

## Background on the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program

The Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program (VBFRCP) aims to improve opportunities for beginning farmers and ranchers to establish and sustain viable agricultural operations in Virginia through the development and enhancement of whole farm planning programs, online resources, and farmer mentoring networks.

### Beginning Farmer Audience

The VBFRCP is aimed at addressing the needs of the spectrum of beginning farmers and ranchers in Virginia. We recognize a diversity of farming experiences, backgrounds, and aims held by Virginia beginning farmers and ranchers. Many groups find it useful to look at the stages of commitment, decision-making, and skills that farmers pass through as they begin a career in farming. Drawing upon the work of Sheils & Descartes (2004), the following categories are a helpful guide to understanding this pathway:

- **“Prospective” or Explorer farmers** = individuals interested in starting a farm or ranch. This includes next generation farm family members as well as those who do not come from a farming background.
- **Start-up farmers** = individuals who are in the early stages of their agricultural operation, often within one to three years of farming or ranching
- **Re-strategizing farmers** = farmers who are making changes to their operation after farming for approximately four to seven years. The individuals usually have increased decision-making responsibility and commitment to farming.
- **Establishing farmers** = those farmers that are expanding , diversifying, and stabilizing within years eight to ten of the beginning farmer period.
- **Transitioning farmers** = individuals who are family farm members who have decision making roles on the farm without having primary farm operator status.

Farmer categories are a modification of those referred to by the New England Small Farm Institute. For full reference, see: Sheils & Descartes (2004). *What does the term “new farmer” mean? In Working with new farmers: Topics in professional development* (pp. 4-7). Growing New Farmers, a special project of The New England Small Farm Institute.

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## Why share beginning farmer stories?

Farming can provide a wide range of opportunities. Beginning farmers and ranchers come from varied backgrounds and bring with them a diversity of experiences, goals and interests. It is important to consider—and share—share your unique perspectives and experiences as you begin planning and developing your farm. The beginning farmers and ranchers highlighted here, share their stories, having all undertaken farming operations. These personal stories cover a range of themes that are relevant to the whole farm planning process. Observe and reflect on their stories as they candidly answer questions and briefly share talking points.

The Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition has also developed a series of YouTube videos which showcase several profile stories, and other beginning farmer footage. Most of the profile stories have a partnering set of video clips. The videos range from two minutes to five minutes and describe challenges and opportunities facing new farmers and ranchers in Virginia. A variety of topics are covered, including gaining access to farmland, capital, and determining marketing strategies. These topics and stories are designed to go along with the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program's *Whole Farm Planning* curriculum. Over 20 videos are available on the Coalition YouTube channel, and new videos will be posted as they develop. The videos and stories here are a useful educational tool for both farmers and service providers. You may visit the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition YouTube Channel here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/VABeginningFarmers>

The following list was used as guided questions for each farmer profile. Each profile story has been copy edited for readability from the original audio or video transcript. The videos have also been edited for production purposes. Therefore, the length and themes will vary from story to story.

- How did you decide to become a farmer and develop a new farm enterprise?
- How did you decide that it was the right farming option for you?
- What are the goals for your farm?
- Describe your farming enterprise; crops, size.
- What roadblocks if any, did you encounter?
- What was/are your business plan and or business managing practices?
- How do you market your products?
- What external resources have been useful to you?
- Did you have a mentor or anyone that helped with your business start-up?
- What can you say about land acquisition?
- What advice do you have for others who are contemplating a farming enterprise?



Brief description of the five beginning farmer profiles highlighted in this educational resource:

**Louis White: Russell County**

Located in Belfast, Virginia, Louis White operates White Farm; a family owned and operated livestock enterprise. Initially, the farm produced livestock as well as tobacco, but in most recent years, the operation produces beef cattle, mainly Black-Angus. When sold, most of the cattle are shipped directly to feedlots in the west.

**Erik Croushorn: Prince William, Fauquier, and Culpeper Counties**

Croushorn Farms are diversified livestock and vegetable farm enterprises, located in Prince William, Fauquier and Culpeper counties. Over 470 acres of land account for the production of beef cattle, hay, row crops as well as vegetables and eggs. Erik Croushorn manages operations on the more than 100 years old farms.

**Megan Seibel: Botetourt County**

Mountain View Farm and Vineyard, a wine and cattle operation located in Roanoke, Virginia, is family owned and operated by Andy and Megan Seibel. 500 acres support the operation, of which 20 acres are planted in grapes, producing 75 tons of fruit across 8 varieties. The very first vines were planted in March 2000.

**Marvin Thornton: Sussex County**

Marvin Thornton operates Thornton Raspberry Farm, a peanut and raspberry enterprise on 120 acres of land in Wakefield, Virginia. Initially a farmer of cotton and soybeans, Marvin started producing peanuts approximately 9 years ago and in most recent years, raspberries. Inside high tunnels Mr. Thornton has about 120 plants and 3 varieties of this 'super fruit'. When ready for harvesting, these can get up to 6 feet tall.

**Mark Seitz: Fauquier County**

Huntley Farm & Seitz Angus is a cattle operation located in Fauquier County, Virginia. Mark Seitz is the herdsman for Huntley Farm, and oversees just about 2300 cattle. Additionally, he along with his wife, own and operate Seitz Angus where they produce approximately 200 heads of cattle as well as hay and corn.

