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Secrets of the Soil

IN THE SMALL Wood County community of Hoard, Shane and Kelli Elmore are doing what they can to lessen their impact on the land and invigorate the soil for future generations—with pasture-raised cattle and chickens and regenerative agricultural practices.

Their 103-acre operation, Jester D Farm, lies just east of Mineola. Its name—a portmanteau of the names of Kelli's paternal grandparents, Jay and Esther Dossett, who once ran a farm and dairy on the land—is a fitting tribute, since Esther, known as Grannie, taught the Elmores the basics of vegetable gardening when the couple bought the farm in 2006.

Lifelong farmers, the Dossetts' ties to the area's agricultural community were strong, and their son Glen Dossett, Kelli's dad, held to that bond as an agricultural science teacher at Mineola Independent School District for 50 years. And now their heritage carries on with Shane and Kelli, high school sweethearts who met at Mineola ISD. Kelli went on to graduate from Texas A&M University with an agricultural business degree, and Shane graduated from Tyler Junior College as a registered nurse.

When they first began farming, Shane had a traveling job with a health care technology firm, and Kelli worked for a feed company. At first they sold produce farmed on 10 acres in their spare time at farmers markets and sent the beef cattle they raised to sale barns.

Then they had an epiphany of sorts that sprouted from two discoveries.

After seeing cattle feedlot conditions, Shane was determined to take a different path to produce food that he believes is more nutritious. After taking such good care of his animals, he felt it didn't make sense for his beef cattle to be exposed to typical feedlot conditions before processing. He also learned that farmers commonly keep only about 20% of gross margins. To hold on to more of the revenue while also maintaining nutritious quality, he and Kelli transitioned to direct-to-consumer sales, and they started with their cattle operation.

Today the Elmores sell half and whole animals to their customers and take custom orders, finishing the cattle on grass or grain according to customer preferences. Before processing, they take customer direction regarding meat thicknesses and cuts, which may include, for example, steaks, roasts or hamburger meat. The Elmores currently use several packing houses but hope to one day build their own facility to have better control over timing.

The Elmores also raise antibiotic- and steroid-free chickens. Chicks are kept in a brooder facility to keep them warm until

1. A wide variety of fresh vegetables are produced and available seasonally at Jester D Farm, including greens, peas and carrots.

2. Sustainably grown eggs and frozen packaged meats from Jester D Farm are available year-round.

3. Esther and Jay Dossett, the namesakes of Jester D Farm, stand in front of their farmhouse, which is now Grannie's Guest House.

4. Kelli and Shane Elmore, owners of Jester D Farm.

they have feathers. Then they are pasture raised in an enclosed tractor pen. This rolling chicken coop is relocated daily onto fresh grass, where the growing birds eat worms and bugs supplemented with feed, and they enjoy the sunlight. Customers can buy whole chickens, boneless skinless breasts and packages of different cuts such as leg quarters and wings. In addition to chicken meat, Jester D Farm also offers fresh eggs from their laying hens.

The farm's newest addition is a herd of goats, which is rotated through different parts of the property for targeted grazing and weed control. The goats are eventually processed for meat, but their initial purpose is to aid the farm's transition to regenerative farming practices, which began in 2017.

Regenerative agriculture is a principled approach that differs in a lot of ways from traditional agricultural practices. The overarching goal is to strengthen the health and resilience of the soil, which in turn benefits the environment and can increase crop yields, raise the nutrient value of crops, lower runoff and moisture deficits, and decrease pest and disease issues. In a broader sense, regenerative agricultural practices attempt to mimic natural processes.

One such practice is to disturb the ground as little as possible. That's because soil is a complex living organism. As Shane put it, "Microbial life is the most important livestock." Energy is transferred between species to enrich the soil while also turning carbon dioxide into useful plant material. Instead of inverting, or tilling, the soil for planting, the Elmores use a no-till seed drill. It makes small incisions in the soil to plant seeds, thus avoiding exposing the soil to the drying effects of the sun and killing off microbial life. Also, untilled soil resists compaction.

