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Unconventional Agriculture

by Marti Attoun

Don Phillips measures his farm by square feet of growing space, not acres. He doesn't plow or weed. He doesn't even plant his crops in direct sunlight.

Jim and Tracy Reddekopp found their niche harvesting vanilla beans in Paauilo, Hawaii.

Bud Muth

Little about the nation's largest grower of exotic mushrooms fits the picture of a traditional farm. Don and his brother, Marshall, co-owners of Phillips Mushroom Farms, grow 35 million pounds a year of portabella, shiitake, enoki, maitake and other fancy fungi in chilly dark buildings on 220 acres of farmland at Kennett Square, Pa. (pop. 5,273). Mushrooms sprout in sterile bottles, on homemade sawdust logs and in wooden compost beds that are 60 feet long and stacked six-deep like bunk beds.

Their father, William Phillips, started growing white button mushrooms in 1927 and sidestepped convention, too. Mushrooms then were a wintertime-only crop, but William decided in 1939 to grow them in muggy summer.

"Dad would take a dump truck and get 250-pound cubes of ice and slide them into the rooms and blow fans over them," recalls Don, 70.

While most farmers in the mushroom mecca of Chester County grew for local canneries, William catered to the fresh market. His pioneering spirit guided the Phillips brothers in 1979 when they ventured into growing specialty mushrooms and became the first U.S. commercial shiitake grower. Six years later, they introduced the wildly successful portabellas.

"We literally gave the portabellas away to chefs from Maine to Miami," says Jim Angelucci, the farm's general manager. The hearty-flavored fist-sized-and-bigger brown mushrooms caught on as the filet of mushrooms and as "bella burgers" for vegetarians

in the 1980s.

"We're all looking for that next portabella," Angelucci says.

Specialty crops for niche markets

Across America, farmers and ranchers produce a variety of specialty crops and livestock—from elk and heirloom apples to alligators and vanilla orchids—for niche markets where less competition means more dollars. Some of these unconventional farmers are seeking a career and lifestyle change; others are trying to save the family farm.

"There are thousands of niche markets," says Ron Macher, the publisher of Small Farm Today, who has tracked unconventional crops for 30 years. Small farmers can't make money by miniaturizing a large farm and growing commodity crops, Macher preaches, but they can thrive with specialty crops and value-added products, such as jellies and sauces made with homegrown berries and cornmeal produced from homegrown corn.

No one keeps tabs on the number of U.S. niche farmers and ranchers, but a sign of their flourishing numbers is the boom in farmers' markets, up from 300 to 3,500 in the last 10 years, says Macher, a diversified vegetable and livestock producer in Clark, Mo. (pop. 275).

Heirloom apples and elk antlers

Fruit is sold fresh off the branches at Tree-Mendus Fruit Farm in Eau Claire, Mich. (pop. 656), where 250 varieties of heirloom and modern apples and pears grow alongside groves of plums, apricots, peaches and cherries.

"A lot of older folks will be making a recipe that calls for a certain apple, and they can find it here," says owner Herb Teichman, 75, whose parents started the farm in 1928.

Teichman's daughter Cindy Devalk, 44, rides on horseback through the orchards, helping pickers identify the ripe fruit. Some families rent an apple tree and return year after year to pick and picnic. Popular heirloom apple varieties include Golden Russet, Newtown Pippin and Jonathan.

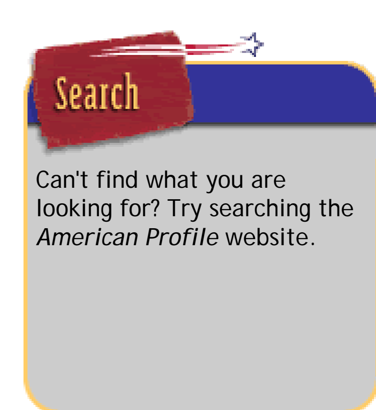
"We're trying to create a market for fresh air, fresh fruit, blue sky and country fun," Teichman says. "We can't compete with the world market. We decided not to compete but to put a value on what we sell."

