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## Lawyer Finds Second Career As Herb Farmer

Former East Coast real estate lawyer Anna Hackman left the corporate world to start an herbal business, The Naked Botanical. "My husband and I built an eco-friendly home in 2005," she shares. "I had about two acres of cleared land to work with, so I started with five tomato plants in 2006 and quickly caught the gardening bug."

Her garden has grown with the addition of new fruit trees, bushes, and raised beds. By 2016, her husband asked what she planned to do with all the herbs she was growing. "Sell them!" she responded, assuming the process would be easy.

Hackman began by selling dried herbs on Etsy but found it challenging to compete

with sellers who purchased their wholesale overseas. So, she took a different approach and began selling herbal teas. She's since expanded to salts, hydrosols, salves, flower essences, and tonics & elixirs. The farm has been certified organic since 2019, and everything is made in small batches to maintain quality and freshness.

Today, Hackman has one employee but continues to be hands-on with every part of the production. "I cut the herbs, strip their leaves and dry them," she says. "They're then cut and sifted into an appropriate size for tea bags and stored in plastic vacuum-sealed bags until I use them. All processed products are made in a commercial kitchen, and an outside company bags the tea."

Beyond her herbs, Hackman sells many other products. "I make elderberry tonic with my farm-grown ginger and turmeric. Some of the elderberries come from my 35 bushes, but I also source frozen elderberries when I have depleted my inventory. Other projects include making simple syrups from my apple trees and lilacs and selling flower essences from my flowers."

All Naked Botanical products are available online, as well as through local craft shows and farmer's markets. While Hackman wants to sell in more retail locations, competing with larger brands is challenging. "Many

retailers won't give you a chance to sell your products because their buyers are accustomed to paying much lower prices from established big companies," she says.

"In my opinion, many consumers aren't aware of the difference in the quality of products made and grown in the U.S. versus products made from herbs grown overseas. I'm always educating prospective buyers on the benefits of buying locally grown products through sampling during in-person events."

For those interested in starting a similar farming venture, Hackman recommends looking closely at the bottom line before setting prices. "Make sure you take into account the costs to make your products. This includes how much time it takes to produce your product and all your expenses to run your farm. So many people just price their products to be competitive without knowing if they are making any profit. You want to make sure your pricing reflects healthy margins to support selling your product wholesale or through a distributor."

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## Growing Edible Cactus For Food And Profit

By Lydia Noyes, Contributing Editor

Prickly pear cactus farming has yet to garner mainstream attention, but it offers serious profit potential, especially for those in arid regions across the United States.

The plant is native to the Americas

and grows anywhere from Connecticut to Argentina. While the prickly pear is often treated as a weed, it has many uses, from human and animal feed to natural fencing around gardens. They are hardy in drought

conditions and can combat desertification, consequently improving the land it's planted on. The fruit and cactus pads offer impressive nutritional potential and are used medicinally in many regions.

The International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) has been promoting the crop to millions of farmers worldwide. The United Nations even considers it a food of the future for its drought tolerance, ability to boost soil health, and quick growing time to maturity.

Both the prickly pear cactus's fruits and pads (known as nopales) are edible. The pads are a common ingredient in many Mexican recipes, including curries, salads, and stir-fries. And despite their prickly exterior, the cactus's young pads work as a nutritious animal feed that can supplement up to 40 percent of a cattle's diet and 100 percent of the diet of sheep and goats.

This naturally abrasive plant also offers potential as living fencing. South Carolina's Wild Hope Farm uses it as a fencing system to keep deer out of the vegetable garden. Not only does a cactus fence require minimal maintenance once it's established, but the fruit and young pads can be continually harvested for profit. The farm sold \$15,000

in fruit from its fence in 2021 alone. Additionally, the cactus's flowers attract beneficial pollinators to the garden plants to improve their production.

One limitation for commercial success with cacti fruits is the hair-like spines (known as glochids) that grow over them.

Wild Hope Farm has invented a technique for removing the spines, making the fruit easier to harvest and handle. The farm workers place the fruit on a wooden frame with a metal screen that acts like a sieve. It's attached by chains on all four corners and suspended above the ground so the workers can jostle the frame and fruit back and forth. As two jostle the frame, a third burns off the spines with a blow torch. The final result? Cactus fruit that's easier and safer to handle.

While it may take effort to scale up this technique to make it work commercially, Wild Hope Farm and others like them are paving the way forward for more profitable cactus production.

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## Teen Built Her Own Goat Milk Business

Though she's still a teenager, college sophomore Abby Shuck manages a thriving soap and lotion business while going to school, thanks to her small herd of dairy goats.

Shuck's love for goats began at age 12 when her pap bought her a young Alpine goat as a gift for helping out on the family farm. Several years into goat ownership, she decided to build up a herd to breed and show. This left her with a surplus of milk and no obvious way to keep it from going to waste. Her solution? She created her own goat milk lotion.

Shuck and her mom spent several weeks crafting a skin-nourishing lotion recipe and watched as happy customers spread the word about her products. She has since expanded the business to include a variety of personal care products, including soap, lip balm, bath bombs, bath salts, and more.

"Right now, we're making products 1 to 2 times per week to keep up with demand, especially during busy holiday seasons," says Shuck.

To date, Shuck gets all the goat milk she needs from her own herd. "We milk from early March to late December/early January, and the excess milk we do not use immediately is frozen," she explains. "The extra frozen milk helps us continue production even while the does are on their dry period."

A busy schedule means that Shuck relies on family help to keep the business afloat. "Being a full-time college student makes it difficult for me to be home on weekdays. My mom and dad help me throughout the week, especially with pulling orders off our shelves and getting them shipped out. I travel from Delaware Valley University to my hometown nearly every weekend to work on

the business," she says. "When I'm home for summer and winter break, I spend nearly all my free time stocking up products for when I am away at college in the fall and spring."

Looking forward, Shuck plans to expand AHS Farms Goat Milk Products in various ways. This includes vending at larger events and craft shows, tweaking her website, and potentially establishing a permanent retail location. "And of course, I'm continuing to find ways to better my products, both with cosmetic look and quality."

For other young entrepreneurs, Shuck offers this advice. "It's quite cliché but completely honest... don't give up! With any business, there are going to be bumps in the road. Take a deep breath, assess the situation, and find a way to overcome the obstacles. Move forward and use past experiences to better yourself in the future."

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Abby Shuck adds value to her goat's milk with her unique personal care products business.

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