

People & Places

A different way to farm

Ronnie Miller uses hydroponic system to grow year-round crop of lettuce

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

BLISS, Idaho — Ronnie Miller has embraced his new high-desert farm, marveling at the glorious sunrises and sunsets that bookend his days as he grows thousands of heads of lettuce — without soil.

Originally from Jackson, Wyo., the co-founder and CEO of Laura Lee Farms spends most of his days inside a 1-acre greenhouse, where he plants, monitors, harvests and packages Boston butterhead lettuce.

With a degree in finance from the University of Wyoming, he is also involved in purchasing, marketing and keeping the books.

The hydroponic operation — no soil needed — is named for his mother and spearheaded by his father, Ron, who in 2013 purchased the 330-acre White Arrow Ranch that houses the greenhouse operation.

The greenhouse once raised mushrooms and tomatoes but sat vacant for several years before Miller's father bought it at auction to pursue an interest in hydroponics. That interest was spurred by a friend and mentor, who grows cucumbers hydroponically in Hawaii.

The venture is different from the family's business holdings in real estate and the hospitality industries in Jackson but falls within its entre-



Ronnie Miller, a partner in his family's Laura Lee Farms, holds a head of lettuce not quite ready for harvest and a bag of the farms' packaged product.

preneurial spirit — an enthusiasm fueled by the book "Rich Dad Poor Dad," Miller said.

That enthusiasm was crucial given the amount of work Miller and his father had to do to get the place in shape.

"There was a lot of deferred maintenance. We had to pretty much fix everything," Miller said.

But it gave the father and son plenty of enjoyable time working together, he said.

Miller moved to the farm last year and runs the day-to-day operations. His father stays involved, and the two work together to make decisions, develop a game plan and hone their time management, Miller said.

"We're excited to feed people. We're excited to serve as many people as possible. That's why we exist," he said.

The operation has the capacity to harvest 1,200 heads of lettuce a day, and it's a "super clean" product, grown in an inert medium without pesticides and using integrated pest management practices, Miller said.

The greenhouse is heated by water from a hot spring, which provides 178-degree water. The closed hydroponic system conserves water. The estimated water use at full capacity is 1,000 gallons per day, little compared to a traditional 1-acre greenhouse operation, he said.

The business, which started shipping in May, only grows butterhead lettuce now, but the plan is to grow other produce once the Millers work out what the community needs and what retailers want, he said.

The lettuce takes about 50 days to mature in optimum growing conditions — humid and 65 degrees. The greenhouse provides year-round production and a constant cycle of planting and harvesting.

While the production system is capital-intensive, it offers many advantages, Miller said.

"You can get so much done with just a few people. You can grow year-round, and it allows you to change things and mimic nature," he said.

The operation is food-safety certified by PrimusLabs and primarily sells to distributors that supply restaurants and retailers. The farm is also a member of Idaho's Bounty and Idaho Preferred, and Miller is always on the lookout for ways to grow the demand for the lettuce.



Western Innovator

Laura Lee Farms

Location: Bliss, Idaho

Co-founders: Father and son, Ron Miller and Ronnie Miller

Product: Boston butterhead lettuce

System: Hydroponic

Harvest capacity: 1,200 heads per day

Employees: Two

Contacts: www.lauraleefarms.com, (208) 352-3115, Ronnie@lauraleefarms.com

The mentor in Hawaii — and another in Canada — have helped the Millers make their dream a reality, and Miller hopes to be able to help others in turn.

The mission of the farm is to feed a lot of people high-quality food, but the family also values and promotes self-development, financial freedom and helping others find success, he said.

Miller remains involved in the family businesses in Jackson. His wife, Kristy, handles social-media marketing and graphics for those businesses and lives in Boise, and the two travel back and forth between Boise and Bliss. They are expecting their first child in February.

Family farm grows tiny pumpkins into big business

By BRENNA WIEGAND
For the Capital Press

HUBBARD, Ore. — Dylan Wells and his brother, Darren, were just boys when they tried selling the family farm's excess mini-pumpkins on the internet.

Little did they know their efforts would blossom into a thriving business.

Their parents, Dan and Diane Wells, established D. Wells Farms near Hubbard, Ore., in 1990. They started a reforestation and Christmas tree seedling nursery and a grafted ornamental tree business.

Brothers Darren and Dylan were in grade school when they started their business, Autumn Harvest, in 1998.

"Darren and I sold pumpkins out of a 1965 Chevrolet pickup in the driveway," Dylan said.

By 2015 they were growing 20 varieties of winter squash, 10 mini-pumpkin varieties and some larger pumpkins, pickling cucumbers and dill on 220 acres.

This year they scaled down to 14 acres and as of next year will be completely out of the farming business, going entirely to online retail sales as AutumnHarvestPumpkins.com.



Dylan Wells watches the pumpkins pile up in a warehouse at Autumn Harvest Pumpkins. The Hubbard, Ore., online business has shipped 300,000 pounds this year.

Their catalog is simple: two types of mini-pumpkins and a white mini variety.

Dylan Wells, 28, said the move has enabled them to go from 60 employees to three: Dylan, his mother and one employee.

"Our payroll has decreased almost \$800,000 so far this year," Wells said. "This year we're shipping about 300,000 pounds and are supporting two families. On heavy days

UPS drops a trailer here for the day."

The pumpkins Autumn Harvest sells come from a network of growers in Oregon and Washington.

"Over the last 17 years that I have been doing this I have built up quite a network of growers," Wells said. "In the coming years I am going to be relying on that network to supply us with product."

The only farm equipment

needed now is a washer for the pumpkins and a forklift.

"Other than that we don't need much else," he said.

