

# Ken Mulberry

## His Goal: Restrained Growth and Sustained Profitability

by Rich Burger

**T**here may be nothing in agriculture more pervasive than the trend toward ever-bigger farming operations. How does the farmer who wants to remain small, or at least smaller, successfully meet the challenges of restrained growth and sustained profitability?

Ken Mulberry, Kimberly, Idaho, believes the key is getting closer to the consumer.

"There's a lot more to farming than just raising the crop," he says. "We're not vertically integrated enough, so we've been spending a lot of time developing new markets. We're always looking for niche markets."

Mulberry farms 3,000 acres in the Kimberly area, near Twin Falls, in the south central part of the state. He maintains about 750 acres a year in Russet Norkotah, Russet Ranger and Russet Burbank potatoes. He also grows wheat, hay and onions on his acreage and rents out a small amount of land on which sugar beets are grown.

He and his wife, Jennifer, came to Kimberly in 1982 from Idaho Falls and he has gradually expanded his operation to the current level. He considers it a family farming operation.

"We have nine children, and the oldest is 17," he says. "Everyone helps."

### The Challenge

Mulberry says he would like to keep things that way, a continuing operation, but not one that will necessarily be expanding in size. He prefers to grow most of his potatoes for the open market and he has incorporated a fresh-pack potato house in his operation, which packs product carrying the Russet Valley name. He also has a fresh-pack onion line for the reds and whites he grows, a "minor crop," and does a small amount of contract packing.

Though the packing segment of his operation offers some means of diversification, that is not what he sees as its primary benefit.

"The main advantage of the fresh pack shed is that we can get information about market trends sooner than we would if we were getting the information at the local coffee shop," he says. "I give the fresh shed credit for giving us a market edge."

Mulberry says the ability to make a profit on his potatoes depends to a large extent on his ability to perceive a window of opportunity in the dynamics of price fluctuations and capitalizing on it. He cites an example in which open market prices were at \$7 per cwt. (Idaho prices are quoted per cwt. rather than the more typical price per ton.)

"We saw indications that the price was going to move sharply down," he says.

"We offered ours for \$4. We sold a lot of potatoes at that price and we came out pretty well. The market price ended up at 25 cents. There's a window between the highs and lows. The trick is to find it."

In the search for sustainable profitability for a farm the size of his, Mulberry has decided to move to a large-scale organic operation. He will make the transition



*The Ken Mulberry family - working to find new market niches.*

gradually by reducing the amount of agricultural chemicals he uses in his operation.

"The first step is to begin to move away from commercial fertilizers and chemicals. We need to get out of systemics," he says. "We've got to familiarize ourselves with the micro-organisms."

Though some concerns have been voiced about the quality of organically grown produce, Mulberry says he expects quality to improve.

## **Believes in Rotation**

Crops on the Mulberry farm are continually rotated to help maintain soil quality. After the second year of potato production, fields are sown with wheat, then seeded into hay for 2 or 3 years, Mulberry says.

Ground preparation for his potato and onion crops is handled with an 18-foot Northwest Farm Tiller, manufactured in Yakima, Washington. "There is a lot less ground work with the Northwest Tiller," he says. "It cuts down the number of passes required to get the field ready to plant."

The machine also is so versatile and adaptable that he says he has considered attaching his onion planter to the rear of the tiller so that he could till the ground and plant it in a single pass.

"It could be done," Mulberry says.

One of the consumer trends that Mulberry is particularly interested in is the value-added fresh-cut produce market. In addition to her role as office manager for the operation, Jennifer Mulberry is actively involved in investigating this niche market. She attends regional events such as the Northwest Processors Convention and has traveled as far as Nashville, Tennessee, to attend the larger national fresh-cut conventions.

Mulberry says they're looking specifically at the potential for fresh-cut potatoes. "I think this is a niche that can help the smaller operation survive," he says. Methods have been developed that give fresh-cut hashbrown potatoes a shelf life of 30 days, and does not require freezing.

"Fresh prepared foods. It saves energy," he says. "It's something the consumer wants. I know it's certainly true at our house. We eat a lot of salads. What we used to do was buy a head of lettuce and carrots and all the stuff you need to make a salad. Now, we buy fresh-cut salad that's already prepared and packaged, and it's just as cost-effective for us.

"The consumer is so busy, but also health conscious and environmentally conscious," he continues. "We want to find ways to add value to potatoes in the same way it's done with other produce. We're looking into peeling and slicing and dicing and trying to get a shelf life out of the product."

## **Downsizing Trend**

Mulberry sees a parallel between the trend toward downsizing in corporate America in the last several years and his own views about how large he wants his farm to be.

"We've never applied the term 'downsizing' to farming," he says, "but the concept is similar." That includes making the most of every resource and utilizing technology. One example of that is the potential for using the Internet in his operation for both buying and selling.

"My oldest son runs our computer on the Internet," Mulberry says, "and he used it recently to locate a loader for our farm. I think the Internet could be a valuable tool in the future."

Staying small and maintaining profitability may be the ultimate challenge in farming's future, but the Mulberrys seem to be good at looking ahead.