

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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The Final Frontier

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The mountainous terrain of Homer, Alaska, is far from the simplest location to establish a new growing business. However, for Emily Garrity, owner of Twitter Creek Gardens, the raw land was ripe with potential. Today, she prides herself in being an avid promoter of adopting “the last frontier” mentality and urges other farmers to consider starting a farm on raw land.

Her journey into growing began at the age of 19 in her hometown of Fairbanks, Alaska, where she helped maintain a neighbor’s garden.

“Her husband had passed away and she needed help maintaining her extensive gardens,” said Emily. “She taught me how to tend flowers and how to grow a vegetable garden.”

This part-time job was quickly followed by a position at Basically Basil, a five-acre diversified vegetable farm in Fairbanks. It was here that Emily was exposed to the commercial side of growing, including farmers markets and restaurant sales. This experience solidified her career choice; however, there was also another dream that she wanted to pursue—living by the water in

Homer, Alaska.

Pictured: Emily Garrity, owner of Twitter Creek Gardens in Homer, Alaska, grows edibles for the local CSA, farmers markets and restaurants.

Twitter Creek Gardens includes several covered tunnels—including three high tunnels, two caterpillar and four low-tech tunnels—and the outdoor plot, plus the passive solar greenhouse, which was purchased in 2010.

Growing in Alaska has its benefits, including healthy loam, spring water and close to 12 hours of sunlight in early March, while the climate makes it possible to grow outdoors from mid-May until mid-October.

So at the age of 24, she packed her bags, moved to Homer and began the job search process.

“I looked for a job with farms, but all of the farms here were pretty small and mostly family-oriented,” she said. “There weren’t many job opportunities and so I decided to start my own farm.”

The process began with leasing a 1,000-sq. ft. garden that Emily used to cultivate specialty salad greens.

“Looking back, it was such a blessing to start with salad greens because it’s one of the highest-dollar crops I grow and it still probably makes up about 25% of my revenue,” she said.

In August of 2005, she took the leap and purchased her own piece of land. However, the different elevations of the plots, 200 ft. for the leased property and 1,200 ft. for her new space, resulted in temporarily maintaining both farms to maximize the growing season.

“By maintaining both properties I was able to provide produce during the shoulder season,” she said. “However, the travel time between the two spaces was about 20 minutes. It just wasn’t efficient and so I purchased a high tunnel so that I could begin the production at the higher elevation earlier.”

Today, Twitter Creek Gardens includes several covered tunnels—including three high tunnels, two caterpillar and four low-tech tunnels—and the outdoor plot. The passive solar greenhouse, which was purchased in 2010, has been a big game changer, allowing Emily to move the seed starts from her basement into the covered space as early as March.

“I try to have about five to six different crops available for that first CSA share, which is typically during the first week of June,” she said. Additional areas of revenue include the Alaska Food Hub, where Emily sells her produce online and to the restaurant market.

One of the challenges with farming on terraced terrain is that the traditional equipment, like tractors, cannot be used. Initially, this meant that Emily used rakes and hand tools to cultivate the land, but after reading JM Fortier’s book “The Market Gardener” she converted her plots to a standardized 30-in. terraced bed size. This change created an opportunity to use some of the standardized hand tools and walk behind equipment.

“Once I made those shifts, the efficiencies and the revenue just skyrocketed,” said Emily. “I’m really starting to use a lot of the small walk-behind and hand tools that have been developed for small growers.”

Growing in Alaska has its benefits, including healthy loam, spring water and close to 12 hours of sunlight in early March, while the climate makes it possible to grow outdoors from mid-May until mid-October. Instead of adding shade coverings in the summer, when the sunlight is at its peak, Emily simply adjusts their growing practices. Spinach, for example, isn’t grown to full size in July, while the other produce seems to thrive in the long light cycle.

“I’m sure that there is other produce that just wouldn’t do well, but we just choose not to grow them,” she shared.

The final harvest is stored in an extensive root cellar, which allows Emily to continue selling produce until late November. Although she could sell year-round, she’s made the personal decision to take a month off to rest and rejuvenate.

“In Alaska, the land rests—it is in a deep freeze providing me the opportunity to rest as well,” she said. “I can’t imagine working the pace that I do year-round.”

Homer has become one of the newer food hubs in the state, with several farmers introducing local produce to the community of 12,000. To help mitigate the flooded market, Twitter Creek Gardens developed an online platform in early 2020, including customized shares, so that she could extend the CSA shares to the surrounding communities.

“And then COVID hit, and my phone and email were off the hook with customers trying to buy CSA shares,” said

Emily. "I went from struggling to sell 30 CSA shares to having 100 members and a waiting list."

For those considering entering into the industry, Emily recommended participating in any available apprenticeship or internship programs to help avoid costly mistakes.

"I've been really fortunate and inspired by the amount of funding that is available for growers to start small farms and aid with the operating costs," she said.

Emily's love for the unique terrain and environment of Alaska is infectious. She's fully embraced the potential in cultivating the region, including recognizing both the land's strength and its challenges. When asked about the future, she shared her primary goal is to maximize the yield of the existing space.

"It took a while to make a profit because for a while I just put everything back into the business," she said. "So the goal now is to get more efficient and find different avenues of sales, and make sure that we sell everything that we grow." **GT**

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wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.