

Specialty Crops Keep These Farm Kids Busy

At Rustic Roots Farm the Olberding kids, Leah, 12, and Blake, 10, already have a few years' experience growing garlic - planting, cutting scapes, and harvesting the bulbs with their parents, Chad and Julie.

Growing garlic has proven to be an ideal crop on the rural Holmes City, Minn., property the Olberdings purchased in 2018. They planted the garlic that October for the following year, and production grows each year, using natural practices such as organic fertilizer and hand weeding instead of herbicides.

"Last fall we planted approximately 15,000 plants in a quarter-acre plot. This was up from 10,000 plants the year before," says Julie Olberding. She credits membership in the Minnesota Garlic Project with the Sustainable Farming Association for helping to educate them about growing garlic and choosing nine varieties of hardneck garlic suited for Minnesota.

The varieties also work well in other states, and they have sold much of the harvest to growers in several other states, in addition to local consumers.

Garlic is a popular and successful specialty crop in Minnesota, and it fits



Rustic Roots Farm grows garlic and other specialties as a way to help their kids learn about money.

in well with other crops, Olberding says. She and her husband have full-time jobs, along with their horticulture ventures. Garlic requires less maintenance than crops like strawberries, which they also grow.

Garlic cloves are planted in October,

then mulched with straw when the ground freezes. Some weeding is necessary, but the Olberdings plant close together in rows a foot apart and mulch heavily. In June they cut off the scapes (flower stems) so the plants' energy goes toward bigger bulbs. A month later the garlic is harvested and then cured for about a month before it is trimmed and ready to sell.

Hardneck garlic keeps up to a year and the varieties they grow offer different flavors. The Olberdings sell it for \$10 to \$20/lb., depending on the variety. Word of mouth, social media and being part of the garlic project helped with marketing in the past. This year they added a website, which includes photos and provides personal information about the family.

"The whole reason we bought the property (50 acres) is that we wanted the kids to learn a good work ethic, and about persevering and problem solving," Olberding says.

It's accomplished those goals and more. "This year the kids came up with the project of planting pumpkin and winter squash," she explains. Her husband prepped the ground for them, but planting, weeding, harvesting and selling will be up to the kids. They will also gain experience working with customers and



The Olberding's grow garlic, strawberries, and pumpkins on their 50 acre property. Their 2 young children do most of the work.

in budgeting, dividing profits into college funds, costs for next year, and money that can spend for fun.

For information about the specific varieties they grow (subtypes: Purple Stripe, Rocambole and Porcelain) check out the Rustic Roots Farm website.

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California Hatchery Operates Differently

A hatchery near Sebastopol, Calif., says it does things differently than other hatcheries, from how they raise their birds to how they deliver fertile eggs and chicks to customers. They put the needs of the birds and the environment first, and the market is responding.

"People have come out of the woodwork to support us," says co-owner Franchesca Duval. "We are focused on how we treat our birds, using plastic-free, compostable packaging, cutting waste, and powering our farm completely on solar."

Duval and her husband Ryan are pioneers in humane breeding and hatching. Unlike much of the poultry industry, they do not kill excess males, and their breeding flocks are on pasture.

"We raise them as closely as we can to how we believe chickens would live naturally, with access to shade, grass and grub," says Duval.

Duval has been raising chickens since she was a young girl, living on less than an acre with her family near Santa Cruz, Calif. It wasn't until she and Ryan married and began looking for a small farm that they learned how most hatcheries dispose of male chicks. The idea of live chicks being ground up and used in chicken

rations or incinerated convinced Duval to hatch out her own. In the past 7 years her passion has become their business. Today they keep around 250 adult birds, all carefully selected for egg color, productivity, beauty, and temperament.

"We started from scratch with less than \$100 and reinvested everything we made," says Duval. "We made no money for the first 4 years."

They still make no money on some of their chicks. While some breeds are difficult to sex when newly hatched, others are sold as female only. In those cases, the males find new homes in several ways. Many are simply given away every Friday to local farm laborers who raise them for their families, supplementing their low incomes. Others are offered to customers at no cost to round out orders of less than 10. She is adamant that other breeders could find their own solutions.

"It takes ingenuity and creativity to do business differently," she says. "If I have a problem, I just pray about it, and an answer comes. There is always a creative solution if you have the heart to go for it."

Alchemist Farm chicks and eggs don't come cheap. Day old chicks run as high as \$25 each (minimum order of 10), and fertile eggs for hatching run as high as \$10 each.

Dedication to chosen breeds can add costs without profit. Recently Duval reintroduced Swedish Isbar, also called Silverudds Blue by some breeders.

"They are the only breed that lays a naturally green tinted egg," she says. "Other green egg layers are hybrids. The eggs can have purple sprinkles over the top of the green."

Alchemist Farm offers breeds that lay a range of egg colors from blue to dark chocolate. Some breeds are noted more for their color and beauty, and the farm offers them as well as dual purpose breeds.

Duval hatches weekly from February through July and then twice a month. Chicks are shipped in biodegradable boxes and liners. Eggs are also shipped in biodegradable, plastic-free packaging.

The packaging works. Duval is proud of their survival rates with both eggs and chicks. "We have a special reed mat for chicks and double insulated boxes with heat packs, as well as food and road gel for nourishment," she says. "We stand behind our chicks and guarantee live arrival."

The Duvals are as eager to pass along what they have learned as they are to sell chicks and eggs. They send out hundreds of hatching eggs each year to classroom



The owners of Alchemist Farm hatchery raise a variety of breeds that produce eggs of varying colors.

hatching projects. Their Facebook and Instagram sites are loaded with short videos about the birds and the farm. Their website offers detailed information about raising birds. Chicken and quail owners can gain even greater insights with online classes (\$65) offered on the farm website.

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Gourmet Garlic Business Thriving

BJ Gourmet Garlic Farm offers 21 varieties of fresh and seed garlic, 9 unique garlic seasonings, 4 jar products, balsamic garlic vinegar, and garlic olive oil.

Jacob Campbell purchased the business from Budd and Judy Leisenring of Mogadore, Ohio, several years ago after FARM SHOW wrote about it in Vol. 40, No. 6.

"I'd been growing garlic for my own use for years and had purchased garlic seed from BJ Garlic with good results," Campbell says. "I had several conversations with Budd and Judy and learned of their interest in selling the business and retiring. Budd helped me move the operation to 12 acres in Portage County, Ohio. The business has continued without a hitch and is thriving."

BJ Garlic has specialized in growing all-natural hard-neck garlic for more than 30 years and all products are classified "certified naturally grown". Products include garlic powders, nuggets, grilling spices, dilled garlic and several more.

The company starts taking orders for fresh garlic in January and shipping begins when the garlic is cured, usually by the end of July. Last year the company shipped 8,000 lbs. of garlic by mid-October and Campbell says their target for 2021 is 10,000 lbs.

"Farmers markets are an important part of our marketing," Campbell says. "We generally do 3 to 4 farmers markets a week, starting in early May. We sell mostly container products and spices in the early months and begin selling fresh new-crop



garlic in July."

The company sells garlic scapes, "an extra bonus of growing hardneck garlic," Campbell says. Scapes are tender green shoots that appear on the plant about a month before harvest. Although scapes should be removed from the bulb to ensure plump bulbs in the fall, they have a mild garlic flavor and can

be used as a garnish in soups, meats and salads when simply chopped raw. A limited amount of scapes are available from the company during May and June.

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