At the same time, the world needs pumpkins, especially the East Coast.

"New York, Florida, North Carolina, Virginia and Maryland ... 85 percent of our product is sent to the East Coast," Wells said. "They try to access them locally but they just aren't available in their areas. We do a lot of Halloween parties, churches and schools, lots of colleges. And the white mini-pumpkins are very popular for fall weddings."

They also sell to birthday parties for toddlers at which mini-pumpkins are scattered across the yard like an egg hunt, he said.

"A lot of our customers are event venues and florist shops; we supply a chain of gyms that want to decorate their welcome counters and we have supplied multiple Ritz-Carlton hotels and resorts for their seasonal events," he said.

Because they're so easy to find on the internet, Autumn Harvest Pumpkins receives many requests from magazines needing pumpkins for fall photo shoots.

"When you Google

mini-pumpkins we are one of the top results that come up, and there is no Oregon sales tax, which is a plus for a lot of our customers," Wells said.

They try to keep their prices reasonable.

"People are often shocked when they find out it's \$125 for 100 pumpkins, including shipping," he said.

He believes the business is thriving because the mini-pumpkin is a unique product that can't be found in many areas.

"Not everyone in the country can just walk out and find it at the farmers' market or in the grocery store," he said. "I think we who live in the Pacific Northwest tend to take for granted all the things that we are able to buy fresh and locally."

Wells said retail sales are very different from wholesale.

"With wholesale you build a relationship with the buyer; you're talking every day," Wells said. "With the online store we only talk to about 10 percent of the people. The orders come in and we fill and ship out."

About 25 percent of their customers return each year.

"The repeat customers are the institutions with yearly events — schools mostly," he said.

Calendar

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Saturday-Sunday Oct. 15-16

All About Fruit Show, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Clackamas County Fairplex, Canby, Ore. This is an opportunity to taste pears, apples, kiwis and grapes and order a custom-grafted tree. Speakers will answer questions and an ID Team will identify "mystery" apples. www.homeorchardsociety.org/events/2016-fruit-show/

Gorge Fruit and Craft Fair, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Hood River County Fairgrounds, 3020 W. East Road, Odell, Ore. www.hoodriverfair.org

Wednesday-Saturday Oct. 19-22

2016 National FFA Convention

and Expo. Bankers Life Field House and Indiana Convention Center, Indianapolis, Indiana. www.ffa.org

Thursday, Oct. 20

Oregon Soil and Water Commission meeting, 8:30-11:30 a.m. Monarch Hotel, 12566 SE 93rd Ave., Clackamas, Ore. <http://bit.ly/2dA-yAOR>

Urban AgFest, 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Parrish Middle School, 802 Capitol St. NE, Salem, Ore. www.aglink.org

Confined Animal Feeding Operations Advisory Committee meeting, 1:30-3:30 p.m. Oregon Department of Agriculture, Conference Room D, 635 Capitol St. NE, Salem. <http://bit.ly/1vCHJfr>

Friday-Saturday Oct. 21-22

Montana Farmers Union Convention, Best Western Heritage Inn, Great Falls, Montana. montanafarmersunion.com

Saturday, Oct. 22

Oregon Agriculture in the Classroom 16th Annual Fall Harvest Dinner and Fundraiser, 5 p.m. CH2M Hill Alumni Center, Oregon State University, 725 SW 26th St., Corvallis. The social hour and silent auction start at 5 p.m., dinner at 6:30 and the oral auction at 7:45. oregonaic.org/

Tuesday-Wednesday Oct. 25-26

Oregon Society of Weed Science annual meeting, 8 a.m. Best Western Hood River Inn, 1108 E. Marina Way, Hood River, Ore.

Wednesday-Friday Oct. 26-28

FSPCA Preventive Controls for Animal Food Course, 8 a.m. Springhill Suites by Marriott, 424 E. Park Center Blvd., Boise, Idaho. The course will cover an overview of the FSMA requirements for animal food, current good manufacturing practice requirements, animal food safety

hazards, an overview of the food safety plan and other related issues. Cost: \$650/person for 2 or more people from the same company registering together or \$720 per individual.

Friday-Sunday Oct. 28-30

Oregon State Beekeepers Association Fall Conference 2016, The Oregon Garden, 879 W. Main St., Silverton, Ore. The theme for this conference is "Beekeeping Out of the Box." Other topics such as honeybee health will be covered as well. Speakers include Tom Seeley, George Hansen, Ramesh Seegal, John Skinner, Elina Nino, Judy Wu and Miksa Queens. There will be a beginning beekeeping class running concurrently with the main meeting on Saturday.

Sunday, Oct. 30

Farm Succession Planning Workshop, 4-8:30 p.m. Forest Grove United Church of Christ, 2032 College Way, Forest Grove, Ore. Host-

ed by Tualatin SWCD, Rogue Farm Corps and Dairy Creek Community Food Web. RSVP requested at 971-409-6806 or nellie@roguefarmcorps.org. <http://www.swcd.net/event/leaving-a-legacy/>

Tuesday-Thursday Nov. 1-3

2016 NIAA Antibiotics Symposium. Antibiotic Use — Working Together for Better Solutions. National Institute for Animal Agriculture conference at Hyatt Regency Dulles, Herndon, Va. animalagriculture.org/2016-Antibiotics-Symposium, call 719-538-8843 or email niaa@animalagriculture.org

Thursday, Nov. 3

UI Extension Forestry Short Course, 6-9:30 p.m. Centennial Distributing Co. meeting room, 701 W. Buckles Road, Hayden, Idaho. This six-session program continues every Thursday through Dec. 15 and covers many topics. www.uidaho.edu/extension/forestry

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