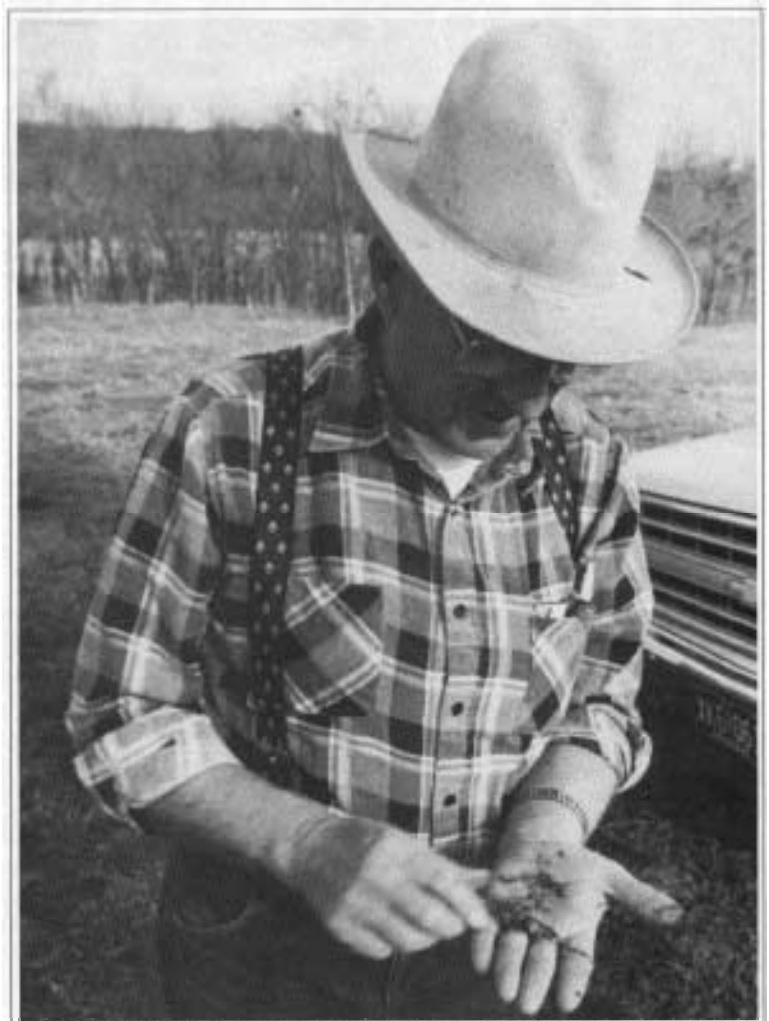

Hay *and* COWS *and* Chaff *and* Stuff

Howell and Jeannette Wheaton are not just ordinary folks. They have a great love of life, Angus cattle and Angus breeders.

*Story and Photos by
Julie Grimes Albertson*



Wheaton examines the root systems of legumes growing in his pasture. The legume is queen of hay, according to Howell.

Wheaton Angus Farm, Columbia, Mo., looks like an average farm to the naked eye. A long gravel road leads to several barns, some old, some new. But while the buildings might be similar to those on many other farms, the land surrounding the buildings is not typical, for it has been cared for by an expert.

Howell Wheaton graduated from two universities with three degrees, including a Ph.D from the University of Kentucky in animal nutrition. His practical work and masters were done in agronomy at Purdue University. The combination of the two sciences is an ideal background for a cattleman.

A well-planned forage system is vital to any farm. Howell has spent two

decades designing a system that provides ample nutrition for his herd. He also answers many questions cattlemen have about forages. "First, I tell breeders they should look at their land and determine what species will grow there. Next, produce high quality forages to accommodate their breeding season, whether it be spring or fall. Third and most importantly, set up as many rotational fields as is practical."

Wheaton says that rotational grazing can increase a farms' carrying capacity by 20 to 40 percent. "I always feel bad in dry weather when people are short of pasture. You drive by and see every gate for every field open, and the cattle are everywhere. The pasture will never get a chance to recover," says Howell.

Special use pastures are also important, especially in an artificial insemination program. Wheaton keeps his best pastures for two-year-old females because they need extra nutrition. He also keeps plenty of legume in the AI pastures.

The legume is the queen of hay, according to this cattleman, and it's prevalent throughout the pastures at Wheaton Angus Farm. Wheaton no-tills legumes in late winter and in the fall. Early rains provide moisture for the seed to germinate and maintain growth.

Some of the legumes he plants include red clover, ladino, birdsfoot trefoil, and alfalfa. Each is planted where it's best suited. For example, he plants alfalfa where the soil has good drainage and



"Our whole social life revolves around Angus cattle," says Jeannette Wheaton. Both Howell and Jeannette are active member of Missouri Angus Association.

birdsfoot trefoil or timothy where it's wet. On land with lower fertility levels, such as leased land, Wheaton plants lespedeza because it's a high quality forage that's easily adaptable to low fertility soil. He also recommends using lespedeza as a fertilizer since it fixes nitrogen.

