



INTERVIEW

JIM KENNEDY, farm manager, Guenthner Potato Company

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, Badger Common Tater

NAME: Jim Kennedy

TITLE: Farm manager

COMPANY:

Guenthner Potato Company

LOCATION: Antigo, Wisconsin

HOMETOWN: Antigo, Wisconsin

TIME IN PRESENT POSITION:

Six months

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:

Frito-Lay for 8 years

SCHOOLING: Northcentral Technical

College, Antigo

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:

Facilities board member for Rhinelander Ice Association, former head coach for Rhinelander Youth Hockey, and former assistant coach for Jr. Yoopers AAA Hockey

FAMILY: Wife, Katie, of 13 years, and two sons, Gabe, 10, and Liam, 8. "We have lived in Rhinelander since 2008."

HOBBIES: Hunting, fishing, camping, boating and spending time with his family at the hockey rink

Jim Kennedy was with Frito-Lay for eight years, and when Bob Guenthner of Guenthner Potato Company interviewed him for a farm manager position, Bob says he knew Jim was the one.

The Guenthner Potato Company was founded in 1926 by Joseph Sebastian Guenthner. Joseph and Lily Guenthner had four children.

Of their four children, Julius Guenthner became district attorney of Langlade County; Harvey Guenthner and his wife, Jeanette, formed their own company and grew potatoes; Margaret Guenthner and her husband, Oscar Wendt, formed another potato growing operation; and Joseph Frank Guenthner and his wife, Carol, grew potatoes and incorporated Guenthner Potato Company, Inc.

Joseph and Carol's son, Robert "Bob" Joseph, owns the Guenthner Potato Company certified seed farm today.

Bob and his wife, Cheri, are very excited that Jim [Kennedy] has been the perfect addition to their operations.

In fact, Bob defers to his farm manager, Jim, for the following interview.

How many acres of seed potatoes does Guenthner Potato Company farm? We are currently growing 300 acres of certified seed potatoes, 250 acres of oats and about 350 acres of clover on average per year.

Is it strictly a seed potato farm, or do you grow for other markets? **Explain.** We have always been strictly a certified seed potato grower and have never grown potatoes for any other markets.

How many varieties do you grow? We are currently growing three different varieties of certified seed potatoes.

What are your daily duties or what is your job description on the farm? I have a wide range of responsibilities around the farm, like most farm

Above: Farm manager for Guenthner Potato Company, Jim Kennedy, shown standing in front of a Lockwood AirHarvester, says he enjoys all aspects of the growing season, from planting to watching the crop mature and taking it all the way through harvest.

managers do. I assist in creating our crop plans for the year. I also work on fertility plans, spray plans and proper storage decisions.

I ensure equipment has been properly maintained and is ready for planting and harvest. I calibrate the planters and sprayer before each season. I dig yield samples throughout the growing season and determine the irrigation schedule and when to vine kill the crop.

I manage our full-time and seasonal employees on a day-to-day basis and strive to enhance our farm team. I also help wherever needed throughout the year to make everything flow properly so we have a high-quality product to ship to our customers.

Are any two days alike? Explain.

In the farming industry, it is very rare that you are doing the same thing day after day. Each day brings a new

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Bob Guenther, owner of Guenther Potato Company in Antigo, Wisconsin, holds his grandson, Sam McGivern, at the State Seed Potato Farm in Rhineland.

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Cut seed potatoes are loaded into the planter at Guenther Potato Company, a certified seed potato grower. Dave Matuszewski (barely visible in the cab) sets the GPS on the tractor, and Joe Holbrook, an operator, checks the settings on the planter before starting the 2019 planting season.



reward or challenge, always a new adventure, if you will.

Mother Nature has been known to throw us some curve balls, and we often work long hours when the weather is good.

What is your favorite part of being a farm manager? What brings you the

biggest joys each day or production year? My favorite part is being involved in every aspect of the farm and working to strengthen our team. Whether it is making crop decisions or being on the business end of a shovel, I will always help anywhere it is needed to maximize the flow of production.

I think what brings me the greatest joy is when we start planting and a new season begins. I look forward to watching the crop grow from planting to the harvest.

Farming can be a challenge at times, but it is rewarding to be a part of this industry and I enjoy watching our team conquer the challenges of each season together.

What are your biggest challenges?

Our biggest challenge is to continue to grow a high-quality crop for years to come, despite the curve ball that Mother Nature keeps throwing at us farmers.

Another challenge can be learning to be creative and efficient when dealing with unexpected machinery malfunctions. In the farming industry,



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Founded in 1926 by Joseph Sebastian Guenther, Guenther Potato Company harvest has taken many forms over the years, from digging by hand and loading the truck bed with bags, from using a Farmall tractor and finally with modern windrowers and harvesters.

we only have a short window of decent weather in each season and our team works hard to ensure safety by resolving any mechanical issues in a timely manner to ensure we get the job done.

Do all Antigo seed potato growers plant, tend to crops and harvest similarly? Row spacing? Machinery? Methods? What does Guenther Potato Company do that perhaps other growers don't? I would say that most of the seed potato growers in Antigo plant, tend to the crop and

harvest very similarly. However, each farm appears to have its own best practices and policies that it follows, allowing for some differences.

Most farms plant 32-, 34- or 36-inch row spacing on their potato crop. Machinery can vary. Larger farms generally have a higher quantity of big planting and harvesting equipment.

