

What's holding you back from retiring?

The closer you look at retirement, the better it actually appears

By Helen Lammers-Helps

Does this sound familiar? “If I quit farming, I’ll die.” For some farmers, a whisper about retirement is all it takes to send them into panic mode, with the result that meaningful conversation stops right then and there.

But what some farmers (and yes, we’re talking mostly about MEN here) don’t understand is how much damage such an attitude can do. Their reluctance to retire may also be hurting their loved ones, and it may be hurting their farm businesses too.

If you promised your spouse that you’d slow down, but you haven’t followed through, then you’re letting your spouse down, says Jim Soldan, a farm business coach with The Family Furrow in Chilliwack, B.C. “You’ve broken the trust,” Soldan says. “This could ruin your ‘happy years.’”

It’s a real problem, agrees Gordon Colledge, a family coach in Lethbridge, Alta, who has seen broken promises lead to divorce.

Staying too involved in the farm business may also be hurting the succeeding generation, says Soldan. The senior generation has valuable wisdom to share with the younger generation, but if the founder stays too involved for too long, it can stifle growth.

The younger generation needs the opportunity to think and learn for themselves, agrees Colledge.

Besides, says Soldan, “If the founder dies suddenly, what leadership legacy is left if you haven’t allowed the farm to be test run by the next generation? It’s best to have the leadership role developed while the senior generation is there to mentor it.”

Sometimes Dad is reluctant to retire because he doesn’t trust the next generation to handle things, says Colledge. In this case, having both generations agree to rules around spending or other management decisions can help the senior generation feel comfortable enough to take a step back from the day-to-day management.

Having a retirement plan will also make the transition go more smoothly, says Donna McCaw, a retirement specialist in Elora, Ont. The plan should include farm and family finances, a time frame, and a path toward succession.

It should also consider activities and socializing,

McCaw says. Everyone needs goals and aspirations, even if you’re going to retire, and everyone needs a structure to their day, a purpose and a community.

Before creating the plan, a couple should spend a couple of months on what is often called a visioning exercise. If that sounds too New Age, all it really means is giving everyone time to think about what they want this next stage of their lives to look like.

Too many people don’t spend enough time on this stage, says Colledge. They jump too quickly into how they will make it happen. “It’s important to dream, to let ideas flow to the top,” Colledge explains. “Later you can figure out what it will cost and make a plan.”

It’s easier to leave the farm if you have something to go to, adds Elaine Froese, a farm family coach in Boissevain, Man. Farmers have often spent their whole lives putting everything into the farm, so when the time comes to retire they don’t have any outside interests. It’s wise to cultivate other hobbies and interests when you’re younger, before you retire, Froese says.

McCaw runs a retirement seminar for women and says 25 per cent of participants tell her their husbands are reluctant to retire. “The men are often afraid of losing their identities,” she says.

Yet this is an opportunity for them to re-invent themselves, to do something else. What have you always wanted to do but never had time? What would you enjoy doing that you haven’t tried yet?

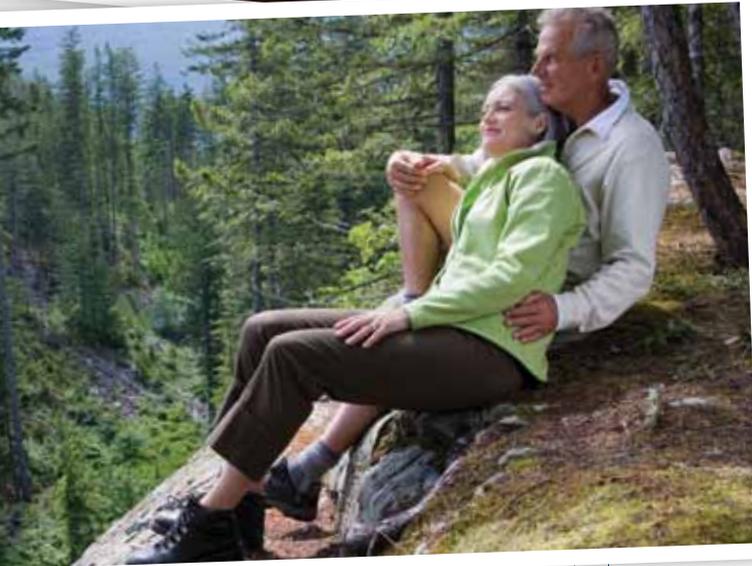
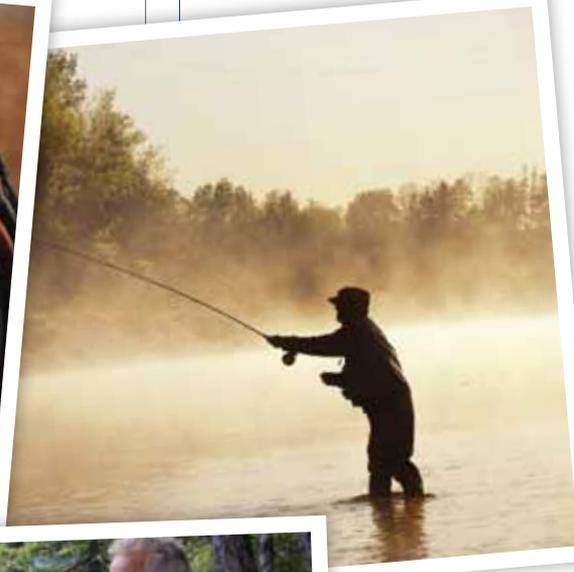
If you’re having a hard time pulling away from the farm, try taking small steps, suggests McCaw. “Start with a three-week vacation.”