## Farmer Profiles: Lessons Learned

### Louis White, White Farm Belfast, VA

*Getting started:* I was born into farming. I was raised on a farm, raising livestock and growing lots of 'burley' tobacco. From when I was a kid it was something that I took an interest in. When I graduated high school, and got ready to go to college, the family had a situation to deal with as it pertained to the future of the farm. My cousin who ran the farm's operation passed away, and that experience threw me into making a decision. Do I take charge of the operation or continue with my education? I chose to stay and take charge of the farm, but I also attended community college part time. After earning a certificate in welding, I knew I would have something to fall back on just in case the farm's business was not successful.

*Farming Perspective and Goals:* I see the farm as a business, but the decisions being made with the farm also include the family. The farm has been a part of the family for years; my grandfather had previously run the farm full time. While my father and uncle played active roles, they both had off-farm jobs. My dad and uncle worked public jobs and my mom and aunt were school teachers. They have always supported me, and I now have the opportunity to farm.

Presently, my main goal is concentrating on livestock production. Tobacco has been "played out" in this and surrounding counties. Comparative to what used to be produced here, there is very little now; it has not been doing well on the market. The intent for us then has been to expand our livestock operations, which is beef cattle. I ended up purchasing my uncle's share of the business, so now the onus is on me, and partly my dad. So the business is experiencing a transitional phase. I want to ensure that the beef cattle are the best quality, and that there is an increase in my head count.

*Start-up Challenges:* I have had a few challenges with getting land to purchase, and in that regard, my family has been real supportive. Before my granddaddy passed away, there was land that he left to be divided among three siblings: my dad, my uncle, and my aunt who lives in Knoxville, TN. She still owns land here, but I am able to rent it at a pretty fair price. She wants to see the farm continue, since she was raised here as a child. Everybody takes it seriously. When my cousin got sick with lung cancer, my dad and uncle wanted to phase out the farm because they were so heartbroken over his illness. He too had grown up here and was the one to run the farm. I had to step it up. I learned to do everything from baling hay and chopping corn, to taking care of the livestock. The experience taught me a lot. People can always tell you how to do something, but when get yourself out there, it is different.

Finances are another thing I had to deal with. I have gone to the bank to seek financial assistance. But as far as farming goes, in this day and time, there are still a lot of people who do not believe in what you are talking about. It is like a foreign language to them. But on the other hand, I'm dealing with Farm Credit. I can talk with any farm loan officer there and they

know exactly what I am talking about. Where I might go to a financial institution and a cow is a cow; it doesn't matter that there are beef cows, dairy cows, cows and calves. They just don't understand what you are talking about. They can't help as well as someone who knows the language you're speaking.

***Mentors:*** My father has been a mentor who helped me start the farm business. Since I was a kid he would take me out and made me work on the farm. He is now 76 years old; he was 40 when I came along. There was a generation gap, but he tried to raise me the way he was raised on a farm. I liked it and was eager to learn. I would ride with him, and we would be looking at the cows or calves. I would watch every move he made so I could do the things he did, whether it was baling hay, chopping corn, plowing or anything else. I was looking out because I wanted to do it. I was preparing to do it on my own.

***Planning the Farm:*** I developed the plan for the farm based on equipment and land availability. I have a lot of farmland leased here in the county, and that just works best for me. I also have friends who are business partners. Together, we raise a lot of stocker cattle and partner to do anything we know will be able to grow the operation and pay the bills. Where business planning and financial management in developing a plan for the farm are concerned, I discuss things with my father and sister. With her educational background, my sister helps a lot in just talking with financial officers and my loan office. They all advise as to what I should and should not do. They give me direction if I want to do something risky that may hurt the business.

***Currently Farming:*** My farm produces beef cattle, mainly Black angus-based cows. We also raise preconditioned wiener calves in the spring. We have a fall calving herd bred from Angus-influenced cows and Charlois bulls. All our buyers seem to like that cross, and most are sold directly to buyers who ship them out west. We also run a Stocker/Backgrounder operation. We buy Stockers in the fall as well as winter, to graze in the summer. We typically buy 500 pounds steer. By the time they leave here they are weighing between 850 and 900 pounds. We also background calves that would be turned around in 60 to 90 days as preconditioned calves. We buy a lot of uncastrated bull calves, as you get these at a reduced cost and that will put more profit in the pocket. There have been challenges in the market, however. It has gotten worse in the last three years. The economy is bad and bankers are really tight on what they let you do because there are so many risks involved.

***Start-up Advise:*** I would advise other new and beginning farmers to fight every day to keep costs down. It is the costs that eat up everything! Everything goes with a cost: building fences, purchasing chemicals for brush control, labor, and so on. We have one full-time employee, and I have been blessed to have a couple of retired neighbors who help out tremendously. I also have rental properties and that money goes right back into the farm. It's an extra income that helps with cash flow and keeps things turning. It is difficult to plan for the unexpected when you are just getting paid once or twice a year. For example, two tractors

broke down just a few days ago, and I spent \$2,000 on one and \$1,800 on the other. This was not expected. These things can drain your bank account; you can get yourself in a real bind if you are not careful.

