

# From farm to feeder

Partnership between BVA, Hicks Brothers and Wild Birds Unlimited brings local sunflower seeds, reduces carbon footprint and gives the public a thing of beauty to behold

By WM. SHAWN WEIGEL

A unique partnership between three area organizations has the benefit of being both ecologically sound and aesthetically pleasing.

For the past two years, area farmers the Hicks Brothers have planted sunflowers in two separate fields at the Brandywine and Red Clay Valley Association in Pocopson Township.

Planted so visitors to the non-profit BVA essentially had something pretty to look at, BVA director Jim Jordan said the flowers were left for the birds to eat at the end of the season.

Eventually, RCVA board member Charles Shattuck came up with a better idea.

Shattuck, owner of Wild Birds Unlimited in Hockessin, approached Jordan about harvesting the seeds and selling them at his store, eliminating thousands of driving miles and cutting out costly middlemen.

"Most of the birdseed he sells comes from the Midwest, in the Dakotas," Jordan said.

Shattuck said that over recent years, he's seen the price of sunflower seeds continue to increase for a variety of factors. Having a local source, he said, allows him to pass savings along to his customers while also significantly reducing the carbon footprint previous shipments incurred.

"First there's over 1,500 miles of freight charges, and then you have to look at the middle men in between," Shattuck said. "It's not a farmer I'm getting it from - it goes from the farmer, to a seed mill, to a commodity broker and then to the store. So the footprint is cut dramatically. And this way, I'm dealing with the people who actually grow the product."

Known among bird aficionados as the greatest attractant for wild birds, Shattuck said the demand for sunflower seeds is high.

"Having a local source is a win/win situation all around," Shattuck said. "My prices are cheaper, it gives the Hicks Brothers another crop to rotate, and it attracts people to the RCVA who in turn might become members."

Bringing people to the BVA, Shattuck said, is important to help keep the



Photo by Wm. Shawn Weigel

Jim Jordan, executive director of the BVA in Pocopson, stands among the sunflowers planted on the BVA grounds by area farmers the Hicks Brothers. The seeds harvested from the flowers are then sold at Wild Birds Unlimited in Hockessin, keeping the crop local and reducing their carbon footprint.



troubling economic times.

"My idea was that if we keep those acres going over at the BVA, they would gain membership," Shattuck said. "With the economy the way it is, non-profits really take a hit."

Shattuck also said that he's starting to see the correlation between locally grown and sold products.

"You go to the grocery store and buy an apple, do you really know what that apple comes from?" he said. "This way, you can visit the fields and enjoy the beauty, knowing that these are the seeds your birds will be eating next season. It's from farm to feeder."

Co-owner of Hicks Brothers Jamie Hicks said that the sunflowers are a double crop, meaning that they are planted late in the season - usually late June/early July - after they have harvested the soybean crop before them.

In fact the low-maintenance/high-yield crop, he said, pays more than soybeans - roughly equivalent to a corn crop on a similarly sized field.

"There's a little more cost with storing and bagging, but it's well worth it," Hicks said. "We not only make more money, but it increases the diversity of our operation."

Jordan said that the program is very exciting as it takes the theme of "from farm to table" in a different direction.

It also reflects many of the standards that the or-

ganization holds in high regard, he said.

"It's something I'm very proud of," he said. "We're growing it local, we're selling it local. And they're actually being bagged locally, too. It's a great partnership."

The method of planting, Jordan said, is also beneficial, with the Hicks Brothers using a drilling method as opposed to tilling the fields, a process which Jordan said creates topsoil erosion and runoff.

"We're big advocates of no-till farming," he said. "Whenever you till the ground you can really impact the stream ... you lose a lot of the topsoil so farmers have to add more fertilizer."

That dedication to conservation, Jordan said, is why the BVA continues to work with the Hicks Brothers, who also handle the farming for the rest of the organization's fields.

"They really walk the conservation walk. Some farmers will talk the talk, but Hicks Brothers goes out of their way," Jordan said. "I couldn't ask for a better farmer."

With just a few weeks left until they're harvested, Jordan and Shattuck both hope people will take the time to stroll the fields.

"We encourage people to come and enjoy them while they're here," Jordan said, adding that the flowers will be cut down in October after they're brown and dried.

"They're absolutely beautiful, you can see how Van Gogh went mad," Shattuck said with a chuckle.

The BVA is located along Route 842 in Pocop-

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