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## Garst Farms Resorts

*Liz Garst  
Coon Rapids, Iowa*

### **Motivation**

The Garst name is synonymous with innovation in agriculture and conservation. Roswell Garst was one of the world leaders in the development of hybrid seed corn. His prominence and the significant impact hybrid seed corn had on increasing U.S. agriculture productivity tweaked the interest of Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev, who made a personal visit to the Garst family home and business on his US tour in 1959. Roswell Garst was also a pioneer in land preservation practices.

“The conversation about preserving both the historical Garst family home and the farm started after my grandmother died,” said Liz Garst, Roswell’s granddaughter. Creation of Garst Farm Resorts helped the family meet the goal of preserving and protecting the resort's beautiful land and the heritage of the Garst Family. Two other goals became important as well:

- Providing an opportunity to promote the economic well-being of rural people living in Coon Rapids and the surrounding area.
- Providing guests a comfortable, entertaining and authentic rural experience.

### **Sell What-We-Have Approach**

Originally, Garst developed a business plan for a bed and breakfast in her grandparents’ old farmhouse. However, the Harvard MBA graduate indicated, “We just could not make the business cash flow. We needed larger volume to make the business work. Instead of only a bed and breakfast, we began to focus on other attributes and ways to market the land and facilities. We began to take inventory of the assets we had within the farm and in the community, so we could offer guests a menu of options through a farm resort.” Garst utilizes the skills, talents and attractions of several of her neighbors to round out the offerings at the guest resort. “People don’t like to just come and sit. Most people want something to do and we try to offer things that appeal to a variety of interests and tastes,” said Garst.

Garst Farm Resorts guests can go on horseback or hay wagon rides; take a walk through the woodlands; and ride a bicycle or Gator (John Deere utility vehicle akin to an easy-to-operate golf cart) around the farm. Garst also provides horseshoes, croquet and volleyball. Resort guests can listen to talks about the area or make flower bouquets. Fishing enthusiasts have access to fifteen ponds stocked with bass and bluegill, along with good catfish on the Middle Raccoon River.

Garst contracts with local experts to offer a variety of opportunities for guests. Some of these include:

- Commercial Iowa farming tour: Local farmers give personal tours of their farms. Guests are able to see modern crop techniques, soil conservation efforts, cow-calf operations and the Garst buffalo herd.
- Alternative agriculture workshop: Offered by a neighboring farmer who has alternative horticulture production such as antique apple and cherry varieties, plus bee keeping.
- Prairie workshop: One neighbor has a native Iowa prairie and provides guests with extensive information about prairie restoration. Another local farmer provides botany tours of the flora in west central Iowa.
- Raptor workshop: A neighbor teaches participants about birds of prey in the area. During the fall and winter hunting seasons, there are demonstrations of falconry.
- Guided wildlife tours: Master woodsmen offer guests a glimpse of native Iowa animals.
- Star gazing: Several weekends a month, a dark sky astronomy tour is offered by a local well known astronomer. Because there is little back light and city lights, the skies in west central Iowa are very dark. Even without telescopes, the Milky Way and the constellations are brilliant. In the astronomy tour, guests use a very high quality 10 inch telescope to see the planets, galaxies, nebula and whatever is notable in the sky at the time. Nearly 40 people enjoyed this year's Annual Star Party and Garst hopes to greatly expand this annual event.



### **Ecotourism Supports Community**

The resort is modeled on international eco-tourist principals. These principals explained in the resort's Web site, [www.farmresorts.com](http://www.farmresorts.com), ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are distributed broadly into the surrounding community and used to preserve and protect the community's natural resources.



Garst states, "The surrounding community is an important part of our resort. Fascinating activities are offered by multi-talented neighbors. Guests are encouraged to dine, swim, bowl, golf and shop in Coon Rapids. Gift shop products have a connection to the local area. Locally grown food is used when ever possible. Contractors, employees and vendors are hired from this area."

