



Steve Larocque indicates preferred stubble height for optimum visibility when inter-row seeding.

HE LIVES THE DREAM

You've heard the expression, "like a kid in a candy shop." Well, that's Steve Larocque in a wheat field, or canola field, or barley field ... any field really. "I love farming," he says, the enthusiasm crystal-clear in his voice. "It's what I was meant to do."

Downplay the negatives and relish the positives, says this first-generation grain grower who figures farming's a great gig

How Larocque morphed from southern Ontario acreage kid into full-time prairie agronomist and grain farmer is a combination of pure fate, clear focus, hard work and an unflinching positive attitude.

Larocque is a rarity on a number of fronts: he's a first-generation farmer, embraces big ideas and huge change, and while not necessarily welcoming adversity, doesn't shy away from it either. He prefers to see it as an opportunity to learn, improve and grow.

This attitude has carried him far already, and will continue to be his strongest asset as he lives out his dream of being a successful farmer.

GO WEST, YOUNG MAN

Larocque grew up on an acreage just south of Ottawa. "I moved out here in 1996 with a friend from Westlock (AB) — I'd worked with him in Ontario doing landscaping," he says. "Then in the spring of 1997, I got a job at the Alberta Wheat Pool."

Working at the Pool opened Larocque's eyes and imagination to western Canadian agriculture — something he'd known nothing about, but which grabbed him by the neck and hasn't let go.

"I was reading everything I could find, talking to colleagues and farmers and learning everything I could," he says. He was lucky enough to have a boss who recognized genuine passion and aptitude and who encouraged Larocque to take it further with a formal education.

He graduated from the Crop Advisory program at Olds College in 2001, then earned a B.Sc. in agriculture from the University of Lethbridge in 2003 and went on to become a certified crop advisor that same year. While attending Olds College, Larocque met his wife Vanessa, who is from a farm family near Morrin, AB.

He began consulting, eventually starting his own business, Beyond Agronomy. Then, four years ago, the opportunity to rent some land from his in-laws presented itself and, at last, Larocque began farming.





Tramlines concentrate compaction, leaving soil structure undamaged across the rest of the field.

THE BIG EXPERIMENT

“I’ve given production advice for years and if I inspired my clients, they certainly inspired me,” says Larocque, recalling the decision to farm. “I love farming and I really wanted to do it myself: to test out some theories and sharpen my skills as a consultant.”

The farm Larocque operates with his brother- and father-in-law may be small by western standards at 640 acres, but what’s happening on those acres is pretty big in terms of testing old ideas and trying new ones.

Right now, he’s revved up about controlled traffic farming (CTF), a system whereby permanent traffic lanes, or tramlines, are established for all farm machinery so that where the crop grows is forever separate from where wheels roll. RTK GPS is critical to establishing and sticking to the tramlines, while inter-row seeding and precision crop protection are key elements of the practice.

“I saw this in New Zealand, Australia and the UK,” says Larocque. “So I know it works in all climates from very dry to very wet.”

He explains that the idea behind CTF is to reduce compaction and open the soil to aeration for better crop performance. “When you think about all the times you take equipment over a field, from pre-seed burn, to seeding, then in-crop spraying and harvest, about 40 to 60 per cent of the crop sees a wheel track. That delays maturity and reduces yield.”

He saw the true power of the practice in Australia where he visited a farmer who’d been using CTF for eight years. The tramlines were so well established and firm, says Larocque, that driving equipment on the fields, “was like riding a bicycle on a paved road versus a gravel road.”

But the clincher was the crop. At the time of his visit, that part of Australia was in its third consecutive year of drought. “When all the other farmers had nothing, his sheds were full with 25-bushel canola, 65-bushel barley and 45-bushel wheat,” says Larocque. “The only difference between him and his neighbours was the controlled traffic and zero till.”

On his own farm, he put the theory into practice during the 2010 season. It’s a new way of thinking about machinery use, he says, and all field equipment must have a similar wheel gauge. “It’s not that difficult a concept to put into place

STEVE AND VANESSA LAROCQUE & THEIR CHILDREN, WYATT & AVA, AT HOME IN THREE HILLS, AB

if you buy new,” he adds, but modifying existing equipment is also practical. With only one year of CTF under his belt, he’s already seeing noticeable benefits to the crop, but also to his fuel bill, his overall efficiency, equipment wear and tear, and so on.

“The efficiency side — that’s what really makes me tick,” says Larocque. “We’ve eliminated overlap completely. There’s less draft load on the drills, no rolling resistance, which means fuel savings. Even the weeds that grew in the tramlines were smaller, so they weren’t a problem at harvest.” There were other benefits too. CTF helped Larocque’s crops mature better and earlier because they weren’t constantly recovering from being run over by equipment. As a result, even in a wet year like 2010, Larocque was able to leave his wheat and barley to straight cut, while many people in the area had to swath to help deal with late green tillers.

He can hardly wait for the 2011 season. “It’s a full-on experimental farm with the controlled traffic system,” says Larocque. “As a consultant, I can recommend x, y or z, but it’s another thing to understand the logistics of something like this by doing it.”

A LITTLE ATTITUDE GOES A LONG WAY

Looking at plans for future expansion, Larocque is torn between his two loves — farming and consulting. “Deep down, I’d like to grow to 2,000 or 3,000 acres, but we haven’t sat down and planned a direction for our business yet. We’re still building our foundation, so to speak, and need to determine what each of us wants to



achieve by growing the business.”

And he enjoys sharing his knowledge, spending eight to 10 hours a week studying some aspect of agricultural production and writing his weekly newsletter, which Vanessa edits for him. “She keeps me rolling, fed, fueled and inspired,” he says.

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They have two young children who may or may not follow in their parents’ farming footsteps, and that’s fine with him. “I want them to do whatever they’re passionate about,” says Larocque. “I want them to (be excited by) what they do.”

“I fell into agriculture and it shocked me how awesome it was,” he says. “I love the simplicity of putting a seed in the ground, nurturing it, doing everything you can to help it grow and all the decisions that go into that process.”

He’s a nut for measuring efficiencies down to the penny, and sees this as the key to profitable farming. “Understanding the numbers is so important,” says Larocque. “We need to put a value on everything we do, every little activity.”

Farming, he says, isn’t about how

much rain you get, it’s about how much grain you can produce with the rain you get. In other words, how can you best use fuel, inputs, time, techniques and knowledge to get the most out of sun, rain, soil and seed? That’s a question he’ll never tire of answering.

Blind optimism? Not a bit. “I can em-

pathize with guys who are negative about agriculture,” he says. “But it’s a choice. You can choose to live there, or you can choose to be positive.”

“The negatives are the negatives, they happen in a lot of businesses, but you can choose to use them as opportunities to learn and grow — become a better manager. You just have to get your head down, deal with it and move on.” FF



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