Some external services can help you with managing your operation. My Cooperative Extension office is really good at getting me assistance; we have always had some good Extension agents. The present agent is very 'hands-on'. You can pick the phone up, call and talk to him about anything. He will always get back to you. He has really assisted the entire county as far as selling calves, or getting together a group of us to make a full load, for which you make more money. Our Farm Bureau office, from which we buy all of our insurance, is another very helpful external service. They fight for benefits for the young farmers and all farmers in general.

It's difficult for me to say how I would be able to help new and beginning farmers in Virginia, in regards to what I would like to see. However, I could encourage any person considering farming to first come up with a plan. Try to get with others in the field, whether it is in a school or college. Whatever you are doing, speak with those who will be able to advise in terms of getting financing. In the beginning, things will not necessarily look good on paper. It is important to realize that if you work hard you will overcome a lot, but you also need the right tools to do it. It is much like when I acquired land from my uncle. My goal was to just work towards getting the land paid off, and it didn't work that way. I wanted to keep showing that I was making a profit, but I had to do fencing of the property, getting additional facilities, and just improve on things.

Most groups of cows we manage are 30-55 head per boundary. So it is just ensuring that the facilities are right, and that we are better able to manage the cattle. It adds to the value of the livestock. So facilities, fencing and everything like that plays a role in getting your farm to where it needs to be. That takes time. That is, unless you are handed something that is perfect. And in my case, that did not happen. I have to keep running. I have to keep trying to get it in the right direction.

## Erik Croushorn, Croushorn Farm Prince William, Fauquier, and Culpeper Counties

**Getting Started:** I currently farm in Prince William, Fauquier and Culpeper Counties. Here I run a small herd of beef cattle, bale some hay, grow some row crops, and direct market and wholesale vegetables and eggs. I graduated from Virginia Tech in 2004 with an Agricultural Education degree and then taught high school “Ag” for 5 years. While I was teaching, I slowly built up my farm operation on two existing farms owned by my both sets of grandparents. That is basically how I got started.



Throughout school and since I left teaching, I run the farms full time. I have expanded them for more vegetable and row crop production as well some custom hay. From I was a kid I always knew that I wanted to farm full-time. So I went to college to learn more, and to make sure that I had more options as far as getting a job. I have a wife and three children, so I knew that I needed to become financially established. So right out of college I started the off-farm job.

After several years one can get stuck between farming part-time and really making the steps to becoming a full-time farmer. The tricky part was determining what enterprise was best for me and my family. I try to do a lot of things that I can get my kids involved in, and can actually do with them. For example, I can take them to the chicken house with me. They help with feeding the chickens, or they help gather eggs. When I started getting into the work field, I couldn’t pile the three kids into the tractor with me, so I thought of how to become diversified and do things with the kids. I can do plenty with the kids, though it can be a big challenge, but I think that it is a good way to raise them.

I have encountered roadblocks with the business. I am very interested in different sectors of agriculture, and I like to try new stuff and experience different things. Much of that is a lot like playing baseball; you swing and miss sometimes, but the biggest hurdle starting out was managing cash-flow and being able to provide for my family.

**Farming Goals:** Goals for my farms involve a unique situation where both sides of my families’ farms are about 5 miles of each other. I am currently the only person interested in full-time farming; we have been on this farm for 100 years. In order to keep it going, the farms really need to be profitable on their own instead of relying on off-farm jobs. That is my mission. I want to make one of them profitable enough to where they are not a burden on the family.

***Importance of Planning:*** To develop my plan, I eased into things, especially with the cattle. There were years I was making money but not making enough for it to be a full-time job. In those years of slow growth, it helped me to fine tune and figure out what would work. It helped me work out all the kinks before really going in to achieve that full time income. My biggest faults could be wavering off the plans I set and trying too many different things at once. Many times you can't do what you set out to do if the timing is not right. I guess it's just me being interested in a lot of things and not being scared to try them. From a business standpoint, there are some ventures that I would be better off leaving alone.

A lot of my business planning and financial managing information came from while I worked as a full-time teacher. I was putting a lot of money into cattle to build up the herd. Before the farm I needed that income for living expenses. I tried to borrow money to start up with. I borrowed operating loans. I also raised a lot of my replacement herds instead of going out and buying; that can take away from income when you're holding back instead of selling them, but I was looking ahead.

***Getting Land:*** I have been fortunate. Almost all of the land that I farm is owned by my family; it comes from different aunts and uncles and both sets of grandparents. My parent's families grew up here as well as all their brothers and sisters. A lot of them own the land, but they choose not to farm. They are okay with me farming. So it all worked out well for me. The lands are all scattered out, and that is how I am able to stretch among three different counties. At the same time, a lot of the larger farmers around that are getting some of the prime crop lands with larger acreages; I am still able to compete with them. Several of them are my family too, so if they find a field that sits too small for them to deal with, that kind of trickles down to me.

***Challenges and Start-up Strategies:*** There have not been too many challenges as far as with operation or land. We really have had growth. Many of the larger farms around here have been split between 10-20 acre lots, and sometimes smaller. On this end of the county, what used to be a 100 acre farm now is 10 acre farm and lots. That is minimum building size. Most people that are buying houses really only want about an acre to 'fool' with, and then they want to have something else done with the remaining 8-9 acres of their property. Sometimes the ground is not the best for farming, and other times you get on a piece of property with 8 acres of prime soil.

