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EDITOR'S PICK FEATURED

## Sprouting Farm renters find comfort in their growing experiences

By Jordan Nelson Register-Herald Reporter Oct 9, 2017



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Sprouting Farms in Talcott is a place where those interested in growing things of all sorts can go and grow their own produce, while they also learn and grow within.

A farming resource and incubator program, Sprouting Farms is used as a destination to educate and train people on how to grow their own food and vegetation.

After its official grand opening back in June, Sprouting Farms began giving locals the opportunity to rent out the area's high tunnels to not only begin their own projects, but learn while doing so.

With over 82 acres of farmland on the property and over 30 high tunnels to rent out, the farm has been a learning place for many, and locals hope it will continue to grow.

Anna Hardy, of Hinton, is one of the vendors who has taken advantage of the property offered at Sprouting Farms, She said it's been an experience she will never forget.

Hardy has been working toward growing pumpkins and gourds for the fall season since May, and said it has been an experience of all different sorts.

"I love October, I love fall, and I love Halloween," she said. "I always spend so much money every year buying pumpkins for myself, so I just thought, 'Why not try and grow them myself?'"

Hardy said she was not aware of the opportunity Sprouting Farms offered until farm officials gave a presentation at her job at West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services.

She said the presentation tugged on her heartstrings, so she decided to give the farming experience a go.

After meeting with Sprouting Farms officials, and another pumpkin farmer for advice, she decided to rent out a high tunnel and other land at the farm to create something she loves and maybe, if things turn out, share her love with others.

While never actually growing pumpkins herself, Hardy said the project was definitely a learning experience.

"Starting out and not really knowing much about farming in general was a learning curve," she said. "Sprouting Farms is also an organic farm, so we had to use special fertilizers and growing procedures, which was also something completely new to me."

Hardy said she was not interested in going into the pumpkin-growing business for money.

"It was more or less a hobby and chance to learn something new," she said. "And the chance to come to realization of a lot of things."

According to Hardy, there is an abundance of processed foods in the United States, and if the population would get back into the groove of growing its own food and eating what its bodies were intended to eat, then the country would be in much better health.

"I think growing your own food, and learning the process to do so, really helps you understand that better."

While October has quickly approached, Hardy said her pumpkins have as well. She has already sold several during the City of Hinton's Second Saturday event, and is hoping to sell even more at the Alderson Farmer's Market Autumn Festival Sunday, Oct. 15.

Hardy has grown a variety of different pumpkins including sugar and big max pumpkins, and has also sold jack-o-lanterns.

She said the employees of Sprouting Farms have been extremely helpful in her learning process, and she would not be have been able to accomplish what she has without her husband and son, Jason and Orion Hardy.

"They've taught me things about growing our own food I never even knew before," Hardy said. "And for that I am grateful."

Hardy said anyone interested in beginning to grow their own food should go into it with a positive attitude.

"Have fun with it, and be really thankful you are able to gain knowledge and produce something on your own."

Rhonda Dortch is another Sprouting Farms renter who has been focusing on harvesting corn.

Now in her 60s, Dortch has been growing her own food for the past 40 years. In 2011, she moved from North Carolina to West Virginia so she could buy more land to grow food and expand her growing at a better price.

"I came here as a single female farmer, and Sprouting Farms offers land for lease," she said. "And there I have 8 acres of corn, along with a high tunnel for butternut squash."

Dortch said she grows her corn to produce corn meal, but also provides it to West Virginia distilleries.

"It makes a wonderful-tasting whiskey," she said.

Although she has been a lifelong experienced farmer, Dortch said she needed land, and she is thankful Sprouting Farms provided her with that.

Dortch said she will not hesitate telling anyone she does not trust the food system, period, and she rarely buys any food from the grocery store.

Several people in the world do not even eat real food, according to Dortch.

"Grocery store food does not taste anything like food you grow yourself," she said. "If someone grew their own food and ate it for a long time, then went back to grocery store food, they'd realize how bad the food tastes.

"If people don't grow some of their own food, they don't realize what they're missing."

Growing food and raising livestock is a way of life for Dortch, and she knows she is a survivalist.

A college education is not something she claims she has a lot of.

"But if you put me next to someone who has gone to school for years, I'd know how to survive out on my own, and they might not," she said.

She claims anyone can do it, if they just learn and change their ways of thinking.

"And if they start and don't succeed, they don't need to give up," she said. "Start small, and diversify the types of things you grow."

It is in Dortch's plan to open up her own farm soon, but she will still continue to use Sprouting Farms as well.

"Every crop has its own advantages, including Sprouting Farms," she said. "And I will also offer classes to those interested in growing their own food."

Dortch said Sprouting Farms also offers free classes to individuals interested in learning how to grow, and they can be contacted at 304-445-7200 or 304-322-4596 to find out more about their workshops.

"I think the program at Sprouting Farms is phenomenal, and it's so wonderful seeing everyone work together," she said. "Because although we're all working on our own projects, we still help each other like a team."

Dortch said the public can stay up-to-date on her projects at [bluestonemountainfarm.com](http://bluestonemountainfarm.com)

"Growing my own food has always been a passion of mine," she said. "I've never wanted to do anything else, and I wouldn't be happy doing anything else. It's in my soul, and it will be until the day I die."

— Email: [jnelson@register-herald.com](mailto:jnelson@register-herald.com); follow on Twitter [@jnelsonRH](https://twitter.com/jnelsonRH)

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