

[Home](#) > [Local News](#) > [Shenandoah County](#)

12:17 pm Thursday, August 6, 2015



Lee Draper, of Purple Rooster Organics, rakes the garden soil to remove any rocks before a batch of carrots for the fall is planted. Kevin Green/Daily

In less than a year, Edinburg residents Jaz and Lee Draper, of Purple Rooster Organics, have gone from self-sustaining vegetable farmers to vendors at area farmers' markets.

"We're in two markets right now – Strasburg and (South Street Barn Market) in Woodstock," Lee Draper said. "We have another vendor that we supply for the Bryce (Farmers' Market) every Wednesday."

To handle this workload, the Drapers split duties between Strasburg and Woodstock – since both markets occur around the same time each Saturday morning.

"This means Thursday and Friday, we're picking in a frenzy," Lee Draper said, noting that all of this is done by hand.

At the markets, the Drapers sell just about everything that they grow at Purple Rooster – eggplant, beats, onions, leaks, cucumbers, berries and several kinds of squash – along with numerous varieties of home-baked bread.

"It works pretty well," Draper said. "We tap into two different and distinct markets, even though they do overlap a little bit."

Originally from Baltimore, Maryland, Lee Draper moved to the Shenandoah Valley in 2010 with his wife, Jaz, and together they bought the 10-acre farm that would eventually become Purple Rooster in 2014.

At first, Purple Rooster started from the Drapers' interest in growing food sustainably and in experimental ways. However, that changed quickly after last year's crop.

"We grew so much stuff last year, we still have 20-30 quarts of food that we canned just for ourselves," Lee Draper said, noting that is enough to last them four or five months.

With that surplus, the Drapers decided to start giving away hundreds of pounds of vegetables and countless numbers of canned food to local neighbors.

After that, they decided in February to test their products by joining the newly formed Strasburg Farmers' Market and the

South Street Barn Market in Woodstock.

While they have seen positive response from markets' shoppers, Jaz Draper said, "We're not turning a profit, that's why I had a job."

Up until last week, she had been working a full-time online job for a California technology company.

Lee Draper noted, "there is very little money in vegetable farming. You break your back, sweat through your clothes a couple of times a day and at the end of the day, you might only made \$80."

To sell at the markets this year, he said they had to expand what they were growing by 30 percent, which will include several varieties of carrots.

To grow this operation, the Drapers have to manage everything on the farm from pests to plant wilt to soil health and crop harvests from sunrise until around 10 p.m. — even after market days.

While they are are considering applying for organic certification through the U.S. Department of Agriculture next year, Jaz Draper said they are looking to explore the region's markets.

"We're trying to, in a very small way, imitate a small and sustainable year-round vegetable growing operation," Lee Draper said.

All of this is done through organic material such as horse manure compost instead of synthetic fertilizers, and by-hand planting techniques rather than machine tilling.

"Growing this way is very scientific," he said. "If you don't use petroleum-based fertilizer and herbicides, then you have to be much more careful about the relationships between plants, soil and timing."

For example, Lee Draper is planning to rid a garden row of weeds for fall carrot planting through the use of a propane-fueled flame weeder.

"Carrots don't compete well. Because they take a long time to grow their tops ... weeds will overtake them," he said.

Their solution is to take a wooden box with a glass top and place it on top of the soil to advance weed growth — and then flame weed anything that grows in the days prior to the carrot plants sprouting.

"It only takes 160 degrees for one second to kill a small plant," he said, adding that it "breaks the cellular structure" of the weeds.

While Purple Rooster is not turning a profit at the moment, Lee Draper said that of the returns on investment they benefit from is swapping costly synthetic weed killers for this flame weeder.

He indicated that this daily, constant workload is anything but a chore.

"We're happy doing this," Lee Draper said. "We're very passionate about diversity and growing stuff in a healthy way."

Contact staff writer Kevin Green at 540-465-5137 ext. 155, or kgreen@nvdaily.com

1 Comment

Sort by Top



Add a comment...



Diane Nicholson · Owner at Self-Employed

Creative approaches to organic gardening. Good work Jaz and Lee!

Like · Reply · Aug 8, 2015 4:32pm