

Sibley Shopper Farm & Home Spring Guide



A SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT TO

The Sibley Shopper

April 4, 2021

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Community solar gardens provide landowners with added source of income

by Kurt Menk
Editor

A Green Isle man is harnessing the power of the sun to help others save money on energy costs while earning additional income.

Nathan Dahlke works remotely for a Twin Cities-based retailer while also farming corn and soybeans and raising cattle alongside his father and brother on their family farm. He's able to provide for his family, but a community solar garden on his property is giving him added security. It's expected to generate \$300,000 of additional income over the next 25 years.

"Community solar gives me another way to provide for my family," Dahlke said. "The economy can be unpredictable; the income from the solar garden is something I know will be there."

Nokomis Energy developed the solar garden on 10 acres of Dahlke's 200-acre property. The



Submitted photo

company worked closely with Dahlke and the community to make sure it was the right fit.

"Anytime we go into a community and talk with a new landowner, a big part of our role is listening,"

said Corey Orehek, Community Engagement Director for Nokomis Energy. "In Green Isle, we were able to find a solution that benefits Nathan's family and the community."

Community solar gardens generate electricity that gets sold to Xcel Energy. Xcel customers located in the same or adjacent counties as the landowner can subscribe to a portion of the garden through energy bill credits. Green Isle Community School is one of the subscribers saving money. Nokomis Energy also performed a \$5,000 lighting upgrade for the school, which adds to their energy cost savings.

"We're all about finding solutions that work for communities," Orehek said. "We work one-on-one with everyone involved, and that relationship continues after the garden is finished."

Dahlke, a Green Isle native who returned to the area a couple of years ago, sees it as a win for rural Minnesota.

"Community solar opens up another avenue to support yourself, others and local communities," Dahlke said.



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Dairy princesses start new farm program, debunk myths

By Brianna Taggart
Staff Writer

Sibley County dairy princesses can be found working at the malt stand during the county fair and presenting information on the dairy industry to children in classrooms, sharing their knowledge on myths and realities of dairy farming during a typical year.

However, passion for this agricultural world started at home for dairy princesses Madison Krueger, Montana Krueger and Aly Dieball.

"We focus big on closing the gap on how milk goes from the farm to the store," Dieball said.

Dieball and sisters Madison and Montana Krueger represent Sibley County as the three dairy princesses along with five other dairy ambassadors. Their love for their family farms and passion for the industry led them to a newfound love of sharing what they do with the community.

Sharing the love

Dieball, 18, grew up on a dairy farm in Green Isle and started sharing



Submitted photo

Montana Krueger and Aly Dieball helped out an Arlington ambulance breakfast Aug. 30, 2020. Krueger and Dieball enjoy handing out dairy products to people and teaching them about the process that goes into making those products.

her stories with the community as a dairy ambassador for five years until she was crowned a dairy princess last March.

As a dairy princess, she gets to engage with the community about what dairy farms are and what they do. She's recently taken things a step further and created an "adopt-a-

farm" program for an autism school in the Twin Cities and daycares in Arlington and Gaylord for children who may not be aware of everyday life on a dairy farm.

"It's just so fun," Dieball said. "It makes it worth it at the end of the day hearing how excited they are."

She updates a Google Drive folder every month with video updates of calves on her family farm and activities for children to do. Projects have included printouts for Christmas tree ornaments, a make-you-own cattle ear tag and this month was valentines.

"It's really cool," Dieball said. "You'd think something so little would do nothing but the kids talk about it all the time."

Community learning

All three dairy princesses work with children in classrooms when they get the chance to teach them about dairy farms.

Continues on page 7

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Bruce Mathwig and Jason Winter

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Dairy princesses start new farm program, debunk myths (continued from page 5)

That's 20-year-old Madison Krueger's favorite part. She's currently a junior at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, but she grew up just outside of Arlington. She's been a dairy princess for three years and was an ambassador for about four years before that. Her goal is to become a large animal veterinarian.

They've been able to play a Jeopardy game with children in the past.

"I enjoy going to the school visits and seeing their eyes light up when they get a question right," Madison Krueger said.

Her 17-year-old sister, Montana, likes school visits too, because she gets to educate people about the dairy industry. That was the reason she became a dairy princess.

"When you teach somebody, they're really amazed at it all and I like sharing that," Montana Krueger said.

What they want people to know

Myths can litter the realities of dairy



Madison Krueger, age 20, is a dairy princess with her sister Montana. She's been a dairy princess for about three years and was a dairy ambassador for about four years before that. When she's engaging with the community, Krueger likes to take share personal stories about her childhood on a farm outside of Arlington.



Submitted photos

Aly Dieball, 18-year-old from Green Isle, is one of Sibley County's three dairy princesses this year. She likes sharing stories of everyday dairy farm life, so she she set up an "adopt-a-farm" program for an autism school in the Twin Cities and daycares in Arlington and Gaylord.

farms, so Madison Krueger likes to debunk them whenever she can.

"People think that we treat the cows badly when we milk them, but that's not the case at all," Madison Krueger said.