### **From Farm to Farm Resort**

The Garst family farm developed and grew through the production of purebred cattle and hybrid seed corn. Today, the farm resort encompasses 4,500 acres in the Middle Raccoon River Valley in west central Iowa, known locally as Whiterock. The resort is one of Iowa's largest natural areas. Guests at the Garst Farm Resorts have a variety of options for accommodations. They can stay in the original family farmhouse, now a five-bedroom bed and breakfast and the site of the Krushchev visit. Other options include the Hollyhock Cottage, formerly a chicken coop; the Oakridge Farmhouse, recommended for small retreats and family reunions; the Woodland

Carriage House, formerly a large garage attic; a primitive camping cabin two miles from the nearest road; or several primitive campsites that allow horses.

In addition to solo, family and small groups of travelers, Garst Farm Resorts will accommodate larger groups. The resort will cater home-cooked meals to parties of eight or more. “The River House Party facility, a 1900-era barn, is available for large retreats, dances, receptions and meetings. Garst Farm resorts does not have ideal accommodations for very large overnight groups, but if a group is flexible and really wants an authentic farm experience it can work,” says Garst.

### **Unique Customers**

The farm resort attracts a variety of customers that generally do not fit into neat categories. However, Garst says her best customers fall into three unique groups:

- Family reunion and multi-generational guests: This market frequently includes grandparents who grew up on a farm and are looking for a location to bring the family together that is centrally located to Midwest cities. Garst says, “The parents love watching their children catch fire flies and the teenagers will generally cooperate with their parents and grandparents about going to resort once they see there is something for them to do.”
- Active young couples: These are mostly from the Omaha, Nebraska, area, which is about two hours away. Garst advertises in the yellow pages in the Omaha phone book, as well as the Web site, located at <http://www.farmresort.com>.
- Group tours, especially the bank seniors clubs: This is an active target market for the resort. Garst remarked that the travel agents do not like to book one day tours, so she obtains a free list of banks that offer the one day trips from the Iowa Department of Tourism and markets directly to them. She also attends the Bank Club Marketplace, which is held in central Iowa every year to market to this targeted group.

In addition to the target markets, Garst is actively involved in synergistic marketing with other local attractions and sites in the area. For instance, she often recommends a restaurant in an up-scale hotel about 25 miles away and they, in turn, refer day trips to her resort. She belongs to the Western Iowa Tourism Association, two Iowa Bed and Breakfast associations, and is listed with the State of Iowa tourism attractions.

### **Barriers of Success**

One barrier Garst is quite vocal about is the difficulty out-of-state-deer hunters have in obtaining a license to hunt in Iowa. Since the deer licenses for out-of-state hunters are meted out on a lottery basis, interested hunters can not be guaranteed they will get to hunt in the state and are not willing to book a hunting vacation in the state.

Garst indicates Iowa has both over production of deer and some of the best deer hunting in the world, because the local creatures are feeding on Iowa’s abundant corn crops. However, state law is preventing the agritourism-hunting industry from developing in Iowa. Outfitters are not interested in booking clients to the state until the issues regarding availability of licenses can be resolved.

A second barrier to success may be the difficulty in obtaining good insurance. Garst has been able to locate liability insurance for her resort, but indicated that it has been expensive and there are few choices and insurers on the market. She indicated her insurance would be less without the horseback riding. However, the horses are a unique aspect of her resort and even though the horse enterprise loses money, they are important overall to the uniqueness of the resort.

### **Lessons Learned**

“One of our greatest successes has been initiating the ‘It pays to be honest,’ approach to our business. If you treat people as though they are inherently honest, they will be,” said Garst. For instance, we let people go into our gift shop and when they check out they are asked if they had any gift shop purchases to pay for. In the 7 1/2 years since the resort has been opened, there has been less than \$200 in theft on the entire resort.”

One area the Garst Farm Resorts hopes to work on is to provide more self-guided tours and self-guided informational areas such as kiosks, touch screens, etc. Garst indicates the resort is still very labor intensive and Garst sees the opportunities to offset labor costs by utilizing these techniques. She also hopes to attract more “drop by” business as well.

In agritourism, Garst states that a critical mass is necessary to make the business work. There has to be enough for your guests to do both on the place and in the nearby community to make things work. It takes organization and local development to make things happen. Don’t overlook the assistance of the local tourism division or chamber of commerce. They are available to help people get organized to achieve a critical mass of tourism activity. “After the infrastructure is developed, marketing is everything,” advises Garst.

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