

Working with Plain Sect Growers

Learn about the culture and practices of the plain sect community, and take away methods for successfully working with this increasing population of farmers.



Amish and conservative Mennonites make up what sociologists refer to as “plain sect” communities. There are many different groups that fit this title and they vary in their use of and acceptance of technology. They are united, however, by their desire to be “set apart” from the modern world in some form. They settle in intentional communities in typically agrarian settings. Their children are educated through the 8th grade and they prefer to make their living as farmers or tradesmen.

According to the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College (1), the plain sect population numbered around 308,000 in 508 communities in 31 states and Canadian provinces in 2017. The population is very dynamic, growing at a rate of 4,000/per year with new settlements started each year. Ohio and Pennsylvania lead the nation with populations of around 70,000 each.

We have found that as general farmer numbers drop, the percentage of plain sect growers increases as these farmers buy farms as they become available. This is especially true in the area of vegetable production. In Pennsylvania, perhaps well over 60% of vegetable farmers are plain sect growers growing approximately half of the state's total vegetable production (2). These growers are hard-working, entrepreneurial farmers. Over the years they have developed marketing businesses to help them market their produce. As

their vegetable enterprises have become larger and their volume moved beyond what they could market at the farm stand, they have banded together to develop wholesale markets. The most common method they rely on to market their produce is the wholesale auction. They have developed nearly 100 auctions across the US and Canada. Although these auctions vary widely in size, their combined sales would be in excess of \$150 million (3).

The challenge for educators is understanding their unique restrictions on technology. The Amish faith believes that Christians should be set apart from the “world”. Amish take this literally in the way they dress, their mode of transportation, and the technologies they avoid. When it comes to technology, the Amish prefer to avoid technologies that would take away from the value of community and family. However, the levels of acceptance can vary widely between communities. It is not uncommon to have different groups of Amish with different rules within the same community. For example, some groups may not want to view computer projected slides at a meeting while other groups would have no such restrictions.

Working with the growers is all about developing relationships. This is especially true with the Amish community who rely more on relationships and less on technology. The best way to get to know Amish growers is to meet them at their markets or farms. Being available to help with diagnosing production and marketing problems is a good way to build rapport and trust in the community. Developing relationships takes time and patience. More conservative groups will be a bit harder to engage because they may not interact with the rest of the community as readily.

Interacting with them requires you to respect their values, but not necessarily follow them. The area of dress is one example. The Amish are not impressed by and are often put off by formal attire. Ties and suits are things that should be avoided for men. Shorts are not recommended for educators, be they men or women. Low necklines and large jewelry should be avoided for women, although wedding rings and small earrings would generally not be offensive. In general, the dress code for working with Amish should be neat, modest, and casual. Although women may have to work harder to be accepted by Amish men, at least initially, many women educators have developed successful working relationships in the Amish community. Women educators may even have an



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advantage when working with Amish women in areas where they are heavily involved in production and management as in greenhouse plant production.

Working successfully with a grower will have an impact far beyond that one grower. Their communities are socially based. They visit regularly with extended family and friends and discussions frequently turn to production methods they are using on their farms. I once received a call from an Amish lady about an outbreak of Allium Leafminer that was devastating her green onions. Her comment was "The preacher didn't talk about it in church, but everyone else did." Because we had done some visits with a few growers, our name came up in conversations about the pest during the meal after church and our phones were busy Monday morning with questions about the pest.

Produce auctions and other gathering places like stockyards and farm supply stores are great places to disseminate information. Many of these businesses hold grower meetings for their customers each winter. Growers are much more comfortable coming to these community meetings with their friends and neighbors than they are coming to extension sponsored meetings. Work with these businesses to get on the program and you will become known throughout the community. These business owners are always looking for timely topics and knowledgeable speakers for their meetings. It is always much easier for educators to work through the existing education network in the plain community than it is to force them into our network of meetings and emails. Amish typically look to local supply companies, fertilizer salesmen, produce auctions, and peer mentoring for their education. We cannot afford to treat these sources of education as competitors. We must think of them as collaborators in getting good sound research-based education into the farmers hands. Working through existing meetings and connections in the community takes us away from being meeting facilitators and enables us to focus more on being educators.

On-farm demonstrations have been successful tools in implementing grower adoption of new practices. We must first make sure the things we want to demonstrate can be implemented through their practices. For example, does it require tractors, electricity, computers, or other technology they may not want to use? If it does, then think about ways it can be adapted to their technology. They are very innovative at converting tractor drawn equipment to horse drawn equipment. Can electric power be replaced by battery power or generator power? When you have a demonstration lined up, make sure you find a respected farmer who is a good manager. Spend some time on the farm making sure your demonstration is working the way you planned. If your demonstration is successful, news of it will quickly spread throughout the community. If it is not successful, that news will also quickly spread.

Whenever you spend time working with one farmer in the plain community, you are never just impacting one farmer. You are impacting his sons and their farms, his neighbors, and sometimes even relatives in other areas. I have received calls from growers in other states asking very specific questions

about projects that we had done locally. It is a result of what we jokingly refer to as the "Amish internet". It is a network of people who meet at weddings, funerals, and other family gatherings from across states who have their own nation-wide newspapers and conference calls. They share joys and concerns, successes and failures freely across their communities. Some of the things we have demonstrated on farms over the years that have now become commonplace in these communities include drip irrigation, cover cropping, ag plastic recycling, nutrient management, stream fencing, no till farming, and many other practices.

Amish farmers are no longer a niche or novelty on the landscape. They are continuing a trend over the past 50 years of becoming the predominant face of commercial agriculture throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Mid-West states. This is especially true in the dairy and produce industries. Their small farms, innovative marketing, and value-added enterprises enables them to more easily capitalize on the growing demand for small-farm locally grown food. They are innovative, entrepreneurial, and eager to learn new more profitable methods of production. Our role as educators is to develop the relationships and programs to help them address the challenges of commercial ag production.

References

1. Amish Population, 2018." [Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies](#), Elizabethtown College.
2. Personal observation based on statistics on total number of produce growers provided by the Pennsylvania Vegetable Growers Association (PVGGA) and estimate of number of Amish growers marketing through produce auctions.
3. Personal communication with Mr. Raymond Yoder and the (Amish) Food Safety Education Team based on conservative estimates from produce auction operators.

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