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Family grows business one bright idea at a time

Listening to customers, they branch out into different areas

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Stacey Gingras checks on tomato plant starts she will sell at the Prosser Farmers' Market. Gingras was in high school when she founded Buggirl Gardens, which paid for most of her education.

An innate affinity for plants and direct marketing led Stacey Gingras to own and operate a successful business by the time she reached her mid-30s.

"It turned out to be nothing like we planned on," Gingras said. "But we're so thankful!"

She started in business by direct marketing the family's apple crop and a few small flower bouquets. Gingras discovered her skill with flowers working for a local florist while in high school. She and her mother then took flowers from around their home and made small bouquets to sell at the local farmers' market in Prosser, Wash.

"We started with less than \$100 in product that first time," said Gingras. "It went so well we started bringing loose cut flowers and assembling bouquets on the spot for people."

Each year brought more and more customers and requests for different items, Gingras said. She began offering bedding plant starts and then added vegetable starts. In the most recent years she has added produce grown on the family farm.

Now Gingras and her husband, Jonathan, bring 34 varieties of tomatoes and more than 20 varieties of peppers - among other produce varieties - to the Prosser market.

"We really like to play with variety and offer our customers the unusual and interesting," Gingras said.

The Gingrases plan to add hardy kiwi, several types of berries, peaches and fingerling potatoes to their product list. Jonathan is adding even another aspect to the business by custom fire-roasting chile peppers on site at the market.

They also work with Stacey's parents, Gary and Suni Ballard, to ensure a wide selection of products. Most of the items sold are grown on the Ballards' 2.5 acres.

No space goes unwasted, Gingras said.

"We tuck things in wherever a spot opens up," Gingras said. "This gives us the maximum production and the use of beneficial insects."

"It's a family affair, but Stacey and Suni are the driving force behind it all," Gary Ballard said. "Us men are just the labor."

The Gingrases recently purchased 5 acres and will plant several varieties of squash there this year. They also plan to expand and are considering starting a community-supported agriculture operation.

But for now they are working to maintain their current commitments.

Gingras calls her business Buggirl Gardens, after her love of gardening and insects. She studied spider reproduction while earning her master's degree in biology from the University of Texas at Arlington.

Her strong suit is the relationship she maintains with her customers. Requests from customers are frequent and welcomed, Gingras said.

"We're working on propagating some honeysuckle that one of our customers requested," Gingras said. "We feel really plugged into our customers by working mainly at the farmers' markets like we do."

She also sells plants at special events like antique shows and harvest festivals and creates flower arrangements for weddings and other events. She did four weddings last year and says that is her maximum. Her biggest event is an invitation-only plant show in Spokane, Wash., that features over 300 vendors.

"We're still not sure how we got on the list, but it's an honor to be invited to return this year," Gingras said.

Along with selling at the Prosser market, Buggirl Gardens sells at the Richland Farmers' Market. The business cleared \$1,000 profit on two days last year.

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