"We're better at taking care of them," Montana Krueger said. "We're not abusing the cows we milk."

A senior at Sibley East, Dieball had a similar sentiment and wants people to know they use good practices. She plans on majoring in dairy production and dairy manufacturing with a minor in food safety at South Dakota State University. Dieball then wants to come home to help her parents run the farm.

Montana Krueger plans to join her sister at University of Wisconsin-River Falls with a major in dairy science and plans to come home and partner with her parents like Dieball.

"For me, it's rewarding," Dieball said.

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Is your water softener hurting your city?

by The City of Arlington

To be in compliance with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) a city must limit the amount of chlorides discharged by the City. Chlorides are not something a city can treat at the Waste Water Treatment Plant (WWTP). Therefore, a city must reduce chlorides at their source. One of the main factors that influence the amount of chlorides in the wastewater coming to the WWTP is in-home water softeners.

What are Chlorides?

Chloride is one of two components of sodium, also known as table salt or rock salt. When salt dissolves in water, it separates into sodium (Na+) ions and chloride (Cl-) ions.

Where does Chloride come from?

Chloride is found in drinking water and is a vital part of cellular structure. Small amounts of chloride come from soaps, detergents, and other cleaning products. Some also come from industrial processes. A

significant amount of chloride, however, comes from self-regenerating water softeners.

How is water softened?

Home water softeners have two tanks: a mineral tank that contains resin (-) in the form of small beads, and a brine tank which holds the sodium salt chloride (salt) solution. As water flows through the mineral tank, the hard minerals, magnesium (Mg++) and calcium (Ca++) ions are replaced with sodium (Na+) ions. This process is called ion exchange. The water that flows out is considered "soft" because sodium ions do not build up on pipes as lime or interfere with detergents and soaps.

What is the Regeneration Cycle?

Eventually, the resin reaches its limit as to how much calcium and magnesium it can hold. At this point, the resin is flushed with a strong brine solution from the brine tank. Because of its high salt concentration, the brine washes off the calcium and magnesium and replaces them with sodium. The min-

erals and brine wash go down the drain and into the sewer system. New salt must be added regularly to the brine tank to replace the salt that is used to regenerate the resin. The regeneration cycle can be initiated by a timer or by demand. A timer regulated softener regenerates the resin after a fixed amount of time regardless of how much water is used. A demand initiated regeneration (DIR) softener either tracks the amount of water used or utilizes a hardness sensor to indicate the resin is near capacity and needs to be regenerated. A DIR softener is the more efficient softener in terms of salt and water usage.

What Can You Do?

1. Check to see how your softener is calibrated. Some softeners are preset for the highest hardness setting at the factory. Soften only water used inside the home. Do not treat the outside hose faucets.

2. Check the timer. When was it last adjusted? Many of us move into a house or purchase a water softener and never check it again.

Children move out or other factors come into play that affects the amount of water we use. If your softener is regulated by a timer, you may be able to increase the interval between regeneration cycles without affecting the water quality. Increase the time by one day and see if there is any effect on dish washing and laundry during the next month. Doing this will reduce water and salt usage, and in turn reduce money spent on both.

3. If your softener can be set to demand initiated regeneration (DIR) please make this adjustment as it is the most efficient.

4. If you are replacing your old softener, replace it with a softener that regenerates based on a meter or a sensor. The benefits to you are a substantial cost savings from your salt and water usage reduction, with the added benefit that you are helping to protect our environment and helping your City meet the wastewater permit limits.

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Spring is here! Let's start seeds!

by **Natalie Hoidal**
Extension Educator,
University of Minnesota

Spring weather is finally here, and it's time to start planting seeds. Starting seeds at home doesn't need to be expensive, fancy or difficult.

Serious gardeners who want to start large quantities of seeds will benefit from certain investments like artificial lights and heating pads. But for gardeners who are growing a small number of plants or just starting out, materials you already have on hand may suffice.

When do I start my seeds?

We have a great guide to starting seeds, with a table showing you when to seed different vegetables.

In general, now is a great time to start seeding your cool-season crops like lettuce and Brassicas, and it's best to wait until early April to start seeding warm-season crops like tomatoes and peppers.

What is the best type of soil to use?

A pre-mixed potting soil specifically de-



signed for seedlings is usually the best option for starting seeds. Seeds need to grow in soil that drains well to prevent damping off. These mixes have an optimal blend of sand, silt, clay and other materials such as peat, coconut coir and vermiculite.

Pre-made mixes also have enough fertilizer to support seedlings until you're ready to transplant them into the garden. However, these mixes do not have enough fertilizer to support plants to maturity. So if you're planting into a container, make sure to use a separate soil mix that is specially formulated for containers.

What supplies do I really need?

Person planting seedlings in a plastic tray with individual cells filled with dirt.

