

Elderberry Operation Thrives Thanks To Aquaponics

By Dee George, Contributing Editor

Brent Madding in Webbers Falls, Okla., is doing a booming business in elderberries, thanks in part to using “aquaponics” to raise plants. He sells plant stock to home gardeners and commercial growers and also sells elderberry fruit, teas and skin care products locally and through his online business.

“My oldest son had built an aquaponics system to eat healthier, and his health completely changed for the better. That intrigued me,” Madding says. “I own 120 acres and was within hours of starting a blueberry operation when a friend said I should look into elderberries.”

The tart fruit has 3 1/2 times the antioxidant level of blueberries and twice as much Vitamin C as oranges. As a bonus, the top-producing elderberry cultivars are native to Eastern Oklahoma, where Madding lives. Though Madding didn’t even know what an elderberry looked like before doing his research, he decided to jump into growing them in 2011 with his wife, Valerie.

When the 2,000 “plants” that he ordered turned out to be cuttings that didn’t survive a first-year drought, Madding recognized there was an opportunity to start an elderberry nursery.

With his 1,700 sq. ft. flood-and-drain aquaponics system, cuttings are rooted, leafed out and ready to plant in 30 days. The wicking system raises and lowers water (fortified with nutrients from fish) every 12 min. in a gravel media that provides enough water for the roots to develop and grow without rotting.

The young plants are potted and moved to a 3,000-sq. ft. high tunnel to grow and sell to customers.

“Potted plants will produce fruit the first year. On the other hand, it takes 2 to 3 years for cuttings to produce, and you need good irrigation,” Madding explains.

Besides the nursery, he cultivates 11 elderberry varieties totaling 7,000 shrubs that he grows for cutting propagation and to harvest fruit for the other products he sells. Everything is grown using sustainable, organic practices.

Harvest begins in May when he picks some of the flowers for tea and skin care products.

“Our tea is the most popular. Customers are aware of the nutritional benefits,” Madding says. Tea blends include medicinal herbs also grown in the aquaponics system.

The skin care line of oils and Elderflower Skin Polish and Skin Serum are the result of Madding’s own experience.

“We worked on teas the first year and I harvested and processed for two weeks,” Madding explains. “I looked at my hands and they were baby soft with no torn cuticles. I found out elder flowers were historically used for skin care.”

Fruit harvest runs from late July through September or longer. Handpicked berries are vacuum-sealed and frozen, and sell out quickly.

Teas and skin care products can be purchased year-round through the website, and 1-gal. planted pots can be ordered. Madding sells eight varieties with various traits according to customers’ needs.

“They may want a healthier berry with higher antioxidants or they may want sweeter berries with more sugar for jelly or wine,” he says. “A lot of people get them for ornamental purposes. They’re excellent wildlife habitat



Brent Madding grows elderberries using a 1,700 sq. ft. flood-and-drain aquaponics system. Cuttings are rooted, leafed out and ready to plant in 30 days.



Madding sells elderberry fruit, teas and skin care products locally and through his online business.

for NRCS or buffers. It’s an ideal crop for small acreages, 3 to 5 acres. We’re looking for new growers to supplement our harvest of berries.”

For people interested in the operation, Madding does tours by appointment from March to June and again September to

November. Check out the website for more information about products.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, 360 Farms, 21838 S. 115th St. E., Porum, Okla. 74455 (ph 918 464-2505; www.360okfarms.com; Facebook: 360 Farms; brent@360okfarms.com).

Ranching School Focuses On Profit

Understandable language and focus on profit are key components in weeklong Ranching for Profit courses put on by Dave and Kathy Pratt and their team. The goal: help ranchers and farmers be profitable, nurture healthier soil and livestock and - as a result - be happier.

“The focus is business,” Dave Pratt says. “One thing about us is the comprehensive nature of what we do. We have to talk about finance, and we also talk about people. In ranching, the grass business is about capturing solar energy. So we need to get into grazing, nutrition and soil health. And we are never far away from the economic and financial part.”

The weeklong Ranching for Profit school allows time for participants to learn in depth—about cow profitability and cow depreciation, the benefits of cell grazing and matching the calving season to the forage cycle; and the concept of having a disposable herd, for example.

“The heart and soul of our students are multigenerational ranch owners with between 200 and 2,000 cows,” Pratt says. But the school also attracts feedlot and large ranch owners and producers of other livestock such as bison and sheep.

The school is offered about 5 times a year in various cities in December and January and costs \$2,750 for the first person and \$2,000 for the second person (students are often married couples).

The worksheets they fill out ahead of time and interact with the other 40 to 50 students in the class also provide valuable information.

“One thing that makes us unique is the follow-up we do,” Pratt says. With its Executive Link chapters, he organizes Ranching For Profit School alumni into boards. Board members review each other’s operations, offer recommendations to increase profitability and hold one another accountable to take action. Pratt estimates he has visited more than 400 ranches in the past 10 years as part of the Executive Link program.

He says he also posts online information through Profit Tips, a free subscription to anyone who signs up through the website.

For samplings of what the school provides, the Pratts are available for association and business sponsored half-day or full-day workshops that focus on specific issues. Pratt welcomes inquiries from groups that need speakers to fill out an event. He has owned Ranch Management Consultants since 2001 and taught for the previous owner since 1992. More than 200 school sessions have been held since the company was founded in 1980.

Many students return to attend the school a second and third time, Pratt says, as a refresher and to meet changing needs of their operation.

Check out the website for school sessions and to contact Pratt about workshop options.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Dave and Kathy Pratt, Ranch Management Consultants, Inc., and the Ranching For Profit School, 953 Linden Ave., Fairfield, Calif. 94533 (ph 707 429-2292; www.ranchmanagement.com; pratt@ranchmanagement.com).



The weeklong Ranching for Profit school put on by Dave and Kathy Pratt teaches ranchers and farmers how to be more business focused to boost profits.

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