

Farm planning to form Community Supported Agriculture cooperative

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RUSK — If, as they say, it's all in the name, few things could be found more aptly named than the Good Roots Garden operation of Jerri and Larry Berry south of Rusk in the hills of Cherokee County.

They were living and working in Austin in October 2009 — she as a registered dietitian doing nutrition research with the University of Texas School of Public Health and he in computers — when they decided to move back to the land in the piney woods Larry's family had settled on in the 1850s. His mother had recently passed away and left the Berry's the land, some 66 acres of timber and pasture, with a home off Farm to Market Road 1857 between Rusk and Alto.

“We knew the land was here,” Jerri said. “We knew we wanted to do something with it and we saw the opportunity.

“We'd worked for 20 years in the city,” she said. “We wanted to have a positive change in our lives while we were still young enough to enjoy it.”

As a registered dietitian, Jerri was familiar with healthy foods and nutrition. But she quickly learned there was a lot still to learn. Having grown up a “city girl,” this was her first venture into rural living.



Good Roots Garden

Andrew D. Brosig/The Daily Sentinel Jerri Berry, right, introduces intern Jennifer Bennett to the different varieties of lettuce under cultivation at the Berry's Good Roots Garden on March 11 south of Rusk. Berry and her husband, Larry, moved to the property from Austin in 2009 and now hope to expand into a Community Supported

“I needed to know how to grow food,” Jerri said. “I’m a dietician and I don’t know what a potato plant looks like? There was something wrong with that.”

Agriculture operation, delivering garden fresh organic produce weekly to subscribers in the Tyler area.

“As a public health nutritionist, I did a lot of talking with people about what they should be eating,” she said. “I thought there should be more healthy food available on the market and I wanted to be a part of that.”

The garden seemed to be a natural extension of her background. Though Larry’s speciality was computers and technology, he’s also a good general handyman and jack-leg mechanic, Jerri said. He built a greenhouse from the ground up and keeps the machinery they use in good running order.

The Berry’s follow true organic practices with everything they grow at Good Roots Garden. They’ve only used a certified organic pesticide on a couple occasions to deal with a caterpillar infestation on seedling plants in the greenhouse. Otherwise, it’s all mechanical controls — weeding, hoeing, etc. — and beneficial insects.

Community Supported Agriculture

Since their first successful crop in 2010, they’ve been bringing their produce to farmers markets in Nacogdoches and Tyler. Their next venture is to start a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) cooperative, where subscriber members will pay an annual fee and receive a weekly box of vegetables straight from the Good Roots Garden, varieties depending on what’s in season at the time.

For a CSA, it’s all about variety, Jerri said. Six to eight different items each week, enough to feed a family with no left overs by the time the next box of goodies arrives. The variety should be a problem, with Good Roots Garden growing everything from garlic and herbs to greens, tomatoes, bell peppers and egg plants.

Also on the list are cool-weather crops — broccoli, kale and cabbage, to name just a few. Jerri even grows a few varieties of flowers, more for fun than anything else, she said.

“We have to focus on the main thing,” she said. “But I have to say our tomatoes are the best.”

Working the soil

Good Roots Garden operates primarily with Jerri and Larry handling the lion’s share of the day-to-day work. But Jerri does take on volunteers and she also works with colleges, including the food sciences department at Stephen F. Austin State in Nacogdoches, mentoring interns in her role as a registered dietician.

Jennifer Bennett, a graduate student in dietetics at SFA, is the latest intern working at Good Roots

Garden. Despite a family background in farming, this was Bennett's first real introduction to food production.

"I wanted to see where food comes from," Bennett said on the first day of her internship in early March. "My biggest 'a-ha' moment so far has been how much processed food is out there. (Healthy eating) is not all about the calories. It's important to look at what goes into the produce."

Jerri Berry agrees. For her, healthy food starts with healthy soil. It's better for the plants, better for the environment in general and produces a better product for the consumer, she said. And healthy soil actually reduces the need for chemical amendments to grow.

"If you have healthy soil, the plants will be healthy," she said. "I think people really don't know what good food tastes like.

"They actually might like vegetables if they eat something somebody grew fresh," Jerri said. "It just tastes better."