Right now I have almost 100 heads of cattle including cows and calves, and I also raised some bottle fed dairy calves that I sold as a side enterprise. After all is said and done, I predominantly farm 400 acres and most of that is pasture and hay ground. I cut an additional 70 acres of soybeans this year, and I also do some custom work for neighbors. I have a decent sized chicken house located on another farm, where I do egg production. I pretty much run two herds in two counties. I also do a spring calving group and a fall calving group; trying to put in extra income.

Marketing my products has been an interesting challenge. When I first started out, you hardly got anything for a feeder calf and beef prices were low. I would finish out a few steers each year and sell to USDA butcher not far from here. I was also direct marketing meat and raising a few hogs. Each year I was making pretty good money. Now beef price isn't so high, but it is almost easier to run more cattle than finishing out, processing, and delivering it was well. The beef market is strong but it can get tough when you start charging \$6 and \$7 per pound for ground beef, but that's what you do in order to make the market worth your while.

Where business management practices and employees are concerned, I custom hire a lot of people since what I do is seasonal. I did wholesale tomatoes, and I had a group of friends come in. I also custom hire them to do a lot of different projects. I am nowhere close to having full-time employees, because you have to put extra time and money into that. I have a lot of family and friends that come around when I need to get some things done. Sometimes I have to teach them a thing or two though, but my "Ag" background helps out.

**Advice for New Farmers:** I advise new and beginning farmers to make a thorough plan and try to stick to it. However, in my original plan, I would have had 100 group cattle by now. I had to change all of that to meet the price. If I had 100 group cattle right now, I would be making good money in the beef industry. Yet I would have been hurting for several years to get there. That really did not make sense to me at the time. So, have a good plan and stick to it, but at the same time be versatile and be ready to go after opportunities.

**Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition YouTube Channel access for Mr. Croushorn:**

<http://tinyurl.com/Erik-Croushorn-farms-1>

<http://tinyurl.com/Erik-Croushorn-farms-2>

<http://tinyurl.com/Erik-Croushorn-farms-3>

<http://tinyurl.com/Erik-Croushorn-farms-4>

## Megan Seibel, Mountain View Farm & Vineyard Botetourt County

**Getting Started:** After Andy Seibel and I met and got married, he had always had some sort of partial ownership in different aspects of his family's farm. It may just have been 5 or 10 heads of cattle or 8 pieces of different equipment or something. When we got married it was pretty clear that we needed to figure out some way to really make sure that the farm stayed in the family. The idea of going into farming full time was not necessarily something that I was familiar with. At the time it was not necessarily, for me, the most appealing career aspiration. After having helped him with different things and working with his family, it became something that I loved. However, it was not something that I solely wanted to do.



We looked at ways of diversifying the farm, since at the time, it was just a beef operation—a cow/calf and hay sort of thing. After we got married in 1998, a winery in the area approached us about leasing property in one of our upper mountainside hay fields to put grapevines in. They proposed rate as only a few dollars per acre per year. The hay that we would be getting off that field was worth more than that. Andy and I talked with his parents about allowing us responsibility for diversifying it, as a way of having more ownership. So his dad and I went to a few informational seminars about the vineyard industry. I found that crop to be “thrilling” as my dad grew up in California about an hour outside of Napa. Grapes are pretty cool; there is a lot of chemistry involved, and I loved the idea of growing a product like that versus animals that I knew very little about. So Andy's dad and I left a grape growers meeting one day, and he said, “I absolutely have no idea what they told us all day, but if you think it's a good idea, I will let you try it.” And he did. So we used part of the old hay field and put the first plants in 13 years ago, and that's how I got in.

**Learning Resources:** Conferences have always been a great resource for me. The Vineyards Association and the Winery Association provide a lot of industry driven activities and technical workshops. In those forums, they put together information for people who want to come into business but just need to know more about it. In addition to that, extension research specialists like Tony Wolf, who is the state viticulturist/horticulturist along with state enologists in the Food Science and Technology department at Virginia Tech, and other industry leaders, are a part of those workshops and conferences.

We found that there is so much involved in the business, even with just site selections and choosing a trellising system. One has to choose the right root stocks before getting the plants



into the ground. Financial investment for beginning farmers was my biggest take-away from the workshop and conference sessions. It was also helpful to attend the seminars with someone who was a seasoned farmer, like my father-in-law. He came out of one particular meeting with an entirely different perspective. All he heard for the entire day were the “dollar signs” of what it took to financially invest in a vineyard. He put a value to every single thing he heard. On the other hand, my perspective was from a different view point. I was focused on such things as the correct soil type or the right slopes. So it is really good to have different perspectives to figure out how to make it happen.

*Farming Goals:* We had specific production goals. The original field was about 10 acres. Even though we could not initially put 10 acres worth of vines in, we knew that eventually that was what we wanted to do. At first, we got a little more than 4 acres in and surmised that it would take us about 5 years to fully expand to 10 acres. That was based on us doing all the work. We knew that it would be lots of hard work. Until just a couple of years ago, Andy, myself and his dad, before he passed 4 years ago, did everything ourselves. After his passing, we hired a neighbor who still works for us full time, and we try to do as much of the work as possible ourselves with regard to expanding and planting. At the time, that was financially feasible for us, as the operation was still a big investment. It gave us a chance to see how things would develop.