Plastic trays are efficient and low cost for starting seedlings

When I look at photos and videos of seed starting setups and start to figure out the price of setting up a similar system, it can get overwhelming pretty fast. The good news is that most of us don't need state-of-the-art systems for starting seeds. There are five basic requirements for starting seeds successfully indoors, and they can be

achieved with varying degrees of investment and sophistication. These requirements are light, warmth, containers, water and humidity.

A source of light

All plants require light to grow. In the short term, a very sunny window is sufficient to start your seedlings. This can work well if you plan to transplant your seedlings within 3 to 4 weeks of germination. For most home gardeners, starting seeds in a window works well, and supplemental lighting is not required.

If you plan to start your seedlings more than a month or so ahead of time, or you lack a sunny, south-facing window, grow lights may be necessary.

If your plants do not have enough light, they can get "leggy." This happens when they stretch to reach towards a light source and can result in thin stems that are not strong enough to support the plant.

Check out our lighting for indoor plants and seed starting page to learn more about the pros and cons of different types of supplemental lights.

Continues on page 11



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Spring is here! Let's start seeds! (continued from page 9)

A source of warmth

Most seedlings germinate best in warm soil. For cool-season crops like lettuce, broccoli, kale and pak choi, soil around 50 degrees F is optimal. For warm-season crops like peppers and tomatoes, soil around 65 degrees F is ideal.

When the soil is cool, your newly sprouted seeds are more likely to experience damping off. Keeping your soil warm allows for quick growth and healthier plants.

If you have a south-facing window and an area near it that gets quite warm during the day, this is likely sufficient for your garden seeds.

For gardeners who lack a warm window, or for serious gardeners who want to grow quite a few transplants, investing in a heating mat may be a good idea.

Heating mats are electrically powered and sit underneath your germination trays to heat your soil from the bottom. They can be a bit expensive upfront (\$25 for a 10"x20" mat, up to \$150 for a 20"x60" mat), but they last for many years.

Pots

Rows of tomato seedlings in small plastic pots at a farmers market. Individual plastic pots can be used again provided they are cleaned between uses. Next, you'll need some-

thing to hold your potting soil. The options for pots are nearly endless. Some of the most common options include:

- **Plastic trays:** An efficient way to start seedlings is to buy plastic trays with numerous cells already molded into the tray. These trays come with various cell sizes, ranging from 128 cells per tray (very small cells for herbs, things you plan to transplant quickly, or things that will eventually be transplanted to larger pots) all the way to 50 cells per tray. Trays range in quality; some are disposable and use cheap, thin plastic, and others are re-usable with sturdier plastic. They tend to be space-efficient, allowing you to grow many plants at once without having to deal with so many pots.

- **Plastic pots:** Another plastic option is to purchase individual pots (2x2 or 4x4 pots). These can be practical if you only plan to grow a few things, or if you plan to share plants with neighbors. They can be re-used from year to year. Seedlings planted in coconut coir square pots in a tray. Seedlings in coconut coir pots

- **Peat or coconut pots:** Peat and coconut coir pots have gained popularity in recent years as an alternative to plastic. These pots are biodegradable and can be placed directly into the soil when you are ready to transplant. They work well for vegetables like cucurbits (cucumbers and melons), which are quite sensitive to root distur-

bances. Traditional biodegradable pots were made of peat, but due to sustainability concerns, there has been a shift towards using coconut coir, a byproduct of the coconut industry.

- **Newspaper or toilet paper roll pots:** If you're in the DIY spirit, you can make your own pots out of newspaper or toilet paper rolls. These pots may be more likely to disintegrate over time as you water your seedlings but can work well for seeds you plan to transplant relatively soon after seeding. Seedlings planted in tubes made of rolled up newspaper. You can make your own pots out of newspaper or toilet paper rolls

- **Soil blocks:** Finally, soil blocking is a method that allows you to forgo pots altogether. A blocking tool allows you to mold moist soil into blocks; as your plants grow, the roots fill out into the block and hold it together. The up-front cost of a blocking device can be a little bit high (~\$35), but you will not need to buy pots again once you have the tool.

Any time you reuse a pot from year to year, make sure to clean and sanitize it first to prevent the spread of pathogens.

Water

One of the most common mistakes that new gardeners make is overwatering. No matter what method you use to water your seedlings (from above with a watering can, bottom watering

into a tray), make sure you're feeling your soil before you water.

It is important to maintain consistent moisture, so don't wait until the soil is bone dry, but if it's moist, wait until it's just barely damp before watering again.

Signs that you're overwatering might include crusty algal growth on the top of your soil, yellow leaves, or rotting seedlings.

A way to maintain humidity while seeds sprout

While plants need plenty of airflow after they've fully germinated, there's a short period of time when they require ample humidity to sprout.

You can achieve a mini-greenhouse effect by placing a plastic lid on your germination trays (you can often buy pre-made germination kits that include a lid). You can also take the DIY approach and use plastic wrap, a bowl, or another item to create a dome over your seeds.

For growers at a larger scale, there is a range of options for germination chambers from old refrigerators to covers that you can put around shelving units to hold in humidity.

Once your seedlings have successfully germinated, you can move them out of this super humid environment.

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