Wheaton says that warm-season grasses also have a place in a forage system. Switchgrass, which is drought tolerant, is a popular choice. Wheaton cuts his switchgrass for hay and plans to graze it this summer as well.

A strong believer in big bales, Wheaton says that they put up about 300 bales per year. "We bale every scrap of everything in the spring, although some is what I call junky stuff." But Wheaton says he always wants to have extra — between one-third and one-quarter bale carryover — every year.

Good forage management is crucial for developing a successful AI program. Wheaton talks with a host of breeders about the benefits of artificial insemination as an ABS sales representative. "AI has

helped us more than any other management tool we use." Wheaton AI's all his first-calf heifers to proven, easy-calving sires.

Wheaton prefers to calve his cows out in the fall because it fits his forage program. Also fescue fungus is at its worst in the heat of the summer when spring-calvers are still lactating.

"Another reason that I do quite a bit of fall calving (late August, September and October) is that I seem to have better luck finding cows in heat in November and December than in late May, June and July. I still believe that catching the cows in heat, or lack of it, is the major reason why more breeders don't take advantage of AI," says Wheaton.

Another management tool

Wheaton uses to a limited degree is creep feeding. He creep feeds only his fall calves the last 90 days before they're weaned. He says there are other times and conditions when creep feeding can be especially helpful, for instance, when breeders have: (a) low quality pastures or availability due to drought, (b) hay quality below normal with fall calving cows, (c) a herd made up of a large number of two- and three-year-old cows, (d) any combination of the above.

Wheaton limits the calves intake of creep to two to three pounds per day by using 10 percent salt in the ration. He also places a

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— Howell Wheaton

big bale of his best legume hay in the creep pen for peak efficiency.

It was the efficiency of Angus and the progressiveness of its breeders that led the Wheatons to the breed in the early 1970s. "The Angus association has been able to adapt to new situations because of its openness, such as their willingness to promote open artificial insemination in the early years."

In 1972 the Wheatons bought crossbred cattle and an Angus bull. Susan, the Wheaton's youngest daughter, wanted a 4-H heifer. So in January of 1973, they bought their first Angus heifer at the Missouri State Angus Futurity. Howell continued buying Angus females and later replaced all his crossbred cows with Angus cows.

"Basically, like a lot of small Angus herds in the country, some kid wanted a 4-H heifer, and years later here we are with 100 head of Angus cattle.

"After the first few years, what she showed generally had to be what we could produce. I thought it would be a more meaningful experience for her that way."

The last 4-H heifer Susan showed happened to be one the Wheatons bred. She won her class at the Missouri State Fair.

Wheaton believes that his Angus cows have performed better than his crossbred cattle would have, and the purebred cattle offer more than just market money. "I've always believed that the cow business was tough going at the very best, when you try to pencil it out. So anything that you can do to get a little extra, like sell a purebred bull or two, or a few females, helps you along."

Both Howell and Jeannette are active members of the Missouri Angus Association. They each contribute monthly articles to the Missouri *Angus Trails*. Howell's column, "Hay and Cows and Chaff and Stuff," is usually accompanied by two or three other articles relating to forages and cattle management. Jeannette, a Purdue University home economics graduate, writes "The Cook's Column," which not only lists favorite recipes, but also provides readers with a slice of this unique couples' life.

Howell and Jeannette Wheaton consider themselves just average folks in the Angus business. However, they contribute more than an average share of expertise, and aren't afraid to show their genuine affection for the Angus breed and its members.

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Creep feeding is an important management tool for Wheaton. He creep feeds his fall calves the last 90 days before they are weaned.

There are many ways to cover bales, but the method that works best for Howell Wheaton is as follows:

- Place about 100 feet of bales (approximately 16 bales) end to end on a well drained site.
- Cover the length of the bales with a piece of plastic 100 feet long and 14 feet wide.
- Tie the two weights together with plastic twine. The distance between the weights should be about 8 or 9 feet.
- Used anti-freeze jugs filled about 3/4 full of water make excellent weights. Never fill them completely full so that there can be expansion when the water freezes.
- Place the twine holding the weights over the plastic in the crevice where the bales are pushed together. Adjust the twine so that the weights are suspended about two feet above the ground.
- Wheaton says the key that makes this system successful is placing the twine in the crack where the bales meet; as the bales settle and shrink, the twine sinks deeper into the crevice and keeps the plastic cover tight so that wind damage is reduced.
- When Wheaton is ready to use the bales, he removes the entire length of plastic rather than trying to fold it back. He can usually get two seasons use from a section of plastic. Inside storage is still best, especially for the better quality hays.
- Always leave plenty of distance between the rows of bales, at least four feet. This will allow rainfall and snow to better dissipate.