

Adding Value



With Carcass Quality

Relocation, portable equipment and a major expansion don't keep couple from producing top-quality product.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

For the husband-and-wife team of Ed and Gretchen Yeo, focusing on carcass quality is a given. "It is a natural thing," Gretchen says. "In our whole operation, both crops and livestock, we look for ways to add value."

That's no surprise, as Ed works in finance and Gretchen had a career as an economist before taking over the management of their cattle operation.

The choice of Angus-only bulls and semen is just as obvious. "One of our main objectives is carcass quality, and we think that's how to get it," she states. "There is also more predictability with Angus."

The only real surprise is the location of the cattle enterprise. While the historic farm's headquarters is a postcard setting in northeastern Ohio and northwestern Pennsylvania, the cattle now graze in the hog country of North Carolina's coastal plain. Oh yeah, and they are finished in Kansas. But that's getting ahead of the story.

Ed's ancestors moved from Pennsylvania to Ohio in the early 1800s. The land they homesteaded became the base of the grain and livestock farm the couple bought from the family in 1982.

The Yeos reopened the small feedlot that

Ed's father had operated, then eased into the cow-calf business by holding back feeder heifers and breeding them to Angus bulls from the Pennsylvania State University herd.

"Even though a large portion of our cow base is crossbred, every bull we've bought has been Angus," she says. The result is a herd

of black commercial cows with generations of Angus genetics.

The Yeos started adding to their herd by purchasing Angus females, too, including registered cattle. By breeding those females to top sires through artificial insemination (AI), they've been able to produce some

of the bulls they use. They continue to AI their commercial cows and heifers.

High standards

"We started to use AI because we could get higher-quality bulls than we could afford to buy," Gretchen says. "In the beginning it made a big difference in the quality of the calves. As our herd quality improved, we started to collect and use some of our own bulls. We can more quickly see the quality of their calves and make the decision whether we want to use them for the following year's breeding program," she adds.

"Rarely do you see cattle that grade as exceptional as the Yeos' and still convert."

— **Dan Dorn**

Her affinity for numbers and recordkeeping has been an asset from the start.

"We developed our own performance statistics and kept birth weights, weaning weights and frame scores at weaning," Gretchen explains. "Then we used that internal data to choose our replacement heifers and evaluate the sires we used, both the purchased bulls and the AI sires."

She adds, "We are now in a position to be more selective and are doing some bull evaluation for other breeders."

No matter whether the bulls are home-raised or from another breeder, you can bet their carcass EPDs (expected progeny differences) are top-notch. In the early 1990s, the Yeos proved their foresight by emphasizing carcass EPDs in the selection process.

"We did it in part to get greater consistency," she says. "In the beginning, I had to give up a lot of other traits. Today I can get milk, mothering ability, growth and carcass quality."

While the Yeos were building the quality of their herd, they were also increasing the numbers. "We felt we needed to be a significant enough player to attract attention from buyers," she explains.

During that transition, they started by finishing some calves and selling feeder calves locally and by private treaty. Next they moved

► **Above:** The cattle at Yeo Farms graze leased hybrid Bermuda grass pastures irrigated and fertilized by wastewater from hog operations.

up to selling larger lots in nearby auctions. “The feeder calves did very well,” she recalls. “They topped every weight group. We then set as our goal to sell one potload of calves that all looked alike.”

In 2000 they did that, at an auction in Hillsboro, Ohio. “That was an exciting day. I was so proud as I watched the 72 head file through the salering,” she says. It was also the start of another part of their enterprise. Dan Dorn of Decatur County Feed Yard, Oberlin, Kan., bought the load in 50% partnership with the Yeos.

Feeding away from home

Gretchen said it did, and still does, make sense to have the cattle finished and marketed at Decatur County, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) partner feedlot, even though corn is one of the main crops at their Ohio-based farm.

“Our little feedlot was built in the ’60s. Decatur County’s feedlot is modern and highly specialized,” she says. “They have location and expertise. We just can’t compete with their marketing.”

The Yeos shortly discovered another plus of feeding at Decatur County. They have full access to their cattle’s performance data in the feedlot and at harvest.

“Now we can improve our decision making. We can evaluate the performance of our sires and see how their calves compare in a particular calf crop,” Gretchen says. “I have to decide which ones are the good bulls, which are the good cows, and which ones I want to keep.”

Based on the numbers, pretty darn near all of them fall in the keeper category.

“In several of their larger groups of steers last year, the best had a 3.8-pound (lb.) average daily gain (ADG), a dry-matter feed conversion, pay weight to pay weight, of 5.8-to-1, and a *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) acceptance rate of 48.6%,” Decatur County’s Dorn says. “All the cattle graded above the national average.”

He continues, “Rarely do you see cattle that grade as exceptional as the Yeos’ and still convert.” That efficiency produces an average finished weight of 1,300 lb.

“They have done a really good job on genetic selection and management, but the key driver is selection,” he says.

It wasn’t long before the Yeos’ biggest frustration was lack of space to grow the herd. Suburbs were closing in on them. Ed’s friendship with former North Carolina Sen. Lauch Faircloth resulted in the couple checking out the area around the senator’s hometown of Clinton. There, acres of hybrid Bermuda grass grow around large hog operations, fertilized and irrigated by wastewater from those facilities.



► Gretchen Yeo says she and her husband add value to their cattle by emphasizing carcass quality.

In 2004, the first load of 300 open heifers left the Yeos’ Ohio division, headed for North Carolina. They adapted well. “The trucks started rolling,” Gretchen says.

Now, 1,500 cows and heifers graze pastures leased from hog operations.

“It is a mutually beneficial relationship between our cattle operation and the hog farmers. We can grow quality cattle on somebody else’s land, and the hog farmers are happy,” she says. “It is working.”

Electric fence encloses the pastures and portable corrals and pens are used when and where needed. Both the spring and fall herds are still AI-bred once before the cleanup bulls are turned in. And calves are weaned and preconditioned for 30 days before their next step. That’s shipment to the Kansas feedlot for steers and the lower end of the heifers, or development as replacements in the case of the top end of the heifers and the bulls.

The Yeos continue to retain ownership at or partner with Decatur County in order to collect carcass data.

“To be sure, this past year was one of tight margins due to sky-high feed prices. But we have an internal hedge between our cattle and our crop operation in Ohio,” Gretchen says. “We think we have a good business plan. We’re going to stick with our objectives and not sacrifice our long-term goals.”

As their cattle continue to improve, they continue to set new goals.

“It is a moving target,” she says. “We want daily gains in the 3.75- to 4-pound range and in today’s environment, feed efficiency and natural muscling. I think the breed as a whole needs to go to more muscle. We’ve paid more attention to that lately.”

Then, of course, there is the target of carcass quality. For the Yeos, two-thirds is the magic fraction. They want two-thirds of their finished cattle to reach the upper two-thirds of the Choice grade or higher, thus qualifying them for the industry’s leading brand.

“CAB provides an opportunity for added value in the marketplace,” she emphasizes. “We strive to achieve a value-added product.”