

U-Pick Rhubarb Draws Crowd

Rhubarb grows like a weed in the Midwest but is a lot more challenging at 7,700 ft. in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. But Dennis Duncan of Black Forest, Colo., figured out how to create hospitable soil beds for plants that can produce up to 90 lbs. of rhubarb/plant.

He and his wife, Donna, tapped into a market of rhubarb-loving consumers in Colorado and elsewhere who are willing to pay \$3.75/lb. to pick rhubarb themselves during a one-time harvest on a weekend in early June.

"We get 400 or 500 people and have a crew of a dozen volunteers," Duncan says. "It's a big party. Families come out with kids and pets."

Customers pick the stalks, take them to a tent where Duncan's crew removes the leaves, and then to another tent to have them weighed. Average sales are about 10 lbs./customer, in addition to a couple of commercial pickers who pick 200 to 500 lbs. of rhubarb.

Currently, with about 400 plants on half an acre, High Altitude Rhubarb produces about 3,000 lbs. of rhubarb a season. With new plants that will be in production in 4 years, Duncan expects to produce 7,000 to 9,000 lbs.

He got started when a friend gave him some rhubarb roots. His plants only yielded a few stalks so Duncan researched and figured out how to create a nurturing

environment for plants to grow 4 ft. tall and 8 ft. wide.

He creates good loam with mulch and compost, then builds 3-ft. high mounds of top soil about 10 ft. apart. He fills the spaces between the mounds with pine mulch to prevent weeds and makes water rings at the top of the mounds around the plants. It recently cost \$3,000 to establish a new plot for 60 plants. The mulch composts in place, yielding soil similar to the native soils but deeper.

"We deep water about five times a year," Duncan says, noting that the mounds compress as the mulch composts and he tops the mulch off every 5 years.

His oldest beds are 20 years old and rhubarb plants typically produce for about 25 years. Through the years he's added 20 varieties. Some consumers prefer the red varieties, but the most prolific variety is Victoria. It's a greener rhubarb, but tastes the best, has thin skin and the best yield.

Duncan notes that there is typically only one harvest, because in mid-June the area is usually hit with large hail storms. Then comes the extreme heat. In some years there is enough regrowth that he takes reservations for a second harvest in July.

The Duncans figure they spend a couple of months a year on their "hobby farm" - working with the plants, website updates, organic certification paperwork, and bookwork.



Dennis Duncan has figured out how to grow high yielding rhubarb at 7,700 ft. in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

Duncan started with hand tools and has since mechanized with a 25 hp. John Deere tractor and attachments to do 95 percent of the field work. His background in the corporate world of computers has been useful for marketing; his website gets 30,000 hits a year. Combined with word of mouth and articles written about the business, the Duncans don't need to advertise.

In fact, Duncan says, his biggest risk is running out of rhubarb.

"We are a destination business, and we don't want people to drive here for nothing," he says, noting he knows of one customer who drove 13 hours to pick their rhubarb.

Duncan shares his technique for growing rhubarb on his website. He has advice for anyone who wants to create a destination business. "Differentiate yourself. Focus on



Customers pay to pick rhubarb themselves during a one-time harvest on a weekend in early June.

something unique in your area," he says.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Dennis and Donna Duncan, High Altitude Rhubarb, 7275 Wildridge Rd., Black Forest, Colo. 80908 (ph 719 494-8424; www.highaltituderhubarb.com; dennis.duncan@highaltituderhubarb.com).



Sandra Kay Miller receives a premium for raising veal calves on pasture. "It's a way to maximize profit on smaller acreages," she says.

Pasture Calves Produce Premium Veal

Like her beef, pigs, sheep and poultry, Sandra Kay Miller raises veal calves on pasture and gets a premium for doing so. Conventionally raised veal calves are prized for their white meat, something hers don't have. Like other veal producers, she faces criticism for harvesting the animals at a young age. Miller has no problem taking on both challenges when direct marketing her veal.

