

He Grows Lettuce Year-Round

Ray Tyler grows lettuce year-round selling to customers from Memphis to Nashville, and south to Mississippi. About half of his market gardening is devoted to leafy greens in an area where greens are usually only a spring crop for most growers.

"We grow lettuce in the winter with high tunnels and in the summer with a heat index of 125 degrees and 99 percent humidity," says Tyler. "Summer-grown lettuce won't be as high in quality as winter grown but our customers are happy with it. It keeps our farm employees happy and well paid, full-time and year-round."

Tyler is quick to admit his success didn't come easy. It included downsizing his farming operation from livestock and vegetables to concentrate on salad production. He and his wife Ashley went from earning \$35,000 on an acre and a half of vegetables in 2015 to over \$100,000 on a half acre in 2016.

"We spent tens of thousands of dollars on failed methods and tools to get the crop to grow, before we figured it out," says Tyler.

Some factors, such as fertility, are important regardless of the season. Winter success was largely a matter of protecting the roots. Tyler insists that lettuce will survive as long as the roots don't freeze.

Summer success has a lot of factors, some of them surprising, such as limiting use of shade cloth. Tyler learned that lettuce goes leggy under shade cloth. "We only use shade cloth over new transplants to help the roots acclimate," says Tyler.

Giving lettuce the proper moisture was

an expensive lesson, admits Tyler. Relying on memory to water when the heat index was over 120 degrees was an epic failure.

"It took us 3 years to realize we had to invest in the proper infrastructure," he says. "Once we did, it was a complete game changer. Now we have our entire watering system on an automatic timer."

Tyler also learned to take care of the seedlings. "To harvest and sell year round, I have to have healthy plant stands every week," he says. "If you want 100 transplants, but only 25 emerge, you'll miss your sales target in 8 weeks."

Tyler learned the hard way that lettuce doesn't like to germinate at high temperatures. It needs a consistent temperature and humidity.

"We tried walk-in coolers and refrigerators, but if conditions fluctuate, germination is poor," says Tyler. "We failed miserably at germination for about 5 years."

The answer was to build a germination chamber with a thermostat that keeps the seed and seedlings at a perfect 71 degrees, no matter how hot or cold it is outside.

"We maintain nearly 100 percent germination week after week," says Tyler.

He patterned his germination chamber after one developed by Michael Kilpatrick, from In The Field Consultants (ITFC).

"You can pay thousands for one or take an inexpensive course from Michael," says Tyler.

Another key to success was growing the right varieties. "A basic summer crisp that we like is Muir," says Tyler. "We trial dozens of



Tennessee market gardener Ray Tyler grows lettuce year-round in high tunnels, in an area where greens are usually only a spring crop for most growers.

new varieties every year, but we always go back to Muir."

Cracking the nut of year-round lettuce growing has helped with other crops as well. "We are following similar protocols with carrots, baby kale, mustard and more, though they are not high return crops like lettuce," says Tyler.

Tyler shares his 10 years of experience through his online Masterclass. The course grew out of Tyler's need to share his methods and thinking with employees.

"I needed a system that any employee could follow," says Tyler. "I realized that others could use the information too. I do a lot of consulting, and sometimes people need a roadmap. The Masterclass is it."

Tyler worked with Kilpatrick to develop the class and market it through ITFC. For

\$500 students receive 8 audio/video/transcript modules released over 4 weeks on growing lettuce year-round in all climates. In addition to Tyler's mid-South experience, Kilpatrick provides a northern lettuce plan.

"We also do weekly Q&A's and offer access to additional modules as they are developed," says Tyler. "We have a Facebook group that meets almost every week as well. If we don't have the answer to a question, we bring in an expert who does. It's a one-time fee for ongoing learning."

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Endangered Choctaw Purebred Found In Mississippi

DeSoto, an old Choctaw stallion discovered on a Poplarville, Miss. farm in 2005, provided a big boost to preservation hopes for a rare breed that Oklahomans have been nurturing for decades. The Choctaw breed is one strain of Colonial Spanish horses owned by Choctaw Native Americans (and other tribes) in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. Most of the purebred Choctaw horses were lost when tribes were relocated to Western reservations.