The tricky thing with a crop such as this is the lag time between putting the plants in and finally earning revenue from it. Grapes typically have a “3 years down” period, but we were really lucky to have got them in fertile stands on high root stocks. They had a lot of growth and ended up partially cropping out the second year instead of the third and fourth. Although it was not enough to have any kind of profit, at least it allowed us to expand a little bit the next year.

Financially, everything needed to be decided on, but we knew that we wanted to go at least 10 acres. Eventually, we ended up going 20 but those decisions were made after securing relationships. Initially the goal was to show that we were interested enough in the viability of the farm and to ensure that it was kept in the family. The original 10 acres were financially split with my in-laws because they technically were the owners. So they received half of the income off that fruit. We still do not own the land under the current plan, but we hope that what it is sitting on, it will eventually roll over to our kids. Andy and I do not know what his mom’s plans are for her percentage of the original block, but she is aware that she will earn an income off of it. Hopefully it will become an easy transition.

Somewhere down the road, we are hoping that there is part of this farming enterprise that the children will inherit. We want them to understand that we put a lot into the operation and equipment, and these can last a long time. Unknowing to them, they have also led to some of the decisions that were made. We want them to understand what happens at the end of the day when you have something to show for your hard work. We know that things can fail due to factors completely out of your control, like weather and or natural disasters. However, for what we are able to control, we work hard and try to protect ourselves and our investments.

***Choosing the Land:*** We have a great sense of keeping the land intact and productive and not being completely consumed by urban sprawl. In choosing the piece of land that was suitable, we used criteria about the sort of vineyard that we were hoping to have. We thought that it was a fairly suitable site based on things like orientation of the sun, the degree of the slopes, soil composition, the types of crops previously grown there, and the altitude going up the mountain relative to the things around it, as well as other factors. We knew that there would be access to water and even electricity if we needed it. To verify our findings, we got a state research specialist to come and go through a suitability scale. We ended up at 99 out of 100 points of suitability. The specialist was also able to pull records indicating the number of times in the last 100 years that the temperature had gotten well below 0 degrees. That helped us pick suitable varieties that were cold hardy based on that altitude. We ended up putting in irrigation systems, and I learned a lot from the experience.

***What is success?*** Success is really interesting, and I think we are getting there. It can be personal, emotional, or financial successes that matter. A couple of weeks ago, Andy said to me, "someday I will hit the big time." So I wondered, what is the big time? How do you see the big time? The 'big time' may be comparable to some other operations. I would say that from the standpoint of being an operator and grower we have achieved success. We have contract negotiations with some of the best wine makers in the state. People want our fruit and are willing to have us plant additional blocks if we are able to do that. So we are respected in that regard. We do what we do really well. We grow more tonnage of a single variety than some of the other vineyards in our area grow on their entire operation. We have a definite idea of how we can get to the point of being financially stable.

***Farmland Transitions:*** A lot has changed in the past month or so because we are now showing up on smart phones; people have been searching for vineyards and wineries in the area. We have been getting a lot of calls about tasting room hours, and there is no tasting room. People have even been asking about wedding packages. Right now we are unable to provide those kinds of services. We love the idea of doing that at some point, and we have a spot picked out should we ever be able to buy the land from Andy's mom. Right now that is not a conversation she wants to have with us. We are sure that we could get enough revenue from it to slowly but surely buy the land and acquire equipment from Andy's mom. At some point we also want to work things out with Andy's brother and sister who are not interested in the operation, but are also unwilling to just see us inherit it. We are trying to figure out what will be reasonable and fair to them so that we can try and work with them.

I think a lot about my children's involvement. They have been involved since the very beginning. They now have specific ideas of how they would be involved with the day to day operations. They all have a list of what pieces of equipment they want to learn how to run, and who knows how to run what tests, and what specifics to look for with sampling, or who gives a calf his first shot. Before they were too little to help with anything, but they knew that it was something we went out and did. I try to mentor them.

**Mentors:** I've had mentors. As far as grapes are concerned, other people in the industry have mentored me. We have a great relationship with another guy in the state that was at least willing to help secure labor and loan us equipment in the early years when we were still a bit new to things. We would share ideas back and forth; what chemicals worked best or what certain diseases could affect the crops. Family members who had been farming for their whole lives also offered help and know-how.

There were also a lot of little things that we also invented as we went along. They weren't just things you could go to a supplier and get, so we devised some things that were needed to get a job done more efficiently based on the equipment that we had.

There were many adapted changes, even with the cows. Over the years we made changes from beef to dairy and then back to beef again. We did all season calving and worked really hard at it. In the last 11 years or so, we tried to get all the animals artificially inseminated by picking the best bull so we would have better calves than the ones before. We heavily relied on people, such as Cooperative Extension agents that coordinate some of the quality assurance sales. And we have an amazing vet that we work with to ensure health of the animals. As far as from a management perspective we just needed to carefully layout an argument to justify why we did things a particular way and why we made some adjustments, and how it would work better for us and pay off in the end.



**Challenges:** There have been a few roadblocks and challenges. Economic roadblocks are what most people would say are most apparent in starting an enterprise. Since we had no production history, but were seeking loans and with credit history, we ended up cosigning with Andy's dad. So he was the primary operator according to USDA terminology. He was willing to do a lot to help us until we were at a point where we could be free and clear and qualify on our own. So the economic roadblocks are a big thing.

