

# Former NYC exec turns Surry farmer

August 16, 2020 By Jeff Linville [jlinville@mtairynews.com](mailto:jlinville@mtairynews.com)



James Garrett stands among his 8-foot high plant towers in a greenhouse he built just outside Elkin. The tower closest to him is filled with Bibb lettuce.

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James Garrett shows how his plants don't live in soil, but absorb their "food" straight into the roots from nutrient-rich water like this Toscano kale.



The plants closest to the camera are nearly ready to move into a tower, while the plants get progressively younger across the tables.



James Garrett points to the top where water seeps down onto coils. Large fans behind the coils blow over the water, creating evaporation, which cools the air inside the greenhouse when it gets too hot.



James Garrett said he did most of the assembly of this greenhouse himself, with room enough for 100 towers.



Red oak lettuce grows in one of the towers.

STATE ROAD — When a lifelong city slicker decides to move to a quiet countryside for early retirement, what does he do with all his newly discovered free time?

Well, if you are London native James Garrett, you dive headfirst into a type of organic farming that uses no dirt.

Just north of Elkin in the State Road area lies Grassy Creek Vineyard & Winery. The former dairy farm has 225 acres of land, and on a tiny portion of it, sits a 2,100-square-foot hydroponic greenhouse.

Garrett, 58, said the building is 30'x72' with 12-foot walls.

“It’s a pretty high-tech greenhouse,” he said. “This is a double-wall polycarbonate, so it’s very durable. It’s got a 15-year life span on this plastic. And it diffuses the sun’s rays just enough that I don’t need shade cloth or anything like that.”

Speaking during a week in July when the weather had been in the 90s and humid each day, he said he had no problem keeping the interior to a level comfortable for plants.

Gesturing to a couple of small flower-covered structures just outside the greenhouse, Garrett said, “These two towers sat on a deck in Atlanta 10 years ago; that’s how it started. I started growing food — I’d never grown anything in my life. I’m from London, moved to New York City, then Atlanta. I mean, I’m a city boy. I didn’t have a horticultural bone in my body.

“But I got one of these towers and we started growing food, and I couldn’t believe it. I fell in love with it and started doing research, formulated a dream, which eventually became a plan. Here we are 10 years later: Greenhouse Towers.”

### **Coming here**

The Yadkin Valley region is a long ways from Atlanta. How did he and his wife, a Texas native, wind up here?

“My wife Severin and I had always wanted to move to North Carolina to the mountains. We thought we were going to the Highlands or one of those places. And then we came up to Roaring Gap six years ago, just purely by chance, and saw it, fell in love with it.”

He said he became friends with a couple of the owners of the local vineyards. He was telling Jim and Cynthia Douthit that his dream of a greenhouse couldn’t be realized in Roaring Gap because it was up the mountain at a higher elevation, and it would be too cold in the winter.

“Heating a greenhouse is expensive,” he added.

The Douthits said there was a section of land on the former Klondike Dairy Farm that the vineyard wasn't using for growing grapes, just baling hay.

Garrett made an offer to rent space, and the owners accepted.

## **Setting up**

"We broke ground on this Nov. 18," Garrett said. "We had the land flattened, then we put in the footings, the foundation and poured the concrete.

"And it was about the first week of December that the greenhouse was delivered. It came on two semis — just a big pile of metal."

"I put it together myself with one other guy, which was quite an undertaking. We did it in December and January — we lucked out with good weather. It was mostly dry.

"But I've never done anything quite so mentally taxing or physically demanding in my life — and I've done a lot. It was well worth it because I saved about \$32,000 on the construction of the greenhouse, which is what they were going to charge me to put it up."

Done with one other guy? Who helped?

When it comes to growing grapes, Garrett noted, "December, January, they are very quiet." So, he was lucky enough to have one of the co-owners assist him in the construction.

"They have a forklift truck, and I could borrow that. These trusses weigh 600 pounds each, and there are a lot of them; and trying to get them 12 feet in the air, it was a process."

Working to assemble the greenhouse structure, "It took me until probably mid-February. ... Then we had to work on the electrical and the plumbing."

Asked how he had the knowledge to do that kind of work himself, Garrett chuckled. "I didn't. I just went at it, with a set of directions and a plan."

"I now know every square inch of this greenhouse, every nut and bolt. I know how it works. And, actually that's a plus because now I know how to fix it if something goes wrong."

## **The work**

Inside the greenhouse, Garrett said, "We are all leafy greens and herbs. Right now we can't do anything that's flowering because we can't pollinate because we have no bees. We're doing things like kale and swiss chard, got bok choy, a variety of different

gourmet lettuces. We've got all the different types of herbs: basil, thyme, dill and chives and all those kinds of good things.