But some pure Choctaws remained on Blackjack Mountain near Antlers, Okla., where they were turned free to roam on timber company land by owners who could no longer care for them.

"They're survivors, just like the Choctaw people. They fend for themselves in the wilderness. They're smaller than other horses, and built more narrow with a V-chest, but a deep chest between the chest floor and withers provides more internal capacity for the lungs and heart. They don't have a lot of body mass or muscle, so they are good runners," says Bryant Rickman, who cares for the horses.

Rickman, a retired agriculture teacher, became interested in preserving the breed as an important part of Oklahoma history. In 1980, with the help of Dr. Phillip Sponenberg of the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine at Virginia Tech., and DNA testing, nine mares and three stallions proved to be 100 percent Choctaw horses. Currently there are about 250 known Colonial Spanish horses with a percentage being Choctaw horses. Those are mostly under Rickman's care and a handful of other people dedicated to

preserving the breed.

The discovery of the Choctaw horse in Mississippi was important because it adds to the genetic pool, Rickman says. He sent 11 mares to Mississippi to be bred and three of the colts were shipped back to Oklahoma.

Caring for the Choctaw horses and other Spanish mustangs became more difficult when the Rickmans lost their lease with the timber companies in 2007. In keeping his promise to Jones, Rickman, with friends and volunteers rounded them up and moved them to other locations. Making the rounds to feed 200 to 300 horses requires 42- and 90-mile round trips every other day.

Volunteers have also sponsored fundraising events. In races in other states, such as Michigan's Shore-to-Shore Endurance Ride, Choctaw horses are very competitive with other breeds, Rickman says. They can easily handle five 50-mile days.

The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy is working with Rickman to find experienced breeders committed to preserving the Choctaw breed. In addition, some stallions and yearlings are available for sale. With a mild temperament, the horses make great riding horses.

Though caring for the horses has become more challenging, Rickman notes that Gilbert Jones would be pleased about the growing recognition of the horse breed he cherished.

In 2014, the Oklahoma Colonial Spanish horse became recognized as the official Heritage Horse of Oklahoma.

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The Choctaw is a rare breed that Oklahoman Bryant Rickman is trying to preserve.

"Waygu Holstein" Makes Great Beef

Blake Hansen is producing tender, tasty beef by crossing the family dairy herd's less productive cows with Wagyu semen. The co-owner and herd manager of Hansen's Dairy was hooked on Wagyu beef after trying some at a friend's home. Wagyu beef is often marketed as Kobe and is known as a premium product.

"I tasted some Wagyu/Jersey beef and that gave me the idea of crossing some of our Holsteins with Wagyu," says Hansen.

Four years later, Hansen has begun selling the crossbred beef at a premium. Prices range from ground beef at around \$8 per pound to fillets at \$100 per pound.

In addition to their dairy herd, Blake's parents and 3 brothers operate a creamery on the farm and offer farm tours for a fee. They market their milk and other dairy products at 3 family-owned Hansen's Dairy stores. Their dairy products are also carried in more than 40 other retail stores.

Hansen credits their retail experience as key to the new meat enterprise. "It is easy to crossbreed and raise the cattle, but marketing the premium beef is the hard part," he says. "With our dairy products, we've built a strong consumer base and

distribution system. However, the meat is very high quality and priced accordingly. There is a limited market for beef this expensive."

While the market may be limited initially, Hansen expects demand to grow as people become more aware of the quality. He now has about 45 crossbred animals on feed.

"We have had a huge amount of interest," says Hansen.

Hansen personally prefers the beef from a Wagyu cross, but he also plans to sell beef from purebred animals. He will continue breeding his less productive Holsteins to Wagyu, and he is developing a line of purebred Wagyu as well.

"We have 2 Wagyu steers and a heifer we raised from embryos implanted in our cows," says Hansen. "We have since collected 15 embryos from the heifer with plans to implant them as well. The full-blood steers will be ready for market by the end of 2019."

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