

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Returning to Her Farming Roots

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Left: Liz Graznak, founder of Happy Hollow Farm in Jamestown, Missouri, grew up gardening with her grandmother. • Middle: Liz (left) and John Hamrick (right) transplant Pak choi while Scott O'Malley (background) of World Wide Opportunities Organic Farms looks on. • Right: Liz and her daughter Sylvia selling at the Columbia Farmers Market.

Jamestown, Missouri, is a quaint farming community in the Midwest known for its corn and soy production. It's here that Happy Hollow Farm has planted their roots.

One of only four organic farms in the surrounding region, founder Liz Graznak identified a gap and launched an organic CSA to fulfill it.

"Even though Happy Hollow Farm is vastly different from their own, the farmers see that I toil the ground just like they do," said Liz. "When I need help, my neighbors are here. It has been an eye-opening and wonderful experience."

Liz's love for plants was inspired by her grandmother, who could often be found digging in a garden with a young Liz at her side.

"My grandmother grew up on a farm, but she wanted to get away from farming life," said Liz. "She loved gardening, and I loved being outside and gardening with her."

Intrigued by the potential in plants, Liz pursued a plant breeding degree at Cornell University. Although the program was extremely informative, Liz felt that something was missing. It was around this time that she became a member of a local CSA and discovered a community connected through food.

"This experience completely turned my world around," said Liz. "I didn't know when I was growing up that there were people out there that were doing this."

Liz began to wonder if this could be the career she was seeking. “I didn’t have any farming experience, but I started poking around to see what life would be like if I decided to invest in farming,” she said.

Her journey began by attending a workshop at Cornell conducted by Elizabeth Henderson, founder of Peacework Organic CSA, one of the oldest CSAs in the country. After the workshop, she approached Elizabeth to share her dream of starting her own CSA farm.

“Her words were, “That’s awesome, but you should probably work as an apprentice first,”” said Liz. She heeded Elizabeth’s advice, interning at a couple of local CSAs to get both first-hand experience and to help determine whether this was the right career choice.

After a few years as an apprentice, Liz recognized she still had a lot to learn. But one thing she did know is that she wanted to plant her roots closer to home, so she moved back to Columbia, Missouri, and worked at a local garden center.

“It was through this career move that I learned not only about operating a garden center, but vital skills—including employee management, marketing and budgeting—that would help with running my own business,” said Liz. But perhaps most importantly, the garden center experience equipped Liz with the confidence to venture out on her own.

Happy Hollow Farm is born

The year was 2010 and Liz and her wife purchased a small farm in Jamestown, Missouri, slightly over 30 miles away from Columbia. Liz’s background in plant breeding naturally led her to research organic farming and its growing techniques. From the very beginning, Happy Hollow Farm has been a certified organic facility.

“If I’m going to grow and be responsible for feeding other people, there is only one way that I’m growing,” said Liz.

The operation began fairly small, with 19 families, but it didn’t take long for word of the new CSA to spread.

“It was a blank slate, which was both a challenge and fun, although somewhat expensive, adventure,” shared Liz. All of the infrastructure had to be built, including a barn, walk-in coolers, and most recently, a wash pack shed with concrete floors and floor drains.

It was around this time that the Farm Bill initiative offered grant money to organic farmers, including a program for high tunnels. Happy Hollow Farm added their initial tunnel in that first year of operation, eventually expanding to four tunnels in total.

“You can grow a lot of food in the winter in an unheated structure, although the growing techniques from summer to spring are vastly different,” said Liz.

These tunnels not only added coverage during the summer, but presented the opportunity for growing all year, allowing Happy Hollow Farm to become a year-round operation four years ago. Part of the motivation, shared Liz, was the simple fact that there was only one other farmer who offered leafy green vegetables in the winter season. Happy Hollow Farm can also be found at the local farmers market each Saturday.

When it comes to running a farming business, Liz cautioned there’s much more to farming and running a small-scale diversified vegetable farm than growing.

“If you are going to run a successful business and farm, you need to be aware of potential challenges and how to handle them,” said Liz. She admits that coming from a family of entrepreneurs may have provided her with a bit of an edge, as 9:00-to-5:00 jobs were simply not a part of her upbringing.

One of the biggest challenges with operating a business successfully is being able to proactively foresee problems before they occur.

“I have no idea how you learn that skill,” shared Liz. “But it is a skill that you have to develop because if you are putting out fires all the time, you will never get ahead.”

Operating a CSA isn't for everyone and the apprenticeship program that Happy Hollow Farm offers has truly highlighted that. Only one of the apprentices that the farm has trained has continued on to farming.

“It's very sad,” said Liz. “But I'm also not willing to send people away with rose-colored glasses. Farming is hard work.”

Today, eight years after the initial opening, Happy Hollow Farm has expanded substantially with several employees on hand to help support this thriving operation. The adventure has been far from an easy one, but Liz shared what has made it worthwhile was the community.

“I just received an email from someone this morning stating I couldn't imagine not getting vegetables from Happy Hollow Farm,” said Liz. “Each of our CSA families are truly members of our farm.” **GT**

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