

She Grows Organic Luffa

By Dee George Contributing Editor

When Cindy Oulton educates people about luffa sponges they are first surprised to learn they don't grow in the sea. But the biggest surprise is that she grows them in Nova Scotia.

"I was looking for a profitable crop to grow in my retirement years," Oulton explains. Luffa caught her attention when she was working as a surveyor in the oil fields and read about it being used to absorb oil spills.

After she returned to Nova Scotia in 2014 and did a couple years of internet research, in 2016, she leased 100 ft. of space in one of her nephew's high tunnels (www.taprootfarms.ca). Because luffa takes 200 days to mature, she started seeds in a greenhouse in March, then planted the seedlings in the tunnel around mid-May. The experiment worked and she had her first harvest by October, though she had to make some modifications in the process.

"In southern climates the luffa turn brown and get light on the vine as the fiber is developing and they dry," Oulton says. Her luffa usually stay green and require additional drying steps.

She peels off the thin outer skin and washes the luffa in warm water. Then she "flings the heck out of it" to remove seeds and excess water and lets it dry thoroughly on a drying rack. Oulton sells luffas whole for \$25 to \$38, ranging from 10 to 22 in.

long, as well as adding cords for bath luffas (\$12) and slicing them into clothlike pieces for scrubbers (\$8).

"Luffas are also referred to as the dish cloth gourd. They are great for the kitchen. I use them on stainless steel and cast iron and they last for 7 months," Oulton says, adding they never smell as long as they are rinsed and allowed to dry between uses.

Since her first crop, she has expanded to 1,200-ft. of trellising in two 200-ft. tunnels. This year she added a new Egyptian luffa variety that has a softer texture.

Growing luffa is labor-intensive, Oulton says, because the vines need to be trained to grow up on a trellis and pruned as the luffas grow. Being organic adds extra challenges. She adds calcium and nitrogen based on soil testing. Pests such as the cucumber beetle and squash bug are the biggest problem, because it is difficult to find non-chemical solutions. The squash bug destroyed a large portion of last year's harvest so this year she put tin foil on the floor and hung shiny streamers because the bugs don't like reflective surfaces.

Though being organic makes it more challenging to grow luffa, being natural is important to Oulton. She sells her luffas at about 30 Canadian stores and at farmers markets. She appreciates mentoring from FarmWorks Investment Co-operative Limited and recent media publicity that has helped educate consumers about luffa. "Customers



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tell me they love how luffa feels on their skin," she says.

By the end of 2019, she expects to have a website to sell her products in Canada and the U.S. Also this season she may try to harvest young luffa, which is called Chinese okra and edible in soups and sauces.

"My pie-in-the-sky goal is to have five tunnels and sell luffa coast-to-coast in five years," Oulton says. "I hope to inspire other luffa growers to offer this basic product to consumers."

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Oulton adds cords to make bath luffas, and slices luffas into clothlike pieces to make scrubbers.

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He Creates Corn Mazes With GPS-Equipped Zero-Turn Mower

"It's like playing a video game," says Don Watts about cutting a cornfield maze with his modified zero-turn mower equipped with GPS. "It's pretty challenging, because you can't take your eyes off the screen for more than a second, but you also have to watch for things in the field."

Still, he admits, following directions from a screen is an easier way to cut a maze. And his favorite part comes when he shows his client overhead photos taken by a drone after he finishes.

Thanks to GPS and drones, the business he and his wife, Lorraine, started in the early 90's has changed considerably. For several years the graphic artists drew designs on inch-grid paper and then removed young corn plants after creating a grid in the field with stakes every 25 ft. and spray painting the design. Nowadays, what once took 8 hrs. to cut, takes about 1 1/2 hrs. and is accurate to within 6 in.

Operating as The Corn Maze Guy, Watts creates about 80 mazes a year - from Maine to North Carolina and from the East Coast to Indiana.

It's a full-time job, Watts says. From January through May, the couple works with clients to create designs using computer software.

"Most of our customers have design ideas," Watts says. "Farming, Halloween and patriotic are the most popular themes."

They have graphics to work from but usually customize designs to feature a local football mascot or special county celebration, for example. From June to September, the couple travels pulling a trailer with the modified mower and the software they've created for clients.

The commercial Ferris mower has been greatly modified to cut corn that is ideally 2 to 3 ft. tall and sometimes taller. The front has been removed, the mower elevation changed and tires replaced with tractor tires. The

GPS antenna rises above the canopy, which provides shade necessary to see the monitor.

"We get stuck a couple times every year, in tire ruts and muddy areas," Watts notes. They purchased a 4-WD Kubota mower for particularly wet fields.

He suggests clients plant corn in both directions in 30 to 34-in. rows, to make it more difficult for maze-goers to see through the rows. After he cuts the design, the client needs to mow or chemically kill the cut corn, otherwise it will grow back.

"Some farmers are starting to go with the tall-growing grasses like Sudan and sorghum because they have some advantages over corn," Watts notes. "They look very similar except they don't have ears, they grow quickly even in adverse conditions that would hinder corn, and they need less fertilizer. The grasses can be harvested when the maze is over."

Using a mower is different than other corn maze companies that use tractors and larger equipment. It also makes The Corn Maze Guy more affordable.

"Our price is based on the location and the size of the maze. Generally it's about a \$2,000 average," Watts says. That's for average size mazes from 5 to 8 acres.

Their services include cutting the design, a corn maze guide, a banner, and a corn maze game. They offer premium games, rack cards and promotional material for an extra fee.

"I think games are very important so maze-goers feel they get their money's worth. Have a game, a tractor-pulled wagon ride, and animals. Sell pumpkins and food. Do something to keep your customer there for more than the maze," Watts advises.

There seems to be continued growth in the corn maze business, and with hired help Watts says their company is growing and taking on more clients.

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Don Watts uses a modified zero-turn riding mower equipped with GPS to create corn mazes for customers.



Front part of mower was removed and tractor tires installed for better traction. The Watts usually customize their maze designs.



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