Another key practice is to keep the ground covered. This ensures natural fungi stay intact to interconnect the microbial life. "Mother Nature is modest, and she does not like to be exposed," Shane said. "When you see bare soil, it's sick. It gets hotter in a hot environment and colder in a cold environment, and when it rains or it's windy, it erodes." To reduce vulnerability, there should always be a cover crop, or an overlay such as hay or plastic.

It's also important to keep living roots in the ground as long as possible. Plants perpetually release nutrients into the ground. These in turn feed bacteria and fungi. The root systems also keep the soil aerated and help curb erosion.

Regenerative agriculture prioritizes crop diversity. In nature you don't see monocrops, or vast swaths of land with only one plant type. The greater the crop diversity, the healthier the soil becomes, thus reducing the need for fertilization. Typical crops like legumes supply nitrogen and other nutrients, while radishes and turnips aerate the soil. Crop diversity also reduces the need for pest management and pesticide.

According to Shane, a farmer can achieve good results with

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From left, Xander and Christopher Reynolds of Alba enjoy a visit with the happy chicks of Jester D Farm.

all the above without introducing livestock, but adding livestock to the mix is one more way to mimic nature—simulating the impact of roaming buffalo and other herd animals. To do this, the Elmores employ high-intensity rotational grazing instead of conventional continuous grazing. They move their cattle with fencing, which allows for more even manure distribution and results in increased forages per acre.

To better describe what they are trying to accomplish, Shane pointed to reductionist science, saying, "How am I going to work with nature instead of fight it?" If a carrot is good for you because it has beta carotene, then some say we should just take beta carotene supplements, he said. But "in reality, there are so many things that we don't know about how nature works." Regenerative agriculture taps into the Earth's natural responses and interconnectedness to get desired results as naturally as possible. The goal is to let nature do what it does best and avoid using manufactured chemicals like fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides.

In doing so, Shane said, research shows that food grown with regenerative practices will have much higher nutrient and micronutrient content than much of what we find in the grocery store today. The soil will also begin to naturally protect itself by holding more moisture to guard against drought.

"I became a nurse to help people," Shane said. "Eating naturally and sustainably is a different type of medicine. People want to locally source their food. Good healthy food is available to you."

Parents of one daughter, Kennedi, a freshman at Quitman High School, Shane and Kelli are longtime members of Wood County Electric Cooperative. In addition to operating their farm, they are highly invested in the agricultural community and its young people, volunteering their time with the Wood County Junior Livestock Show. Also, as Airbnb Superhosts, they invite guests to experience the simple pleasure of life on their farm by booking a stay at Grannie's Guest House. ■

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Sock It to Old Outlets

ELECTRICAL OUTLETS have come a long way from the original electrical receptacles that hit the market around the turn of the 20th century.

Screw-in, tandem and nongrounding outlets mostly have become relics of the past. Outlet technologies on the market today can prevent fires and prevent you from being shocked or electrocuted. Having enough sockets also eliminates the need for extension cords, which can be fire and tripping hazards.

Types of Outlets

USB outlets can replace traditional sockets and allow users to plug in electrical devices without bulky boxes. The outlets lay flush against the wall for a modern look while offering convenience.

Recessed outlets are indented into the wall to stop plugs from protruding and getting damaged by crimping or bending. This outlet option allows users to save space as furniture can slide directly up to a wall. Varieties of recessed outlets accommodate multiple plugs and various cord types, such as cable, video and data.

Pop-up outlets rise up out of areas like kitchen islands and desks and then retract when not in use. They not only offer a tidy look but also enhance safety by hiding outlets from kids who might stick fingers or other objects inside.

Ground-fault circuit interrupter outlets continue to be required by building codes in areas with close proximity to water, such as in bathrooms, kitchens and laundry rooms and outdoors. GFCI outlets have test and reset buttons and work by cutting off current when an imbalance is detected.

Wi-Fi outlets allow the user to monitor and operate outlets from anywhere on a mobile device. This allows electricity- and tech-savvy people to remotely shut off the curling iron they left on or turn off power to outlets feeding devices that are draining energy even when not in use.

Tamper-resistant outlets help parents childproof their homes by closing shutters over the receptacle when not in use. Those shutters move aside when both slots receive equal pressure from a plug being inserted.

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ELECTRIC CO-OP

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