

## Vet pursues love of farm



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DEWITT — After returning from war, Jason Kerr decided to concentrate on his passion — agriculture.

“This is where my passion lies,” he says of farming.

Kerr enlisted after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. After seeing action in Iraq, he felt the need to follow his dream.

“I am going to grow something,” he says.

Kerr, who works full-time as a veterans representative for Iowa Workforce Development, decided to start an ag operation.

His family raised onions near the Quad Cities when he was growing up. They did truck farming in addition to their full-time jobs.

Kerr wanted to use some of the land on his Clinton County acreage. He planted one acre to blueberries after properly amending the soil.

He decided to plant blueberries due to supply and demand. Blueberries are in very high demand due to health benefits that include antioxidants.

In addition, Kerr says growing blueberries in Iowa is limited since the fruit likes acidic soils. He has irrigation hooked up from the pond on his property and plans to be as natural as possible.

He now has 800 healthy blueberry plants on his acreage. The fruit maturity ranges from

mid-June to about Labor Day.

Kerr plans to turn the blueberry operation into a pick-your-own business open on the weekends. He expects to be open to the public in 2014.

Blueberries might be the first crop planted, but it won't be the first crop Kerr will harvest.

This year, Kerr planted his first row-crop field, 17 acres of soybeans. The field was hay ground, and he took a cutting off of it before planting beans.

Kerr says he heard from a friend the field might be for rent. He presented his case to the landowner, explaining this was his chance to start farming.

Kerr eventually got to rent the land.

Gazing at his field, he says he wanted to produce something that has meaning for him.

Looking into the future, Kerr wants to become a full-time row crop farmer. He has worked with the Iowa State University Beginning Farm Center, Practical Farmers of Iowa and the Farmer Veteran Coalition to start his operation.

He says many veterans who want to farm will seek out the resources to help them get started.

While there are many resources, from organizations to state and federal incentives to help veterans farm, Kerr says access to land is the biggest challenge.

He says one of the challenges is to educate landowners to the opportunities of working with a veteran.

"I am not afraid of a challenge," he says.

"What is the worst that could go wrong? Someone shoots at me?"

"I have had that happen. Not any of my neighbors have shot at me."

Kerr says many beginning farmers are interested in smaller fields that established farmers may not want.

Overall, he has the same desire to farm that many farmers share, including the smell of dirt in the spring.

"I am most happy when I am out farming," Kerr says. "Farming chose me to be happy."