Another challenge we have is the situation with land ownership. We have had to deal how we would break percentages of ownership, as we own a different percentage on the cattle operation than we do in the vineyard operation. Other roadblocks may have been "family." There were times when we had to make decisions to buy a piece of equipment and not everyone in the family felt like they had been a part of the discussion to make the decision. I would say the biggest example of that was the decision to plant on a different hill. About six months prior to Andy's dad passing away we had a conversation with him about cultivating a new block. Somebody had come in from France and looked at the field and picked out that hill as a great spot. We, including his dad, had been a part of deciding what we could use and where we could put another block of grapes when we expanded. Well, his dad passed and apparently never told his mom what we had decided on. So then it was us hoping that she would take our word on that decision, not understanding exactly why we were expanding or

what Andy's dad had told us. Those kinds of things can get "touchy." Even on something as equipment. Many beginning farmers do not have equipment.

We also had to make an effort on examining our land and the resources to determine varieties that we could plant. The first four varieties we put in the ground were what we knew would grow well. We picked popular varieties and popular clones on the most commonly used stocks. We knew that people would buy Chardonnay and Cabernet. So over the first six to eight years the varieties we put in were Chardonnay, Cabernet, and Viognier. The contracting on those in the course of 10 years has changed rapidly. Sometimes mid harvest people would agree to buy, and then they would express that they didn't want the last couple of tons, so then I would be on the phone with someone else asking if they would take it. So now there is extra inventory. Who do we now sell to, because this person is unable to take anymore? With the Chardonnay, we actually ended up planting more on request of winemakers and from that built relationships and began selling to other wineries. After a while that wine-maker ventured out on his own, and up to this point, we grow for him. So that was a great experience. Our red grape contract, however, still fluctuates. All of our red grapes were going to different people this year, in comparison to last year.

***Marketing and Choosing a Market:*** I think we have done a good job in terms of thinking things through and evaluating the market. For us, I think we understood the market in the area. Probably with a lot of crops, the taste and preferences and the demands of the market are regionalized. What may sell really well outside of Charlottesville might not sell well in Roanoke. What is going to a five-star restaurant in Washington DC, might not sell well in a Richmond restaurant. People have different tastes for things and having proficient skills of people in the business is necessary. With the industry growing really fast, and lots of wineries going with vineyards, we made the decision to try and do at least one thing really well. As far as our marketing standpoint goes, the places we sell to are pretty diversified.

The other thing that we also had to deal with in the midst of cultivating grapes was dealing with cattle. That would be the whole market and associated wholesale market processes. Cattle just do not go straight to the stock yard. One has to work with quality issuance programs and other things that are set in place. Now there is much to talk about "point of origin" and many regulations in that regard. We always had done what was required, and provided all records and documentation.

***Off Farm Jobs and Future Plans:*** I enjoy both being hands-on as well as working on the side. I do love the idea of working really hard outside all day long at something, and at the end of the day having something to show for it. I mean, I live for the harvest! Harvest time is a good time of year, and if someone asks if I would do it again, the answer would definitely be "yes!" I would put another 20 acres in, if I had time to fool with it. We would not do that though, unless we hired someone full-time.

I do enjoy doing both my jobs, but Andy often says he would love to come back and just do the farming. I think Andy would love the idea of being able to totally support our family financially and not focus on the outside things. Financially, it may not be the best idea for him to take on the farm full-time. He does not feel like he can do that now at least. So the interesting thing is that as much as I like having that outside job, and do not want to give it up, the money we are able to make from it is just a means of exchange.

It would be nice to have somebody really be able to focus on expanding the contracts and business side of things. I also know that Andy has concerns about his mom and feels obligated to taking care of her. So we really cannot give up on our other jobs just in case things do not work out. We have to ensure that "fallback plan." I would not mind giving up a career to do this if I knew it was worth doing. I need to be convinced that it would be worth my while in the end. If we have to start over, it won't be the end of the world but hopefully we won't have to.

**Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition YouTube Channel access for Ms. Seibel:**

<http://tinyurl.com/Megan-seibel-1>

<http://tinyurl.com/Megan-seibel-2>

<http://tinyurl.com/Megan-seibel-3>

<http://tinyurl.com/Megan-seibel-4>

<http://tinyurl.com/Megan-seibel-5>

<http://tinyurl.com/Megan-seibel-6>

## Marvin Thornton, Thornton Raspberry Farm Sussex County

*The Farm:* I currently own 120 acres of land, which has been primarily used for cotton and soybeans for as long as I can remember. This year we are growing peanuts for the first time in about 8 or 9 years. Peanuts are a very particular crop because it has to grow above any other crop, and it must be free of disease. After trying cotton and soybeans, I wanted to create my own operation. In creating it, I met with Dr. Rafie at Virginia State University. His project was to help local farmers grow raspberries in the state of Virginia. Therefore we wanted to grow raspberries for any person, or pick your own, or any restaurant who wants to buy them.

