

# Love at first sight with century farm

By Dee Belew

Who would have guessed 48 years ago we would own the house and farm we fell in love with the first time we drove past it?

Living down the road from Lewis and Helen Messenger, a long and wonderful relationship developed resulting in us purchasing the farm and giving them life rights to stay on their farm.

This time together gave us the opportunity to learn the history of the farm until Lewis' passing in 1997.

What could we do with my husband retiring at 48 to keep the farm going? We built an 18-horse boarding facility; we worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to build a manure shed, proactively preventing manure runoff from entering local streams; we made and sold hay; and we learned all we could about making maple syrup.

**Maple syrup.** We wanted to continue the tradition the Messengers started in the 1800s. We started out in the oldest sugar house in Geauga County, which still stands today.

As it got harder to rely on outside help, we moved the operation to a 1910 building and updated to the latest technology which enabled us to handle the operation as a family.

Sugar makers know making maple syrup gets into your blood and becomes an addiction.

We have been able to share our experiences about making syrup for many years on the maple tours. This year's How Sweet It Is Maple Driving Tour and Maple Madness Tour is March 2, 3, 9 and 10.

Check out the Maple Producers of Northeast Ohio's website at [mneoh.com](http://mneoh.com) for more information.

A favorite farmer of ours, Mike Voytko, once told my husband we are only caretakers of our land and we need to do the best we can to care for it. For several years, we wondered how we could protect our 70-acre farm, surrounded on three sides by 460-plus acres of State of Ohio land, and fulfill the promise made to Lewis Messenger.

**Western Reserve Land Conservancy.** For three years, we researched many ways to put an easement on our property with many organizations. We were approved for a federal farm preservation easement but ultimately decided to work with Western Reserve Land Conservancy (WRLC).

WRLC was easy to work with and took all our wishes and concerns to heart. Walking through our property with our land steward each year is such a benefit, knowing they are watching over what we have asked for and will do so forever. I am sure Lewis is looking down and smiling.

I have been a volunteer at WRLC

and am so honored to be able to help such a hard working organization. The love of land at WRLC is beyond words. We are so proud to be a part of the 56,000-plus acres they have been able to conserve through partnerships with local farmers, soil and water conservation districts, park districts and landowners.

I encourage you to reach out to WRLC or other conservation resources to understand the benefits of putting an easement on your property. You are the one who can do this today for future generations.

We planted 4 acres of blueberries with our son and his family, who also live on the farm. We operate a "pick your own" blueberry farm.

Being a Master Gardener through Ohio State University's Geauga Extension has given me the insight to research and understand all about soils and growing, thanks to the guidance of our wonderful county Extension educator.

**SWCD.** One of the most rewarding things I have done is serving on the board of supervisors for Geauga Soil and Water Conservation District.

This agency, along with the other 87 in Ohio, goes above and beyond addressing natural resource concerns, implementing conservation practices and educating. Check out

its websites to see what programs they offer.

I encourage Geauga County teachers and Scout troop leaders to check out the fun, engaging education programs that fit into your curricula for your students.

They have so many free educational resources for children and adults. If you need soil information, insight on building a pond, or would like to discuss drainage problems, call your local district.

When it comes to conservation, no one works harder than our local soil and water districts and the land conservancies. I am extremely grateful that I am part of both.

As a resident of Auburn Township for 48 years, I saw the increasing

growth and development surrounding us and knew that planning is another essential way of caring for the land.

I served on the township's zoning commission for years and was a part of updating two land use plans and rezoning the township.

There are many ways and many organizations that you can join to show your love and help take care of our local landscape.

My experiences with different agencies have provided me with a long lasting respect for the land of which we are all "caretakers." I am so grateful to be a part, or have been a part, of them all.

(Dee Belew has been on the Geauga SWCD board of supervisors for seven years and cur-



Dee Belew  
**The Dirt on Conservation**

rently serves as fiscal agent. As owners and "caretakers" of Messenger Century Farm, Dee and her husband, Bill, have protected the land with a Western Reserve Land Conservancy conservation easement and are currently producing maple syrup and blueberries.)

**Farm TOY SHOW**  
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## OSU program to focus on weed management

MASSILLON, Ohio — Ohio State University (OSU) Extension of Stark County will host an agronomy program about weed management, including an herbicide update, March 4 at 5:30 p.m.

Dr. Mark Loux, professor of weed science at OSU, will present the program at the RG Drage Career Technical Center, 2800 Richville Drive SE.

There is no charge for the program. A pizza dinner buffet will be offered.

Interested farmers can register by contacting the OSU Extension Stark County office at 330-832-9856, ext. 3465, by noon the day of the program.

For information, contact Heather Neikirk, Extension educator, at 330-832-9856, ext. 3476, or [neikirk.2@osu.edu](mailto:neikirk.2@osu.edu), or visit [stark.osu.edu](http://stark.osu.edu).

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