FOOD GROWN WITH LOVE



Rodger Bilbrey moves a tray of young plants at the Bilbrey Family Farm in Auburndale, Florida October 9, 2015.

Organic farmer fights the bugs the natural way

BY **LANCE FERGUSON**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **PIERRE DUCHARME**





(ABOVE) **Carol Bilbrey inputs some information on their tablet computer at the Bilbrey Family Farm in Auburndale.**

(LEFT) **Rodger Bilbrey with a Red Hot Chili Pepper plant at the Bilbrey Family Farm.**

Rodger and Carol Bilbrey manage their 3.5 acre farm alone although they do have 14 farmhands.

But, unfortunately, Katrina, Gucci, Marshy, Sweetie, Twerp, Stalking, Froggy, Peepers, Possum, Bandit, Sweep Pea, Yoda, Obi-Wan and Little Kitty are not exactly motivated workers.

The cats, all of them rescues, leave the work for Rodger. And because all produce grown on his farm is organic, it is a lot of work.

"Being a community-supported farm, we like to give people a variety, something different, something they haven't had," Bilbrey says.

A smaller number of several products are grown on the farm. Numerous varieties of bell peppers, tomatoes, lettuce, eggplants and more are sold to customers at the Downtown Farmers Curb Market in Lakeland.



Rodger Bilbrey waters the red beet seedlings in the greenhouse.



Rodger Bilbrey looks over the row of tomato plants.

If you cannot make it to the market in Lakeland, Bilbrey plans to open a stand at the farm, located at 6488 Bilbrey Nursery Road in Auburndale, for customers to come by and purchase vegetables picked from the vine that day. Hours will be available on www.bilbreyfamilyfarm.com.

Bilbrey Family Farm is also a community supported agriculture farm where customers can buy a bag of vegetables that are available for pick up every week or every other week. Weekly memberships cost $540 annually and bi-weekly subscriptions cost $300.

Payment plans are also available.

Carol Bilbrey likes getting to know the members.

"Some of them, they come and pick up their bags and say 'Hi,' and 'Bye,' and that's it," she says. "But others stick around and talk to us and we've really developed a friendship with some of them."

Julie Townsend, executive director of the Lakeland Downtown Development Authority that owns the Lakeland market, says meeting farmers who grow your produce makes you more connected to the foods you eat.

"They're one of our actual growers so it's

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hugely important that we support them," Townsend says. "The fact that you can actually meet the person whose food you're about to purchase and eat is a great experience."

That is one of the highlights for Stephanie Durham, a member of Bilbrey Family Farms for the last three years.

"Rodger and Carol, you can't get any better than them," Durham says. "They love to talk and explain everything. I've just learned so much participating with them and you know what you're getting to eat."

Since the farm opened in 2012, Bilbrey has had to come up with solutions to some unique problems.

For example, his enemy No. 1 – stink bugs – march on, even though he's tried rosemary oil and other remedies to try to get rid of them.

He mainly uses an insecticide that is derived from the neem leaf, but he's also tried chili peppers, coffee grounds and once used ground rhubarb root as a repellent but the odor was not worth the decent result.

But that's not the worst smelling method he has attempted.

"A stink bug can't stand to smell itself so I got this brainy idea one time," Bilbrey says. "I went out and caught a bunch of stink bugs, put them in a food processor, ground them up with a littler water in there ... We sprayed the edge of the beds and it worked for about two days. After that they were right back."

That food processor was never used again.

But once the crop comes in, all those hassles are worth it to Bilbrey and customers like Diane Guarnieri.

"I live in Auburndale so to have something so close is wonderful," Guarnieri says. "I'm a big advocate of organic produce ... and the supermarkets are only now starting to address that. But I love going to the farm knowing the vegetables were cut fresh that day. Food grown with love is the name of the game in my opinion.



(L-R) **Rodger Bilbrey and Carol Bilbrey in the greenhouse.**