

Profile from the Field

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Farm in North Central Michigan is the First to Produce Canola Oil in the State

Project Title: Growing, Processing, and Selling
Omega-9 Canola Oil

Coordinator: Dan Blackledge

Location: Belmont, MI

SARE Grant: \$5,969

Duration: 2010-2011

To read the full project report, go to
www.sare.org/projects and search for project
number **FNC10-809**.

Dan and Bonnie Blackledge have started a canola oil business on their farm in Marion, Michigan. B & B Farms Canola Oil's first pressing was only about 50 gallons, but it stands out as the first canola oil grown and pressed in Michigan.

B & B Farms is located in central, northern Michigan about mid-way between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron, and has been a family operation for almost 100 years, originally starting with 40 acres of land and growing to 540 acres. In 2012, the Blackledges produced about 100 acres of canola, 26 acres of Sudan grass, and 70 acres of alfalfa hay, along with about 150 acres in cattle pasture. Their cropping system consists of growing canola one year, then rotating with another crop such as Sudan grass or alfalfa. They suspect that this rotation will migrate toward using corn and wheat in the future.

Canola has potential as a biofuel and is a popular type of cooking oil; it has seeds with about 40 percent oil content. When compared to soybeans and corn, which have about 18 and 4 percent oil respectively, canola stood out to Michigan State University (MSU) researchers as a key crop for Michigan's economic growth.

In the mid 2000s, the Blackledges and MSU worked on a joint research project to see if canola could be successfully grown in Michigan. The results were promising; so much so that the Blackledges



*A sample of the Canola Oil produced by Dan and Bonnie Blackledge. They sell to kitchens, retailers, and at the local farmers market.
Photo by Bonnie Blackledge.*

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applied for an NCR-SARE Farmer Rancher grant in 2010 and were awarded \$5,969 to research and test a strategy to grow, process, and market Omega-9 canola oil in Michigan.

“The largest group of people who have helped with the project are from Michigan State University,” said Dan Blackledge. “As B & B Farms started working on the SARE grant and began making plans for processing oil, the MSU Product Center became an important part of our team, providing expertise in food processing and food marketing at their incubator kitchen. They helped us learn everything we needed to know so we could transition the business to the farm.”

B & B Farms now operates a fully licensed kitchen on premises. They produce cold pressed, non-GMO, unrefined, not deodorized, unbleached canola oil. They use a mechanical AgOilPress, which has the capacity to press about 25 pounds of seed per hour. As of 2012, they market to one restaurant, several small retailers, and the Downtown Rapids Farmers Market. In 2013, they’re looking forward to working with distributors in Grand Rapids and Ann Arbor, as well as online distributors.

The SARE grant was instrumental to their new business development, both in production and marketing, according to Dan Blackledge.

“This grant provided us our first opportunity to develop a food product, and by doing that we added value to one of our farm products,” said Blackledge. “Without the grant we likely would not have done this, or if we had it would have taken much longer. We learned many things during this project, including how to operate an oilseed press, how to clean canola seed, how to create a food package label, how to bottle oil, and how to develop food markets. It also helped us to form support networks that taught us so much.”



*Dan Blackledge pictured above looking over the Canola crop at his Belmont, MI farm.
Photo by Bonnie Blackledge.*

In 2012, B&B’s goal was to produce 1000 pints of bottled canola oil. Their financial projections scale up to 1,200 gallons by 2015.

“If we are able to meet these projections, we will need part-time help in 2014,” said Blackledge. “This starts creating an impact on our community. We have talked with Township officials, and while we have not shared projections this precisely with them, they are highly supportive of our efforts and see the possibilities for job and economic impacts in our community.”

View the Blackledge’s presentation from the 2014 Farmers Forum, online through NCR-SARE’s YouTube playlist.

Visit www.youtube.com/NCRSAREvideo and search “Dan and Bonnie Blackledge” to watch it.

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