

**Women in Farming Profile- Jo Ann Kuhlman****Challenges are Many But Rewards Keep This Farmer Going**

by Jean Stramel

What does one do when retiring from a fruitful career and needs something to do? Plant eighteen acres of grapes, of course! Add ducks and sheep, build a hoop house, and proceed!

It was not that simple, of course, but after considering other enterprises, Jo Ann Kuhlmann began to develop her Eagle Creek Vineyard near Olpe, Kansas, in 2004. She planted one acre of grapes, which is now up to eighteen. To get started she attended viticulture workshops and researched growing techniques, then selected what she thought would work on her farm. As usual, many things have changed as she learns what works and what doesn't. At one point in time she had 27 different grape varieties planted. Today she has six: four reds – Chambourcin, Cab Franc, Frontenac, and Marquette – and two whites – Vidal and Traminette. She also grows blackberries for winemaking in the EQIP-funded hoop house.

Her parents are nearby and help out when they can. Her dad likes to build machines and implements for her, adapting larger pieces for her smaller and specific needs. Her husband still works off farm but helps with major tasks, but she does the day-to-day labor and enjoys the opportunity to work outdoors. She and her husband both grew up on farms in the area, and are now enjoying the lifestyle they left when they moved away for careers.

The vineyard was planted on poor soil that had been farmed traditionally for years. Jo Ann repaired one large erosion ditch. Another large erosion ditch was repaired using WRAPS funding (Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy, administered through the KS Department of Health and Environment), and is now a waterway planted to a native grass mix. She also used this funding to fence off the streambank of Eagle Creek, set back enough to prevent run-off as part of the WRAPS Non-point source pollution control strategy. She mows along the fence with a bush hog on the back side, and flash grazes the area with her sheep as needed.

Soil tests are done on grape acres every 2-3 years, using the KSU lab. “What’s more important for me is the petiole testing for nutrients, which tells you what the plants are taking up”, done through a lab in Missouri. She submits over 100 petioles per variety. The results are used to fine tune the annual nutrition program for each planting block. In 2015 she did a Haney soil health test, through a NE lab. This will give her baseline data to evaluate the results of her soil improvement efforts. She knows organic matter is increasing. “When I first started you could pick up some dirt and it would just blow away.” She now sees earthworms, as well as good soil clumping, indicating tilth is improving.



*Jo Ann and her hoop house with blackberries in her hoop house at her Eagle Creek Vineyard near Olpe, Ks.*



*A two-foot strip is tilled on either side of the grapes, where in the fall Jo Ann plants a rye/radish cover crop used for winter and spring grazing, and to deter grass growth. Her Katadhin sheep herd is rotationally grazed between the rows. Red and white clover, fescue, and Birds-foot trefoil is also planted between the rows for grazing.*

Currently, water is manually hauled to the paddocks, but she has plans to add quick-connects into the irrigation supply line. Her other livestock, ducks, have been put to work on the lagoon. They now control the duckweed, which she had unsuccessfully tried to control with herbicide spray. The ducks do a great job, and she enjoys having them, so built them a nice “Duck Motel” to live in.

Bird netting is integral to ensuring a crop. She uses netting that can stay on year round. She can raise and lower it herself, when it traditionally takes four people to install and take off. She can graze full size sheep because the netting keeps them out of the grapes. The netting is held in place with hooks, but our Kansas winds kept blowing the netting off the hooks; she has adapted by alternating the hooks with shade cloth grommets to hold the netting in place. “Everything is live and learn” Jo Ann admits.

A two-foot strip is kept tilled on either side of the vines. In this clean-tilled strip Jo Ann fall plants a rye/radish cover crop to be used for winter and spring grazing and to deter grass growth. Then it is killed in late spring with herbicide and the residue provides a cover to keep the ground from getting too hot during summer. Her dad built her a planter from part of an old wheat drill. He cut off three boxes, and built it so it runs off to the side of the tractor to plant close to the vines. He loves to adapt machinery to her needs and also built an upright spinning jenny for stretching high-tensile trellis wires. He also built a sprayer with a dome that mounts on the front of the tractor; it keeps herbicides from drifting during application. The vineyard is currently drip-irrigated with rural water, but Jo Ann would love to develop a water well.