Farmers Ernie and Shari Mau of Tolley, N.D. (pop. 63), were struggling financially in 1988 when they turned to elk ranching to help pay the bills.

"The crops were a little short here," says Ernie, 60. "I like elk meat, and I've always been a hunter."

Mau bought two bull elk calves and eventually built the herd to 750 head. He sells elk meat and big-game hunts at Silverwing Ranch and harvests antlers each spring to sell to Asian markets as a health supplement.

"It's got a lot of phosphorous and calcium," Mau says. "When an antler drops in the wild, it doesn't lay there for long before a



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coyote or something's chewing on it."

Earthworms, alligators and orchids

Niche marketing was the ticket home for Bill Vierra, 55, who longed for a career change after driving a truck for 26 years. He and his wife, Markie, now commute 50 feet to their barn, home to Vierra's Worm Farm in San Andreas, Calif. (pop. 2,615), where 500,000 earthworms squiggle in 5-gallon buckets.

The Vierras raise earthworms for their castings, or manure, which is sold to other farmers and nurseries as plant fertilizer.

"We work the worm business from the other end—what they leave behind," says Bill, who feeds his worms a custom organic diet, including grains and oyster shells.

"You can't improve on the worm, but you can improve on what you're feeding the worm," Bill adds. "We have happy worms. They're in 72 degrees. Basically, they have a complete diet and eat better than I do."

In Louisiana, alligator rancher Mike Ragusa, 66, sought a new career, too, and switched in 1991 from building houses for alligators to raising the reptiles for their hides and meat. He and his daughter, Micah Ragusa-Bujol, 28, harvest 20,000 gators a year at Circle M Ranch near Hammond, La. (pop. 17,639).

"It doesn't take a lot of land or have its ups and downs like other farming," says Ragusa, who raises the gators in 22 buildings with floors that slope to a drain for easy cleaning.

Alligator eggs are gathered each June from nests on private marshland. In about 15 months, the hatchlings grow to 4 feet and are ready for market. Fourteen percent of the alligators are returned to the wild every two years to replenish the population.

"Skins are bringing their highest now, about $100, and we can't supply enough," Ragusa says. "This is the Cadillac of leather."

Alligator skins are sold to overseas tanneries, which supply manufacturers of high-end watchbands, boots and belts. The Ragusas also sell alligator meat for $4 to $5 a pound wholesale.

A yearning to raise their children on a farm in Hawaii inspired Jim Reddekopp, 41, and his wife, Tracy, 36, to chose the ultimate niche crop—vanilla orchids—which only grow within 25 degrees of the equator. The couple started Hawaiian Vanilla Co. in Paauilo, Hawaii (pop. 571), in 1998, the only U.S. vanilla plantation.

"Nine years ago, we were having a dinner conversation, and my mother-in-law mentioned vanilla," Jim recalls. "We'd talked about macadamia nuts and papayas. Nobody was growing vanilla here."

Vanilla orchids blossom only one day a year between February and May and must be hand pollinated to produce a vanilla bean pod. If pollination is successful, a bean pod forms and matures in about nine months. The beans are blanched in water, sun-dried, and then split to release thousands of flavorful seeds, which are used to make vanilla extract.

In a 30,000-square-foot greenhouse, the Reddekopps annually

harvest 200 pounds of dried bean pods, which sell for up to $300 a pound. The Reddekopps give farm tours and sell beauty lotions and chocolate truffles flavored with natural vanilla, and their five home-schooled children help serve homemade vanilla-spiced dishes to visitors.

"Vanilla is a tiny commodity, and supply has never met the demand," says Jim, who may be the world's happiest niche farmer—and bean counter. He sells single vanilla beans for $10 apiece.

Such stories of successful specialty and niche farmers delight Macher.

"It's a grassroots movement led by farmers who want to stay on the land with their families," he says. "It's more than just commerce."

Visit www.smallfarmtoday.com to learn more about unconventional farming.

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