Retirement can give you the chance to spend more time with grandkids and your non-farm kids, says McCaw. What about renting a house in Florida and inviting the family to come and visit?

For women whose husbands are dragging their feet when it comes to retiring, she advises them not to nag. Try framing it as an invitation instead, she says. “Say, ‘why don’t we try this?’”

McCaw, who grew up on a farm, says her dad was very reluctant to retire. However, after retiring at age 69 when he could no longer handle the farm, he made the adjustment very well. He had eight years of





Oh, the things you could do

Not sure what to do with the extra time once you retire? Here are some ideas to get you started.

Go to the library and peruse the books to see what catches your fancy.

Find out what recreation activities, classes or clubs are available in your local community.

The Internet contains a wealth of information anywhere in the world where you have Wi-Fi access.

Try Googling topics of interest and see where that leads you. Here are some other possibilities: At courseera.org you can get access to 540 free online university courses. Documentaries can be found at the National Film Board website www.nfb.ca and public domain books can be downloaded free of charge at www.booksshouldbefree.com. At meetup.com you can find local groups doing things you are interested in.

Learn a new hobby. Many businesses such as Home Depot, Lee Valley and Michaels offer free or low-cost workshops.

There are many volunteer opportunities. You could build a house for a needy family through Habitat for Humanity, work at a homeless shelter, get involved in an agricultural association, help with 4-H, drive cancer patients to the treatment centre, work on civic beautification of your local community, or share your farming skills with farmers in developing nations through the Mennonite Central Committee or the Canadian Executive Service Organization.

There are also endless wonderful organizations that could benefit from your time.

Always wanted to play a musical instrument? Now is your chance to learn. Or maybe you'd like to sing in a community choir. It's a great way to make friends and keep your mind fresh.

Have you wondered about your family roots? Now is a good time to research family history. There are many online genealogical sites such as ancestry.ca and ancestry.com. Many documents such as ship manifests have been digitized and are available online.

What about writing your own memoir so future generations will know what you went through in the early days?

Or what about mentoring a young farmer? You could take on an advisory role for a young farmer just starting out. One service that connects mentors with those looking for a mentor is Farm Management Canada's Step Up Program available at www.fmc-gac.com/step-up.

Are you planning a trip abroad? Why don't you learn some of the language before you go?

What about repurposing flea market finds into useful objects? Check out [pinterest at http://www.pinterest.com/savvy/upcycle-and-repurpose-ideas/](http://www.pinterest.com/savvy/upcycle-and-repurpose-ideas/) for ideas.

Have you always wanted to upgrade your computer skills but didn't have the time? Many community colleges or libraries offer courses for all skill levels.

Other hobbies could include woodworking, refinishing furniture, restoring classic cars or antique tractors, photography, birdwatching, hiking, fishing, sailing, boating, kayaking, building model train sets, or joining a walking or running group.

With so many things to do, who can afford to put retirement off even one more day?

fun, she says. He and her mother travelled to Alaska and Europe and took several bus trips. He got involved with helping at minor baseball and hockey, played more cards, and did more entertaining.

McCaw says her mom started campaigning four years before her dad retired because she was worried about his health. She'd point out that they would be free to travel with friends if they didn't have the farm, she says.

If things have stalled, enlisting the help of a facilitator can help get things unstuck. "Outside guidance can see what the family cannot see or may not want to see," says Soldan. "It is very easy to go off the rails with the emotions that surface."

Change is hard, says McCaw. And it takes a lot of work, she adds. But if you put the effort into it, you can enjoy a second life after farming. With some thought, planning and effort, these could be your best years. **CG**