What I really tried to focus on was a product that everyone will like. I have yet to meet a person who does not like raspberries or strawberries. So after a little study and observation and meeting with Dr. Rafie, what we agreed on was raspberries. If they are done right, it is a super fruit, and tastes great by the way. In growing raspberries, what I want to do is simulate and change ways of doing it. I have tasted raspberries grown and sold by Wal-Mart, and they taste just a "little bit short." I have tasted the raspberries grown here and they taste really good. So my project is to grow raspberries as big and juicy as they can't be found anywhere. Inside my high tunnel are 120 different plants. I have three different types of raspberries, and out of them should be that super fruit that everyone will like. When you put all the varieties in one particular dish you have an assortment of tart, sweet and plump. Inside the high tunnel you will find the raspberries now four and half feet tall, and they will get to be about six feet tall. I am told that we will soon have plump raspberries that will be good to sell at any market.



*Start-up Challenges:* The roadblocks I've faced would be what to grow. I did not want peanuts or soybeans or cotton because I did not prepare myself for the overhead. I have seen and tasted raspberries, but to actually have raspberries means that you have to have the soil free from rain, free from disease and totally isolated. They have to be in the right, contained environment, like a high tunnel. This makes the fruit more sweet and full. So the roadblocks so far have been based on my "learning." This is a learning curve! I talk to Dr. Rafie many times. I have talked to him specifically about what I would face this year. What I have faced this year is one of two things: The raspberry floricanes were about 5 feet tall last year; it gave us raspberries through December 25<sup>th</sup>. The plants need to go through a cold spell, allowing them to go through some type of thaw so the following year they can grow properly. I talked to Dr. Rafie in January and he said, "Marvin, I will be there in a couple of months to help you figure it out." So, I am waiting on him to work some kind of miracle to tell me what is needed to be done. After a long wait, he came and in less than 5 minutes, clipped the floricanes so we could

get ready for new ones. That is learning! Next year I will know what to do by myself. This year, it took just 5 minutes for me to learn and grasp.

***Planning the Farm:*** The plan I developed for my operation came from my integrity. My primary goal though was to grow raspberries. In order to grow raspberries you need proper irrigation. In having its own irrigation system, I had to have a contractor go in the earth 345 feet deep in order to get the best water possible. Raspberries do not need anything except what we feed the plants, which is water. So I found that after we got the water in, and setting up the high tunnel and putting the plants in, the second year of raspberries was nothing like the first.

I own 120 acres of land, but in order for the raspberry project to be really notable, I was told and directed by Dr. Rafie that we needed the highest point of the land so that water flows downhill and does not affect the raspberries. So out of the 120 acres of land, I picked the northern most part that would give me the best chance for proper irrigation. The site where we have the high tunnel is self-contained, and the water from the irrigation system and the cover from the high tunnel are providing a very smooth transition for the berries to grow.

***Gaining Access to Markets:*** I didn't face a challenge with the land because my forefathers presented my mother with this land in 1906. We had cotton and soybeans for that time, but I choose to go with specialty raspberry farming. In marketing my produce, however, I approached several vendors, several small stores, and asked if they would be willing to sell raspberries in their stores. Most of them said, "Yes." That has not happened yet because this is the second year for raspberries. The first year for raspberries, you get a medium sized fruit that looks really good and is tasty, but a high tunnel in this specific case has 120 plants. The first year did not allow enough raspberries to compete on the market. The second year will be a whole lot different. We are supposed to get 4,000 six-ounce half-pints of raspberries if we do really well this year. I approached Boulevard Flowers in Colonial Heights and they use a grade to sell raspberries. I met with two farmers' markets, one in Williamsburg and the other in Richmond. They have agreed to give me a stand. And of course I will be marketing my produce to some of our local schools so that they have a chance to get my products.

***Advice to New Farmers:*** My advice to new farmers is to know your product. In this specific case, my product is the raspberry. The raspberry is an elite fruit. Not everyone likes raspberries, and most do not want to pay \$3, \$4 or \$5 for a 6-ounce container. You will need to have a market for your product, a market that is willing to pay what your product is worth. At Wal-Mart and Sam's Club they are being sold for \$4.99. For a small farmer to be able to sell your fruit at a mega chain is a tremendous undertaking.

This is a very small farm, and doing this is a big learning process. I have prepared myself to do as much as possible. I am limited at doing everything. I do have one employee who tries to perform a miracle job of everything. At some point I will be able to generate more funds and learn more about the product. But right now I'm trying to build it from the ground up. I will be

better able to utilize my knowledge to get the best type of raspberries there are into the market for consumption.

*External Services:* I am not sure if I can use that term, but I think of just about anyone who is willing to give me advice. I have approached Virginia State, Virginia Tech, and the Cooperative Extension service for help with the very reason that they have years of expertise with people who know what they are doing. So I have travelled to as many places and have seen as many people who are knowledgeable as possible.

Again, my advice is to decide what product is right for you and do as much research as possible. Hopefully you will meet able professionals along the way. Extension agents have a whole lot of knowledge. If we can capture some of their knowledge, as well as college programs, we will grow and learn. I am at the mercy of an Extension agent because I depend on their expertise. Recently, I had Dr. Rafie explain to me what I was doing correctly and incorrectly. That helps me; I love that type of information because we are all faced with “right” and “wrong” at some point. Get the best product for you, know your customers, and hope your product tastes well when it leaves your operation.



