

Veteran Grows a Farming Career

Cathie Dibert served her country as an E4 specialist in Army military intelligence. Returning to the Claysburg area, she became a registered nurse, and now, a farmer.

Cathie knew she would have to retire from nursing after a heart attack at 35. She needed something that allowed her to have a flexible schedule, good exercise, and plenty of rest. Her husband Rodney Dibert, a building contractor, had acquired the family farm that consisted of 68 acres. But more than 50 of those were mountainous. *"We had five beef cattle, a few run-down outbuildings, and a small amount of ground that might be productive,"* said Cathie. Thus, Green"er" Acres Farm was born. *"I actually grow all of my vegetables on less than an acre of ground,"* she said.

Green"er" Acres produce is sold under the Homegrown by Heroes and Pennsylvania Preferred labeling programs. The Homegrown by Heroes label is open to all farmer veterans. Pennsylvania Preferred denotes the products are grown in Pennsylvania.

To start, Cathie received some assistance from the Farmer Veterans Coalition. The program identifies the needs and furthers the agriculture careers of those who have served their country and are now serving their communities through farming. Cathie has been working to help start a Pennsylvania coalition so other veteran farmers can get future help. It takes 10 people to form such a coalition.

A few years ago, Cathie received a USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service grant to install a high tunnel with deep irrigation for her farm. Because plants are protected from the weather, high tunnel tomatoes are protected from blight. The tunnel is the site of a huge array of vegetables including garlic, onions, broccoli, cabbage, Swiss chard, kale, beets, and tomatoes.

Cathie added wall mounts in the tunnel to grow strawberries. She attempted raspberry bushes but found they want to take over the tunnel. Her goal is to have another high tunnel for fruits. *"We are putting almost everything we make back into the business at this time,"* she said.

With her husband in contracting, the couple has learned to recycle many things. Rodney built her a small greenhouse out of leftover lumber. He also built her a seed starting spot in the basement of their home. For her part, Cathie constructed

raised garden beds on some of her hillier property sections to expand her growing space. She struck up a deal with the local Intermunicipal Relations Committee, a recycling organization in nearby Altoona. She gets rich topsoil that plants thrive in. Her four raised beds are about 3 feet by 25 feet located in what would have been an unusable space. Most of the crops are chemical-free. Organic and conventional growing practices are used when appropriate.

Cathie also worked with AgrAbility PA and the PA Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR). Their support included a visit from an occupational therapist and a farm assessment of her property to identify modifications and equipment that would facilitate her farming efforts. Because she was eligible to receive their services, OVR provided funding for Cathie to acquire a John Deere Gator so that she could easily access different areas of the farm while reducing physical strain, especially on her heart.

Now into her 13th year of farming and with eight years of Farmers' Markets under her belt, Cathie said she is still

constantly learning. She's also always looking for ways to be slightly different. She likes to offer vegetables that come in unusual hues, such as purple tomatoes, or beans, or peppers, explaining that *"The different colors mean they have more antioxidants."* She also hosts a Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA. She tries to have what the people want and if possible, be the first at the local Farmers' Market with whatever vegetable ripens next. In addition to the vegetables, Cathie offers eggs, chicken, and some pork.

"Truthfully, I wouldn't be able to do what I do without the help of AgrAbility PA and OVR. The Gator is indispensable in carrying the totes of produce up and down the hills of the farm in order to get them to market."



Above, Cathie in the high tunnel with deep irrigation, which protects her tomatoes and other produce from adverse weather conditions. Below, Cathie shows off her wares at one of the many Farmers' Markets she frequents.



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