"When people say it isn't white enough, I says that white veal is from anemic, sick animals," she says. "Raised on pasture, my veal has more color to it, but that's because it's from healthy animals."

Her response to the young animal question is just as direct. "Inevitably, not a week goes by at market when someone openly remarks, 'How can you be so cruel and eat those adorable babies?'" says Miller. "I point out that if they eat chicken, it's harvested at 6 to 8 weeks. Pork is

harvested at 5 to 7 months, and lambs at less than a year. I raise my veal calves to 400 lbs."

Miller once converted militant vegetarians that threatened her online and showed up to picket her stand at market. "By the time I was done educating them about the difference between my veal and commercially-raised veal, they purchased a piece of veal," she recounts.

Not only a pastured veal producer, Miller is an active proponent of raising and marketing veal. She feels it is a missed opportunity for dairymen, as well as small producers looking for another product to sell.

"Smaller animals require less space and will consume less pasture, especially since milk or formula will constitute the majority of calories consumed during their lifetimes," says Miller.

She especially appreciates the reduced physical risk from the smaller animals versus full-grown beef. "Veal is harvested long

"Never A Dull Moment" For Family Sharpening Business

"We'll sharpen almost anything except hair clippers and band saw blades," says Missouri sharpening expert Tom Roy. "We do baler and brush cutter blades, chopper knives, and anything up to 6 ft. long that needs a razor-sharp edge. We do a lot of woodworking and metal-working tools, including drill bits, router bits, saw blades and grinding tools."

Most of Roy's customers are within a 100-mile radius of Joplin, although they've had customers from several states send items for sharpening. "My brother started this business 50 years ago, in 1969, and I joined him 10 years later, then bought it in 1985," Roy says. "We've grown steadily over the years, adding new sharpening equipment to handle diverse customer needs. Now we've got two people fulltime in the shop and two people on the road making deliveries."

People call or email to tell Roy what they've got. "Most of the time, we can handle it," says Roy. "They ship it to us and we ship it back or deliver it when it's sharp."

Roy's Southwest Grinding shop has

Brown & Sharpe grinding equipment, several Cincinnati tools, a Foley United profile grinder, a Heller cold saw grinder and KO Lee grinders. "For a lot of sharpening we have to build our own jigs to hold the piece we're sharpening," Roy says.

Asked where he learned the skills required for the business Roy is quick to say "Knox University, the school of hard knocks. There's really no place to learn what we do other than figure it out ourselves."

Recently they built a machine to sharpen large diameter slitters that cut insulation. They also sharpen serrated tooth slitters and all types of knives used in meat processing.

"I've enjoyed the business every step of the way," Roy says, "I tell my customers we never have a dull moment around here."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Tom Roy, Southwest Grinding, 5735 N Main Street, Joplin, Mo. 64801 (ph 417 781-1814; swgrinding@hotmail.com).

before the calves exhibit any aggressive male behavior, and they are small enough to be restrained with the help of another person using a cotton rope."

She also notes the reduced financial risk. While a feeder calf might cost \$500, a dairy bull calf may be as little as \$50, depending on current markets.

"Raising veal is a way to maximize profit (and reduce risk) on smaller acreages," says Miller. "In one season, my 2-teated Jersey cow reared 3 calves that yielded approximately 1,100 lbs. (live weight) from her milk and pasture."

To encourage others to try raising veal, Miller wrote a series of 5 articles on the

subject at www.onpasture.com, a free weekly, online magazine for graziers. You can search up the articles at the website.

While looking for a publisher, Miller continues to market her veal and not just the cutlets. She sells the organs and bones, even the head.

"The head and bones are extremely coveted by chefs and foodies," says Miller.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Painted Hand Farm, P.O. Box 256, Mt. Holly Springs, Penn. 17065 (ph 717 860-9385; sandra@paintedhandfarm.com; www.paintedhandfarm.com).