## Mark Seitz, Huntley Farm & Seitz Angus Fauquier County

I am the herdsman at Huntley Farm, located in Fauquier County. I run about 1,200 cows and calves and 1,100 feeder calves a year. That would include half being in the fall and half in the spring. My wife and I also raise about 200 calves and produce hay and corn as well in Fauquier County. Our enterprise is Seitz Angus.

**Getting Started:** I became interested in agriculture at a young age. I was involved in FFA and 4H in showing some cattle. I also graduated from Virginia Tech in 1995 from a two-year program. I got a job in Fauquier managing a pure bred operation and worked there for 7 years until it closed. Meanwhile, I started my own herd and then I got this position, and now do both as well as raise feeder cattle.



I had cows when I was in high school and I enjoyed working with them. I learned some husbandry and mainly became interested in raising beef cows. It is somewhat of a lucrative job and occupation, and the more I am around, the more I learn about the marketing of beef cows, especially in this area. There are a lot of pastures here, and its working well for me. I hope to become fully self-employed, raising quality beef calves and having enough calves to sell. This farm, as well as mine, is certified natural and we sell to some natural grocery stores and places in this area as well as Pennsylvania. I try to get good genetics with the least amount of hormones and antibiotics to produce quality calves.

**Start-up Challenges:** There have been roadblocks. There are always in this culture. Equipment cost is a big roadblock. In this area, “fishing” for land is another big obstacle you have to overcome. If you keep a good reputation and you treat people honestly and treat the land as if it were your own, people realize that you are trying to make an honest living and are willing to work with you.

**Mentors and Learning Resources:** A farmer around here has been a mentor; has had a real big influence on me. I still work a lot with him, and he steers me in the right direction. There are also older farmers in the area who I’ve worked with, and they give me ideas that have helped my business grow. When I first started I had the opportunity to run a piece of property, so I went to the Farm Credit and borrowed money and bought some calves. I have had more experience with calves; I wean the calves, vaccinate a couple of times per year, and the end result is more profit for me.

I took business classes at Virginia Tech, but a lot of my farming practices and business planning is a lot of trial and error. I had a business plan to borrow money for five years, and I paid it all

back in four. I put a lot of my income into the farm, and I keep notes paid down. I do not carry a lot of debt. It takes a lot of hours to plan, and I try to do everything myself. I make my own hay and combine my corn. The Farm Credit did help me with a business plan as well as showing what other farms have done that are bad and capitalize from learning from it.

***Gaining Access to Land:*** Here it is hard to select land. You pretty much have to take what you can get to work with. I had the opportunity to get one large piece of property. I worked with the owners and they have been satisfied with me and I am satisfied with them. We also picked up some small properties stretched out a lot of distance between the farms. We utilize that and try to make the best profit you can.

***Start-up Challenges and Markets:*** There have been a few challenges. You cannot have business without having property. That is how you raise your cattle and your corn. Being fair with all the land owners and the local farmers, treating everybody with respect and honesty, makes things work out for you. This has been my family's farm and we are first generation. I started, probably in 1998, with about 1,000 acres. We had 220 calves that we raised, 120 acres of corn and 400 or 500 acres of hay. We sell some horse hay; it has a good market in this area. Our main product is feeder calves, about 700 or 800 pounds. We sell some local meat and it's all natural, without antibiotics. I also do a little custom work on the farm. We rent some property and raise about 300 acres of corn, and market right at about 1,000 feeder calves. We market our products mainly through the local livestock market. There we sell mainly on the board and load-lots. They go to feeders in Pennsylvania.

We are constantly looking for the best markets. Right now "natural" seems to be a real good market to be in. There can be challenges with that; beef cattle have to be kept up. There is always competition. Sometimes we have issues, but there is a real good Cooperative Extension staff here at Fauquier County. They stay on top of what people are selling and are a pretty fair group.

***Advice for New Farmers:*** Advice to beginning farmers is to carry the least amount of debt as possible. That way you can have more marketing options and you don't have to sell at a certain time just because to need to pay-off a note. If you can carry a calf to make it 100 pounds heavier, I think that can be an awesome benefit. Look for niche markets, and don't put your eggs all in one basket. See what other local farmers are doing, not that you need to follow but it's always good to see what your neighbors are marketing and maybe form a larger marketing group.

***Resources and Services:*** I do not use very many external services. I have some local marketing management to help market the calves, and I use some local feed companies. We try to do as much in-house as possible. I am on the livestock market and there you can make a lot of contacts; you here about marketing options that way. Of course Farm Credit and the Farm Bureau help a lot. You need to get out and help your local 4H and FFA organizations. You can meet people at local fairs and shows who will benefit your operation.

Many want to start up a farm and cannot go back to a family farm. So they need to start from scratch. You will probably need to also have a regular job, so as to have regular income. That will really help. You'll have some late-night work for yourself, but if you work hard, and you make your contacts, take some risks and don't be afraid to borrow money, you won't get too far over your head. For those that can go back to a family farm, there are quite a few benefits. You should start out small and use the money that you make to put back into improving the farm; improve your equipment and cattle and get involved in the community as well.

***Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition YouTube Channel access for Mr. Seitz:***

<http://tinyurl.com/Mark-Seitz-1>

<http://tinyurl.com/Mark-Seitz-2>

<http://tinyurl.com/Mark-Seitz-3>

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