

Tools for small farms turn into big business

Earth Tools owner sees passion for local farming catch on throughout the nation

BY KEREN HENDERSON

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OWENTON — Don't get Joel Dufour started on the tools sold at typical home and garden stores.

"They just gall me!" he says. "They are inefficient and designed to wear out so you have to buy a new one every couple of years."

Dufour, 42, owner of Earth Tools — a European small-scale farming equipment distributor on Kays Branch Road, is passionate about supplying farmers and gardeners with quality tools.

He's seen his passion for local farming, which was first cultivated on his parents' farm in Southern Indiana, catch on throughout the nation.

Though Earth Tools doesn't advertise, business is booming. Sales — now \$3 million annually — are growing about 20 percent each year.

"What's happening is that we are on the cutting edge of a national movement for people getting much more interested in locally grown food, farmers markets and community supported agriculture," he says.

"It's all serendipity — me being here at this time. I got into it because I liked it, and I'm an organic farmer and I valued it. It wasn't some bold marketing move."

Earth Tools, which specializes in Italian walk-behind tractors, is the largest dealership in North America, offering 25 tractor options with 42 implements and 60 accessories.

"We ship regularly to all four corners of the country," Dufour says.

Long popular in Europe, the two-wheel tractor is only known by a niche group in the U.S. The machines offer a full range of soil-working, mowing, snow removal, transport and other items at a cost lower than four-wheel tractors.

"In the U.S. there's nothing to fill the void for micro farmers who have little enough land that it's simply not cost effective to invest in four-wheel equipment," Dufour says.

Because Dufour has been selling and servicing walk-behind tractors since 1977, he has developed nationally-recognized expertise. Sales began to spike when the business launched its website in 2003. Though customers can't order online, they can research products in detail.

"The initial contact has to



Earth Tools owner Joel Dufour poses with a model of a walk-behind tractor, his flagship product built for owners of smaller farms.

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be a phone call," Dufour says. "As inefficient as it is, I want you to connect with a warm human voice."

Because most customers know little about walk-behind tractors, he wants his staff to make sure the best possible tractor is ordered for each situation.

"I want my staff to talk to you about your needs, your terrain and what you want to do on your farm," he said. "I want people making educated decisions. It takes over an hour of phone time to get it right."

With garden tools, he says, it's different. Not much discussion needs to go into what kind of hoe you want.

Dufour says his passion for quality tools comes from his upbringing. One of seven homeschooled, farm-raised kids, he was only 10 when he started helping with the family business in Southern Indiana. His dad, Victor, formerly the head of the psychology department at Northeastern University, had moved them to the country where they grew their own organic food and sold the



rest to restaurants. In 1977, Victor Dufour

started a small equipment shop, and Joel Dufour

quickly learned the business. By the time he turned

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18, he was general service manager for all equipment lines, managing four mechanics, which included two of his brothers.

Though the shop sold several products, Joel Dufour says he always gravitated toward the walk-behind tractor line, and with his dad's blessing, he started Earth Tools & Goods in 1993. He sold two-wheel tractors and other European garden tools in a shop just 7 miles from the family farm. Shortly after, however, he met the woman who would convince him to move his life and business to Kentucky.

Chris Schimmoller, one of Frankfort's leading environmental activists, and Dufour married in 1997 and moved to her family's Franklin County land, where they built a home "off the grid," meaning no electricity and no running water. They still live in the same home with their two daughters, Natalie, 8, and Sophie, 5.

Dufour's Kentucky Earth Tools started out in a 16-foot by 24-foot shed made from recycled barn lumber — humble beginnings for a business that now has 12 employees and 14,000 square feet of facilities, including a main building powered by a solar roof.

He doesn't add on until he has the funds, Dufour says, adding that everything at Earth Tools is bought and paid for.

"I just never expected it to get this big," Dufour admits. "I imagined making a small living, growing a big garden, and living off the grid. This wasn't in my plans; it just happened."

Solar panels were installed on one of Earth Tools' building in 2011, part of an ongoing effort to be environmentally friendly.

Brad George, who likes to refer to himself as the "shipping troll," manages the process of getting tools to the customers.