"Primarily though, leafy greens is our sweet spot. ... Arugula is one of our best sellers. We grow arugula unlike anybody else, and people go, 'I've never eaten arugula, didn't even know that's what it was like.' People are eating our kale that have never eaten kale before."

That doesn't mean things went according to plan.

"We started growing seeds in mid- to late-March. We were putting food in the towers in the middle of April.

"And then COVID-19 happened and completely changed our business model because we had six restaurants lined up as our first customers. And they all went away."

With restaurant dining rooms being closed, and their remaining takeout orders not sufficient, Garrett needed a new approach.

"We had always intended to do farmers markets, but we had to really get into that in a big way. We had to reach out to all sorts of people. ... Because we live up the mountain, we do the Roaring Gap Farmers Market. But we have an online service that we do for High Meadows Country Club, and we've started to do an online service for the Sparta Farmers Market."

## **The operation**

Inside the greenhouse, there is no soil, just 8-foot cylindrical stands with plants sticking out at intervals. How do the plants get nutrients if there is no soil?

"Nutrition comes from minerals. There are minerals in the soil that gets absorbed into the plants through the roots and gets turned into nutrition. Because they are literally hanging in air and being watered periodically, we have a mineral-rich solution that we add to the water. It's all done on automation, so it's a measured amount."

Leading the way around the greenhouse, he said, "We consider this 'beyond organic.' It's not an official term, but it is beyond what is considered to be organic. It is denser, it is more nutritious."

After giving the smaller versions of the towers a try in Atlanta, Garrett said he did some research into the method of farming and found some surprising reports.

"The nutritional value of plants, even those you are going to buy in Whole Foods, is somewhere in the region of 50 to 60 times less nutritious than it was before the second World War. And that's just because the soil they are growing in has been depleted of all minerals."

“The tower garden company actually mines its own minerals. They go very deep in the soil.”

Garrett said he isn't trying to sell some marketing pitch; he said he went to New York in his youth to make a name for himself, but now he wants a fulfilling task to do in his retirement.

## **Giving back**

Some of that fulfillment is:

“We are a business for a purpose. Part of our business model is to give away a tenth of our food. So, we have partnered with the Sparta Food Bank; the Ark in Elkin, which is a woman's shelter; we've got the Tri-C, which is a homeless shelter; and then also the local Elkin Fire Department, who have about 50 volunteers.”

These volunteer firefighters are all lower to low-mid income families who could use a helping hand and are deserving of that help, Garrett believes.

The thing about local food pantries is that they rely on pre-packaged goods that have longer shelf life.

“It's processed, it's not that healthy. I mean, it's a part of life, it's necessary, but we're able to give them food that frankly you can't even buy in the supermarket.”

Another thing he likes is that people can take his idea and use it elsewhere, even urban areas.

He said his wife put 30 of these towers in public schools back in Atlanta so that kids could study plant growth as part of their STEM curriculum. He has spoken to the school boards in Elkin and Sparta about trying the idea in this area.

The reason for the vertical structure of the towers is to create a growing space that takes up little square footage, Garrett explained. And since it doesn't require plants being buried in the ground, “You could be in a parking lot; you don't have to be in a field or a beautiful area like we've got,” he said, waving his arm around toward the grounds of the vineyard and winery.

“Right now I've got 54 towers operational, but the greenhouse is designed for 102 towers. The idea behind that is one person is just about capable of managing a hundred towers by himself — if you have no life, which isn't part of the plan. But initially starting the business, I realized I could handle this up until a hundred towers. And eventually I'll have to get some kind of part-time help.”

He said it would realistically take 1.5 people to manage the greenhouse once completely filled.

He said he isn't looking to put up to 200-300 towers. In fact, that would flood the market with his particular goods and cause him to have to ship produce further away, creating travel expenses.

As a business, he said the operation isn't making a profit yet, but it has only been operational a few months, and this has been a trying year to start a new venture.

"But I can see it coming; every week, actually. ... We just got a contract with Hugh Chatham Hospital to provide all of their lettuce in the future. And that's big because they will be getting in the area of 30 to 50 pounds of lettuce a week."

He pointed to some new towers that had been erected but weren't in use yet. He said those had been marked just for Hugh Chatham's use.

And since he can do all the labor himself for right now, he doesn't have wages to pay yet, which will help lead to profits.

"The other thing we do is: everything we sell is living. The roots are still attached to our lettuce, to our kale, to our arugula. So when we hand something over to someone, they are getting something that is still living. What happens is that stays fresh in the fridge much longer.

"Now, from a restaurant standpoint, they waste and have to throw out about 30% of their produce because they never get to it and it wilts and goes bad."

There is an old saying: "Your purpose in life is to find your purpose and give your whole heart and soul to it."

It looks like James Garrett has found his.

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