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PEOPLE

DEVine Gardens a growing endeavor

Kirk and Jeri Hayes' son's interest in gardening helped launch business

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FOR THE BELLINGHAM HERALD**

Two years ago, Kirk Hayes was running an auto repair business in Whatcom County. Today, he and his wife, Jeri, grow organic produce for a market that is rapidly growing.

In fact, he says, the market for produce from DEVine Gardens has grown so fast that they recently leased an additional 7,170 square feet of greenhouse space in Lynden to supplement two acres plus 1,200 square feet of indoor space they have near Custer.

They credit their rapid growth to the help of several local organizations, but say the idea for the business germinated during the four years their son, Jeremy, now 21, studied horticulture at Ferndale High School.

Question: How long have you lived on this farm?

Jeri: I grew up on this farm. My grandfather, Hans Jensen, purchased it in 1919 and started a dairy farm. My father, Don Jensen, and his brother, Ernest, took it over in 1956. I graduated from Ferndale High School in 1981. Kirk and I married shortly after that.

Kirk: Jeri and I dated in high school. I graduated from Ferndale in 1980.

Jeri: For nine years while he was in the Army, we lived all over the world. We came back to Whatcom County and lived in Laurel and Everson.

Kirk: And moved onto her family's farm in 1995. I was a diesel mechanic around the county for years. When I had the shop here, we often gave food from our personal garden to customers, but it was Jeremy's interest in gardening that really got DEVine Gardens jump-started.

Q: How was that?

Jeri: He was so involved in it in high school, always showing us his projects

- **DEVine Gardens:** 961-1373 or www.devinegardens.com
- **Growing Washington:** 312-1678 or www.growingwashington.org
- **Northwest Agriculture Business Center:** (800) 707-2021 or www.agbizcenter.org
- **Sustainable Connections:** 647-7093 or www.sconnect.org

and staying after school to work with his teachers. We thought organic and hydroponic gardening was a good way of doing things.

Kirk: We've been experimenting for eight years, but didn't officially open DEVine Gardens until June 2005. Northwest Agriculture Business Center has been helping us develop our business plan, and bringing in consultants through a grant they got to help small farmers. The farm's name is a tribute to her dad and uncle.

Jeri: "D" for Don, "E" for Ernest, and Vine for the gardens.

Kirk: The vine is a Celtic symbol. My family has Celtic heritage.

Q: Is Jeremy involved?

Jeri: He'll graduate soon from Western Culinary Institute in Portland (Ore.), so he'll be cooking the food instead of growing it.

Q: Who are your customers?

Kirk: If you've had anything with basil at La Fiamma Wood Fire Pizza in the last nine months, or salad greens or the rosemary lemonade, you've eaten our product. We also deliver to Nimbus, Flats Tapas Bar, Swan Café, and Du Jour Bistro, and other restaurants.

Jeri: And to public schools all over the county.

Kirk: I like plugging where our food goes, because without the restaurants, Growing Washington, and Sustainable Connections, we wouldn't have a job. I've been especially appreciative of Sustainable Connections for their help in getting me ready to market my product.

Q: What is Growing Washington?

Kirk: A nonprofit organization that gets local farmers' foods into public schools and restaurants and, hopefully soon, into private schools as well. This is the only middleman that I'll deal with. I can't say enough good about them.

Q: How have you kept up with the increasing demand?

Kirk: We've hired the right people in the right places, and we've worked together as a family. We work directly with the chefs and managers of the restaurants. They tell us what they'd like grown and when they need it. That way, we don't grow too much or the wrong things. Each restaurant has specific needs and requirements for the way they want the produce cut and delivered, and our employees understand that.

Q: What's next?

Kirk: We're going to start blending biodiesel to provide heat and power to the farm. We just got someone to build our Web site. It will be up and fully running within 30 days. When our Web site is complete, chefs or community members will be able to log on, order directly, and watch the inventory change.

Dean Kahn's column runs on Sundays and Mondays. If you have a suggestion for a column, contact him at dean.kahn@bellinghamherald.com or 715-2291.