

Young entrepreneur grows asparagus into a little green



Neal Ely started a fresh asparagus business in 2000 for an FFA project at Sutton Public School and it has paid off. Not only has he expanded to include a pickled asparagus business but he has won a slew of awards. Concomitantly, he has reaped satisfaction fielding requests for his pickled asparagus from Colorado, Missouri and Arizona.

GRAFTON It's not easy being green, or so the song goes. But in Neal Ely's case, it's been a snap □ and it's led to a little green in his pocket, too.

Ely, 18, used a family idea to market fresh asparagus as part of an FFA project at Sutton High School in 2000. Later, Ely added pickled asparagus, from an old family recipe, to his product line.

Today, he's the head of a fast□growing enterprise that produces the vegetable.

"Farming has its ups and downs, and with the economy unstable right now, there's a need for farmers to diversify and try new things," the Sutton senior said. "This was my way of diversifying and trying something new."

Ely's product can be found on the shelves at Hy□Vee, James Arthur Vineyard near Raymond and the Grafton Mini□Mart, among others.

Ely has gotten statewide and nationwide attention from his project, too. He won the 2001 Jerry Brenning Award for the best product produced in Nebraska. He's been interviewed by CNN's Paula Zahn as part of a story on young entrepreneurs. Recently, the Fillmore County Development Corp. toured his processing kitchen.

Sue Baumann, who works at the Grafton Mini□Mart, said she

has helped Ely and his parents, Michael and Tami Ely, pickle asparagus for two years.

"It's a unique product. No one else makes it," Baumann said. "We have people from all over that will ask (about it.)"

Neal Ely said his father came up with selling fresh asparagus while he and his family brainstormed ideas for Neal's FFA project three years ago. Neal liked the idea, asparagus was one of his favorite vegetables and it was part of his family history.

"When I was a little kid, I used to go with my mom to pick fresh asparagus from the road ditches," he said.

In each of the first two years, Ely planted more than 1,500 plants. Two years ago, Ely expanded his business to include the pickled asparagus from a recipe his mom had tinkered with for years.

The business can process 750 jars daily. Ely said he and his crew of 10 hired workers have processed 8,500 jars this past month. He's paid off his initial investment.

Tami Ely does the canning while Michael Ely helps with the paperwork. Neal, however, is the sole marketer.

"I had to find my niche market," he said. "I didn't know if a product like this would be in grocery or gourmet stores but it is working in both right now."

Michael Krikac of the Nebraska Food and Gift Store in Hastings said that, to the dismay of many late shoppers, he ran out of Ely's product a week before Christmas.

As Ely contemplates heading to UNL this fall, he's turned over the fresh asparagus business to his brother, Reid, a freshman at Sutton.

He's going to hold onto the pickled asparagus portion of the business, though.

"I am looking into possibly doing some new products along with, if things go well, continuing to increase my production and, hopefully, expand my market."

If the asparagus venture is any indicator of how he'll do, he shouldn't worry.

"I had no idea it would get as big as it is now, a large business capable of supporting me through college," he said. "And maybe beyond."