Recently, Jo Ann experienced every grape growers worst nightmare. Herbicide drift from neighbors spraying pastures decimated her entire vineyard and it will have to be totally re-planted. But she plans to continue. The market is there and she loves what she is doing. “I have a re-planting plan so I can continue to supply my winery customer with grapes while the new plants are reaching production age (3-5 years). My winery is very good at promoting both the Flint Hills and Kansas products. I am probably his largest supplier of grapes, so I want to make sure he has product to work with.”





*Above left is a hoophouse full of blackberries. Jo Ann posts her vineyard to deter spraying, but suffered every grape growers nightmare when she was impacted by spray drift in her open fields.*

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Jo Ann added Katahdin hair sheep to her farm in 2013, primarily as a tool to build soil health. She started with eight ewes and has built the flock to 50, of which 18 are breeding. She culls older ewes, but has one that is nine years old. The flock is rotationally grazed through the vineyard, using electric netting tied into a hot wire on every eighth trellis row. Endophyte-free K-31 Tall fescue, red and white clover and Bird's-foot trefoil planted between the vineyard rows provides good grazing for the sheep.

The herbicide drift damage is obvious. Cordons are dying back; plants are dying. What should be 5-6 foot long shoots, are now under 3 feet. While there is some production, there are fewer clusters and the clusters are smaller. She must take extra steps to ripen the fruit; in 2015 she irrigated all summer and applied an additional N fertilizer application as a foliar spray. "I did ripen the crop, but I shouldn't have to do all this extra work". The herbicide drift damage has cost Jo Ann much in increased labor. She had to hand harvest because the vines didn't have enough leaf canopy to protect the fiberglass bows on the mechanical harvester as it shakes them back and forth. "Every time I cut a grape I go "2,4-D, 2,4-D, but you do what you have to do." And she has incurred other costs in terms of personal time. "I had to sit down and compute what it has cost me, and the thing I almost forgot was the increased management time for documentation, and meeting and talking to my team" - the experts helping her prepare for litigation.

Re-planting will be a slow, labor-intensive process. She will have to either work around the existing trellis or remove the existing trellis, plant, then re-install the trellis. As she re-plants, the irrigation headers in the vineyard will be re-configured because of the sheep grazing, to aid in mowing, and to aid herbicide application with the domed sprayer. Some in-row vine spacing will be shortened from 8 feet to 6 feet.

Jo Ann has served on the Kansas Grape Growers and Winemakers Association (KGGWA) as past president and is now on the board of directors. As chair of the research and development committee she helps organize speakers and topics for the annual convention. She was asked to serve on the Lyon County Conservation District board, which gives her an opportunity to interact with traditional farming community leaders. She feels this is a good, non-combative way to get the information out about what non-traditional growers must deal with. She was on the Kansas Department of Agriculture Grape and Wine Advisory Council, but the current administration eliminated the council.

She has had issues with not being taken seriously as a farmer. She's not sure if it's because she is a woman, because some are threatened by her choice to grow a non-traditional crop, or because she can make good money on a small acreage while the traditional farmer still has that "get bigger" mentality. It is also difficult for neighbors to understand that everything that happens to the vines this year affects next year. "They don't deal with a perennial crop other than maybe alfalfa. They just think: replant". But she feels as time goes by, her experience and knowledge is giving her more credibility in her community

Despite all these challenges, Jo Ann keeps forging ahead. The demand for her crop is much larger than the supply. She knows she can grow an excellent product and enjoys the work, including watching eagles fly over along Eagle Creek! Her winery in Paxico wins lots of awards so is good to be connected with. Some of her grapes recently went to a big symposium in New York as an example of good sparkling wine, and to Wine East, a big trade show.

"This year while unloading Chambourcin grapes at the crush pad, people were commenting that my grapes were the most beautiful they had seen", Jo Ann is proud to say. This keeps her going.

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