



Match Made in Heaven Case Study #5

Garth Gatson

Vandalia, MO

Photo Credit: Gatson Farms

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The Match Made in Heaven project seeks to understand the state of the art of livestock and crop integration on farms in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. This is one of six profiles of farmers who have honed their craft and successfully built livestock and crop integration systems on their farms. We hope you enjoy getting to know them!

Key Points:

- Garth's grazing operation takes advantage of farm resources that exist because of and alongside of the cropping operations: permanent pasture, cover crops, and crop residues
- Garth developed an enterprise that complements and adds value to existing enterprises run by family members by providing needed labor for farm operations and being a dedicated buyer for beef heifer calves from the farm's cow/calf herd
- Analyzing and managing all the components that contribute to profitability has enabled Garth to build a successful and growing enterprise.

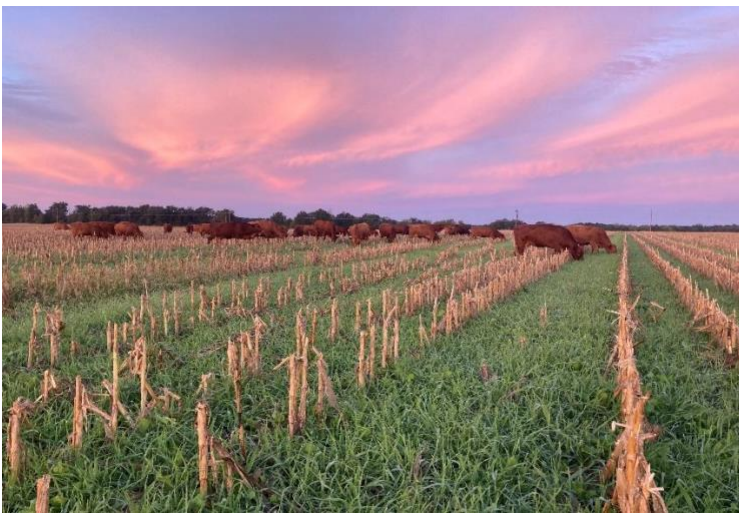
The Gatson farm began in 1880. This is a multi-generational and extended family farm operation in which Garth's father and uncle own land, the uncle grows crops, and Garth's maternal grandfather also farms about an hour away. Garth does not own land, but has been progressively growing his beef cow/calf business over the past 15 years on land owned by the other family members.

Garth and his family embrace a labor-sharing and land-sharing partnership. Garth provides labor needed by the crop and livestock operations owned by his family members. In return, resources of the farms are available to Garth so that he is able to grow a cow/calf operation - but it's not quite the traditional cow/calf operation.



Garth's business is selling cow/calf pairs. His mode of operation adds value to a beef heifer calf by growing her to breeding age, calving her, and then selling the cow/calf pair in the early winter season. The key to his business model is having a supply of good heifer calves to raise up. The home farm runs an 80-head cow/calf herd. Garth buys heifers from the home farm herd and also buys heifers from other beef herds in the surrounding area. The purchased heifers have to fit the type Garth prefers while also fitting into a pricing structure to allow room for profit. Garth likes Red Angus cows and prefers to buy additional heifer calves of that breed.

The farm has a mix of crops and managed pastures. The crop production operation belongs to Garth's uncle. Corn, wheat and soybeans are raised as cash crops. Cover crops typically follow wheat or corn. The cover crop forage is used for fall or spring grazing. An advantage of this system is the opportunity to use lower cost forage to raise beef animals. The cover crop forage is still high quality, but produced for a lower cost per ton of dry matter than many other types of forage.



Like any other farm operation, Garth's system is affected by weather. Flexibility in how the animals are fed is a key component of resilience to weather shifts. His grazing system works by using different parts of his relatives' farms at different times of the year. These include rotationally grazed perennial pasture in the summer, corn stalks in fall and winter, and cover crops in spring and fall. The permanent pasture acres allow for adjustments in stocking density and days on a paddock to account for variation in forage growth throughout the year. A goal is to graze 300 days per year and minimize feeding hay. Approximately 250 bales of hay are produced on the farm per year and additional hay is purchased as needed. Every bit of crop residue, additional pasture production or tons of cover crop forage produced directly affects the amount of purchased forage needed, which in turn directly affects the cost of developing the heifers.

Garth is analytical, utilizing spreadsheets for his accounting purposes. He has achieved a M.S. degree in animal science, and continually works to improve his management of the land, animals, and finances. Experience and intuition also play a role. Key components of successful heifer production include:

- Knowing how much forage is needed per head/day for good growth and calving of the heifers
- Knowing how much forage is available ahead of the herd at all times
- Ability to vary the paddock size based on forage conditions
- Ability to supplement the forage supply as needed

Below is a before and after portion of a paddock with fall grazing of cover crops.



The whole system rests on the desire of Garth and his family members to make it work. Garth and the Gatson family are people of deep faith and deep values that guide their decisions. Besides a financial bottom line, they want to ensure they have a positive bottom line when it comes to quality of life and caring for the land. They value family being close by, continuing the farming operation for another generation, and improving the land.



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