We typically space rows at 34 inches. We have two Kverneland four-row cup planters, two four-row

Spudnik windrowers and a Lockwood AirHarvester.

At Guenther Potato Company, we take a lot of pride in our crop and have our own best practices and policies we believe are best.

Why is the soil in the Antigo area so critical to what you do? Is it all silt loam? Explain. The Antigo silt loam soil is very critical for our production. It is organic enriched, and fairly-level ground holds a lot of nutrients and water for good plant growth, allowing for a high-quality crop.

We do have a couple of lighter sand fields that need increased irrigation and added nutrients throughout the growing season to ensure a good yield.

What kind of checks and balances do you, as a seed grower, go through by law that fresh or table stock growers don't? We are required to have certification conducted by the Wisconsin Seed Certification Program on all our fields twice during

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the growing season. A winter test is also sampled and grown in Hawaii to screen for potential virus levels, and we send samples in for Dickeya screening.

Is cleanliness inherent, and if so, why? Food safety, and why? To be a reputable certified seed potato grower, it is essential to have a quality sanitation program. We strive to consistently maintain a high level

of cleanliness to reduce any possible contamination.

This includes regular disinfecting of equipment, disinfecting storage bins and protocol to ensure we keep any potential diseases off the farm.

We are also required to prevent variety mixtures by ensuring we clean all equipment before starting to work with another variety of potato.

At Guenther Potato Company, we strive to exceed regulatory and customer requirements, providing a safe and high-quality product. We do this by ensuring our potatoes are grown with strict safety measures.

How exactly do you prevent diseases and insect infestation on your farm? What types of prevention methods are you using? To grow high-quality

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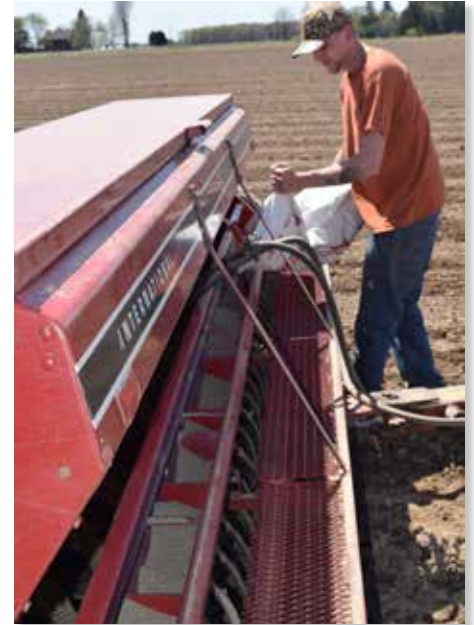
Bob Guenther says the photo depicts those most instrumental in the founding and early running of Guenther Potato Company. From left to right are Bob's father, Joseph F. Guenther, his grandfather, Joseph S. Guenther, Margaret Wendt and his uncle, Harvey Guenther.

seed potatoes, it is essential to scout regularly to inspect for potential viruses, diseases and insects.

We spend a lot of our time in the growing season directly in the field observing the crop. Early detection is essential to keep virus levels and

disease at a minimum and to avoid any spreading of a virus, disease or insect.

We have a quality spraying regimen that assists in reducing the odds of disease, virus, etc.



Dustin Holbrook adds clover seed to the grain drill. He and seasonal employee, Gary, do all the seeding of the farm's oats and clover.

How long have you been farm manager, and how have things changed or stayed the same in that time? I have been a part of the Guenther Potato Company family for six months. However, I have been employed in the potato farming industry for 26 years.

I have seen many changes over my years in this industry, as things often change when best practice standards change. I am impressed with the state-of-the-art storage and grading facility at Guenther Potato Company. We can store about 27,500 bags in each bin, equaling 110,000 bags.

What type of technologies are you using today that you didn't in the past? We have added GPS on our sprayer and all our tractors, which maximizes productivity and sustainability.

How many employees does Guenther Potato Company have, both full time and seasonally? We currently employ eight full-time and 13 seasonal employees.



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Size was consistent, yield good and the potatoes looked great going into storage on the last day of harvest, October 10, 2019, at Guenther Potato Company.

How's the year shaping up? Well, we had a cold, wet spring that pushed planting back, a cool summer and so far, a wet fall. With that said, our crop looks good for the growing season that we were dealt.

What do you hope for the future of Guenther Potato Company?

Guenther Potato Company is a family-based legacy of which I am honored to now be a part of.

We will continue to provide high-quality product to our customers just as Bob and his family have done for decades. I also know we will continue to evaluate and explore new technologies and products to maximize production and continued longevity of the farm.

Do you have anything to add, Jim, that I might have missed? I would like to give a special thanks to Bob

Guenther and our team of full-time employees, Jackie Majewski, Dave Matuszewski, Joe Holbrook, Steve Kloes, Casey Patterson and Dustin Holbrook.

I also want to acknowledge our hardworking seasonal employees, Kevin, Gary, Ron, Ken, Donna, Dennis, Shannon, Sam, Rick, Casey S., Joe Z., Mike and J.R. **BCT**



Above: Two healthy seed potato varieties are shown side-by-side and flowering beautifully on Guenther Potato Company land in 2018.

Left: As part of the seed potato farm's mission of consistently maintaining a high level of cleanliness to reduce any possible contamination, Rick, a seasonal employee, washes and disinfects the seed cutting equipment between seed lots.