

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Embracing Their Destiny

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Nancy and Jim Cameron, owners of Destiny Hill Farm, standing in their lavender fields.

Embarking on a new business venture isn't something Nancy and Jim Cameron, owners of Destiny Hill Farm, take lightly. The couple had owned and operated their own cola bottling service until 1989, which they sold in anticipation of semi-retirement.

Approximately two decades later, the couple opened up the door to a new chapter into their life: farming. Their journey began with a 137-acre piece of farmland in Washington, Pennsylvania, that had been a part of Nancy's family since 1941. The couple purchased the property in 2005, initially building a riding arena and a stable that was quickly followed with building their new home.

It didn't take long for Nancy and Jim to begin to ponder if farming would provide the potential for additional income. With zero farming experience, the couple contacted their local Penn State extension to learn more about both the challenges and opportunities with farm ownership.

"There were darling young couples there who wanted to quit their corporate job and become farmers, and they painted a picture of reality," said Jim. "Farming, they shared, was awfully hard work and they truly represented what life as a farmer was like."

The program provided them with a set of parameters that helped them identify that they had both the resources and qualities to venture into farming.

One of the key aspects that the program emphasized, shared Nancy, was the need to adopt some form of agritourism. When they considered the type of business that they wanted to adopt, they immediately gravitated towards weddings.

"Our daughter's wedding, which took place outdoors, provided us insights on what worked really well and what needed to be improved," said Nancy.

During that first year, Destiny Hill Farm focused exclusively on lavender, planting thousands of plants and learning the ins and outs of working in the field.

"The instructors at the extension program shared the importance of having a niche, and in particular, choosing a product that other people don't have," said Nancy. "We chose lavender. For years, we hosted lavender festivals, but now, we've scaled back on our events, focusing all of our energy into our weddings."

The event planning portion of their business began as soon as they placed their business online. To ensure that this side of the operation focused seamlessly, Destiny Hill Farm hired a professional event planner.

"Our event planner is incredibly good at her job. The three of us are a great team; we each recognize our strengths and weaknesses, and collaborate to create an incredible experience for our guests," said Jim.

Before deciding to allocate a site for agritourism, Nancy said that it's essential farmers connect with their local government to receive the appropriate approvals. She emphasized that fostering strong relationships with both the local governments and neighbors is essential for a successful agritourism business.

With their business online, the bookings quickly rolled in.

"Farmers have to realize the power of the Internet—in that first year, we had a moderate number of events," said Nancy.

Today, they continue to use social media and their website to showcase their business, their weddings and the incredible floral arrangements that they create as showpieces for these events.

As their wedding business grew, the couple recognized that cut flowers and custom arrangements would be a natural complement to their operation. Instead of outsourcing their flowers, Destiny Hill Farm decided to dedicate three acres of the property to grow cut flowers, which are then used to create custom arrangements.

"You don't make money from growing the flowers; you make it from the designs you create with them," said Nancy.

Today, they employ a handful of women who create the floral arrangements with Nancy. These incredible designs are not only a part of each event, but shared on social media, helping spread the word of the farm and generating interest for future couples who would like to host their wedding at a unique outdoor venue.

Nancy and Jim are quick to share that they couldn't run this type of operation on their own. Each year, Destiny Hill

Farm hires several college students to work both in the field and the event side of the business. Nine times out of 10, the student hires return to work at Destiny Hill Farm the following year.

“We love working with our college students and teaching them the value of hard work,” said Nancy. The students have the opportunity to experience the field side of farming, including weeding, cutting and planting, and then wrap up their week with the event side of the operation.

“Our employees need to embrace the fact that one day they may get muddy and the next (be) required to dress up and help out at the wedding,” said Nancy.

Perhaps one of their most recognizable employees is their miniature donkey mascot Luther, who comes out for every wedding.

“He is a social media rock star, and brides and the wedding party love having their pictures with him,” said Nancy.

During wedding season, Destiny Hill Farm employees can be found tirelessly working from Tuesday to Saturday each week.

“It is very physical work—just this past Saturday, I had 30,800 steps,” said Jim. “You have to be very healthy, have an incredible work ethic and be ready for anything.”

More than a decade later, the couple modestly shared that they’re still newbies in the agriculture world. They’re continually invested in improving their operation and cannot say enough about the value of learning from others in the industry. They’re also active members of several associations, including the U.S. Lavender Growers Association and the California Cut Flower Commission.

When asked about their proudest moment at the farm, the couple immediately shared that it was hosting their two children’s weddings at the farm. However, Nancy and Jim said that the entire experience has been an incredibly fulfilling adventure.

“The flowers simply give me a lot of joy,” said Nancy. “I love cutting them, arranging them and creating something beautiful that gives someone a moment of happiness.” **GT**

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