

They Don't Hate Mesquite - They Eat It!

While most folks who have to deal with thorny and invasive mesquite trees hate them, Victoria Cappadona and her family learned how to make money off them. They pick bean pods off the trees every summer and use them to make jelly, coffee, tea, and flour.

"To me it's the wonder tree," Cappadona says. "Native Americans thought of it as the tree of life; they used everything from its roots to its leaves. And bean pods are one of the most important parts."

Older Texans recall as kids, chewing on mesquite bean pods for candy, and the sweetness is also appreciated by cattle and wildlife. More recent research classifies the bean pod as a superfood, high in fiber, calcium and iron with natural sugars. The mesquite bean pod has a low glycemic index, which is helpful for people with diabetes.

The Cappadonas own 5 acres of Honey Mesquite trees, and they have access to their extended family's ranch with many more trees. When Cappadona and her husband and their three sons harvest the

beans, they chew on a bean from each tree to make sure they're sweet. They don't pick from trees with bitter pods.

The beans are taken to a commercial kitchen and dried in ovens to store in food-grade barrels in an air-conditioned storage area until they are needed for orders.

Cappadona spent four years perfecting her mesquite bean jelly recipe. She boils the whole bean pod to infuse the flavor in water, then adds sugar, pectin and lemon. For a hotter jelly she adds chili pequin, which grows wild in Texas. Just 2 lbs. of mesquite beans yields 100 8-oz. jars of jelly that sell for \$8/jar online.

Her second most popular item is mesquite bean coffee, which started as an accident when she was drying bean pods in the oven and the pods roasted too long. She knew Civil War soldiers made a coffee-like drink from the beans when coffee was scarce, so the Cappadonas ground the heavily roasted pods. It tastes very similar to coffee and appeals to people who can't have caffeine. They also make tea from the seed, which is high in protein.



Victoria Cappadona and her family pick bean pods off mesquite trees every summer to make jelly, coffee, tea, and flour.

To make flour, the whole pods are ground very fine.

"It makes wonderful bread and pancakes," Cappadona says, noting she has a great recipe for banana bread along with other recipes on her website. More recipes can be found in cook books that are published by Desert Harvesters (www.desertharvesters.org).

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Worm Casting Business Ideal For "Retired" Couple

Annette Webb recognized the value of worm castings the first time she used them on her tomato plants and eliminated bottom rot and other diseases.

"The castings are so easy to use, and my plants were amazing. That's why I became a fan," explains the Goshen, Ind., gardener.

When her supplier had to quit because of back problems, Webb, a retired dental hygienist, and her husband, Bob, agreed to buy the business in 2015. They moved the African nightcrawlers into an insulated 16 by 20-ft. "worm room" in a pole barn on their property.

To consistently produce quality castings requires the Webbs to pay attention to details. They maintain a year-round temperature around 75F degrees, use fans to circulate the air, and keep the room well-lit.

"They are nightcrawlers, so the light keeps them in the buckets or they would crawl out and explore more," Webb explains.

The couple have more than 100 3-gal. buckets with holes drilled along the top to let light in. Each bucket holds about 250 nightcrawlers. Bob mixes 10 lbs. of peat moss with a blend of ground grains and water in each bucket for the worms to eat.

"Two weeks later it turns into 7 lbs. of castings," Webb says.

The buckets are dumped over vibrating screens of different sizes. Castings fall

through the tiny 1/8-in. screen, cocoons and leftover peat moss fall through 1/4-in. screen, and the adult worms fall through a slot into a bucket.

"That's the key to our business. We sell pure castings that are not diluted in any way," Webb says.

Nightcrawlers can live and produce castings for about 8 years, and the Webbs add to their "livestock" numbers by raising the cocoons in a nursery area. Though the Webbs have to pay attention to maintaining the perfect environment, nightcrawlers don't require daily chores. The buckets just need to be emptied every two weeks, and the worms can begin the process all over again with new peat moss, feed, and water.

"Castings can't burn plants, and you don't have to measure. They are full of microbes and organic matter to help produce nutrients for plants. Plus, they aerate and hold water," she says. "Just 2 tablespoons feed plants in an 8-in. pot for two months." She suggests mixing 1/3 castings with 2/3 potting mix to start plants.

For people interested in raising nightcrawlers, she offers a couple pieces of advice.

"The biggest thing is to make sure you have readily available peat moss," she says, noting it needs to be good quality without sand and chemicals. She makes a 3-hr. round trip every couple of months to buy 3 yards of peat moss from a family-owned bog.



Annette Webb and her husband, Bob, moved their African nightcrawler business into this insulated 16 by 20-ft. "worm room" in a pole barn on their property.

To get started in raising nightcrawlers, Webb also recommends contacting UNCO Industries Inc. (www.vermiculture.com) for information and equipment.

Prices paid for castings vary by location. Webb says her prices start at about \$4.50/5 lbs. wholesale, with price breaks for larger quantities.

Besides selling wholesale to local stores, Webb uses social media such as Facebook (RAW Sustainable Living) to teach, show videos, promote and sell castings.

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Worms are kept in 3-gal. buckets with holes drilled along top to let light in. They feed on peat moss blended with ground grains and water.

Free Online Marketplace Helps Buyers Find Sellers

Farmers looking for better ways to direct market have a new digital option at www.2BuyAg.com, which went online in 2017. It is managed by a mother/daughter team who know about farming, distribution and business.

"We want to connect farmers with buyers. Building relationships is important in the food chain," says Kim Harrison, who raises cattle and sheep with her husband on the couple's Missouri farm.

As she juggled selling to individuals, food hubs, cooperatives and big box stores, she decided there had to be a better way.

After researching and dismissing the idea of creating a physical distribution center, she and her business-minded daughter, Olivia Vann, spent a couple of years working with a developer to set up a digital marketplace. Since launching last year, hundreds of users have signed up, with about 40 percent producers and 60 percent buyers.

It's free for farmers to sign up, list and look, and it's also free for buyers listing and looking for items. A fee is only paid by the buyer when a connection is made — to cover the cost of PayPal fees and administration fees. The buyer/seller make delivery arrange-

ments.

Harrison notes that 2BuyAg.com is different from other digital services in a few ways.

They work in real time, she notes, and posts are only up for a short time. Harrison and her daughter go the extra mile to help farmers set up their pages and a PayPal account. They also keep an eye on messages sent to farmers from interested buyers. If the farmer doesn't respond, they call the farmer.

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Harrison says 2BuyAg is designed to educate and make marketing easier for producers. It also takes care of the bookwork.