



Making It Work

*Eric Walker balances a thriving nursery business
and a passion for Hereford cattle.*

by Sara Gugelmeyer

Some would consider trees a nuisance to cattle production. That's not necessarily true though, especially in the Walker family's case. One can find the Walker grown trees and shrubs at retailers throughout much of the U.S. or when shopping for top performing Hereford genetics.

Eric Walker's family has been in the Hereford business and the nursery business for generations. It's not always easy, but doing both works for him and his family, he says.

Walker Nursery was founded in the 1950s by Sam Walker (Eric's father) and his five brothers near McMinnville, Tenn. The business saw steady expansion through the early 1970s as a local grower for a larger nursery.

Walker Nursery was introduced to re-wholesalers in a large portion of the country (from the Midwest to the East Coast). During the next decade, the nursery would add more products to make it more appealing to retailers, as well.

As a young adult, Eric learned all he could about the nursery

business. Then after graduating from Middle Tennessee State University with

a degree in agricultural economics and a minor in marketing in 1986, Eric worked for the family business.

It was in February 1988 when Eric took charge of day-to-day operations at the nursery. The company has grown exponentially since.

After acquiring an additional 215 acres, Walker Nursery operates on 600 acres of highly fertile soil. Eric says, "Right now we've got trees growing on about 550 acres, and we harvest about 40,000 plants a year, plus another 5,000 containerized plants."

He adds, "We grow mainly shade and ornamental trees and several varieties of flowering shrubs. On the ornamental and shade tree side we're probably growing 150 varieties. On the shrub side, another 100 varieties."

Although Walker Nursery has a small retail location, Eric says, "95% or better of our business is wholesale, shipped to 20 to 25 states a year. We'll ship to Dallas, northward to Wichita

Walkers raise both field-grown and potted trees and shrubs.



(Kan.) and up to Omaha (Neb.). And across the Midwest to the Northeast and south to Georgia. It's a pretty good-sized market area."

In fact, Walker Nursery was one of the suppliers of trees for a memorial in rural Pennsylvania where Flight 93 crashed on 9/11.

Clearly, with this large enterprise, it's a lot for Eric to manage. He explains that while he oversees everything, his main responsibilities are on the sales and harvest ends of things. "I have a production manager that oversees the growing end of it," Eric says. "Of course we talk daily about everything, but he oversees that himself."

Trees and shrubs are sold to re-wholesalers, retail garden centers and landscapers. Eric's job is to find buyers, so he attends about five trade shows a year.

Eric says, "We have six commission sales reps scattered all over: Kansas City, Cleveland, Chicago, Atlanta and two along the East Coast. I am in constant contact with them about the sales."

At the nursery, Eric must be sure that the right trees are dug at the right time, packaged right and shipped right.

Eric says compared to other types of farming, "It's a long drawn out process, versus say corn or soybeans. We plant a crop and it's in the ground, on average, three to five years before harvest. We don't plant them in March and dig them up in the fall.



Both Eric and Cody agree their hearts are in the cattle business. Cody joined his Dad fulltime, helping with the family's cattle and nursery businesses, in 2009.

Since he mainly deals with harvesting the trees, Eric says, "From April to middle of October, during the growing season, is when I have my slack time. My heavy duty trade show and digging time is from October to March."

With the exception of calving season, that works well as a complement to the family's Hereford business.

Much like the nursery, Eric has grown and changed the family's cattle focus as well. "My father and his brothers always had Hereford cattle, but they were commercial Herefords, not registered," Eric says.

Since 1981 Walker Polled Hereford Farm has been performance focused and maintains a cow herd of about 100 to 125 head. With performance goals in mind, Eric does a lot of artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer work, and ultrasound data is collected on all yearlings.

The Walkers sell mainly females and a few bulls through consignment and production sales. To fit the supply and demand, Eric explains that they have a sale two out of every three years. For example, sales were held in 2010 and 2011, so in 2012 there will be no sale; then in 2013 and 2014, sales will take place again. In total, 16 Walker Polled Hereford Farm production sales have been hosted with cattle sold to 32 states, Canada, Mexico and the United Kingdom.

Eric says the showing is not necessarily where his goals lie, but his

program has raised winners at local, state and national levels.

Eric admits that balancing both businesses can take its toll. He credits his wife, Rhonda, son, Cody, and stepson, Casey, with helping him out. "There are times in the spring when I am really stretched and I don't get to see the cattle. During calving season I am really busy digging trees and shipping and it's hard to be

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Replacement heifers are weaned and then shipped to Ohio in December to be developed and bred. The bred females then return to Tennessee in June. Eric says this practice allows him to better utilize his resources.

everywhere, but we have good help and that works to our advantage. My son helps out and I have a herdsman that sees them everyday," he says.

Eric's dedication to both cattle and nursery businesses is illustrated by his willingness to participate as a member of and volunteer for industry-related associations. He is a member of the Middle Tennessee Hereford and East Tennessee Polled Hereford Associations as well as a member of the Tennessee and Warren County



Eric says as a seedstock producer, it is important to be on the cutting edge and utilize the technology and resources available to produce the best product possible. Pictured here embryologist, Todd Bickett, DVM, is pregnancy checking Walker recipient females to confirm pregnancy. Walkers have tried different tools including ultrasound, BioPRYN and BoviPreg to confirm pregnancy. They also use ultrasound to sex pregnancies.

Cattlemen's Associations. He has been a director and president of the Tennessee Polled Hereford Association. He has served on the American Hereford Association (AHA) nomination committee and has been a delegate to the AHA Annual Membership Meeting for several years.

In 2011 Eric was elected to serve on the AHA Board of Directors. He has served as president of the Tennessee Nursery and Landscape Association and is also a member of the Southern Nursery Association and the Middle Tennessee Nursery Association.

He may be busy, but the cattle business is not something he considers giving up. "It helps with cash flow and the cattle are a passion for me," he says. "It works, I can't tell you how it does work, but it does. My first love is the cattle, but we have to do a little of everything." **HW**



Walker sells mostly heifers and just a few of his very best bulls.



The Walker family was recognized as the 2012 Tennessee Polled Hereford Association (TPHA) Zack Dismukes Family of the Year. This award was established to honor individuals and/or families for their outstanding role in the promotion of the Hereford industry. Pictured at the TPHA annual banquet are: Casey Tomberlin and Rhonda, Eric, Betty and Cody Walker.