

COMMENTS

Grower Embraces Farm-to-Table Concept



RODGER BILBREY, 54, owns and operates Bilbrey Family Farm based in Auburndale, the only community supported agriculture farm currently operating in Polk County.

MICHAEL WILSON | THE LEDGER

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AUBURNDALE | At the break of dawn, layered against the numbing cold, Rodger Bilbrey hopped aboard his tractor recently to till a patch of dark, moist earth at

his Auburndale farm.

In coming days, he'll pore through 450 pounds of seed potatoes, splitting the nubby tubers into two or three pieces before folding them into the soil.

By May, the new potatoes will be ready for harvest, along with a cornucopia of spring vegetables — lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes, zucchini and cantaloupes.

Bilbrey, who turns 55 on Feb. 20, coaxes from his oversized backyard garden enough food for dozens of Polk County families who buy shares of his bounty through community supported agriculture, a concept gaining traction in the United States with roughly 4,000 farms, according to the website LocalHarvest.com.

Facts

RODGER HOWLAND
BILBREY

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH:
Feb. 20, 1960, in Winter Haven.

AGE: 54.

RESIDENCE: Auburndale.

FAMILY: Wife, Carol;
stepdaughter, Chrissie Collins;
two grandchildren, one great-
grandchild.

JOB: Farmer.

EDUCATION: Winter Haven
High School, Class of 1978.

HOBBY: Gardening.

DRIVES: A 1999 Ford F-250
diesel.

LAST MOVIE WATCHED: "Over
the Hedge," on DVD.

FAVORITE RESTAURANT:
Ling's Buffet, Lakeland.

LEAST LIKED VEGETABLE:
Asparagus.

Shoppers at Lakeland's Saturday morning downtown farmers market also have access to Bilbrey's array of produce from large sprays of dark, green collards to more exotic-sounding products like burgundy okra, blue potatoes and fairy tale eggplant.

Bilbrey Family Farm is the only CSA operating in Polk County, though a Fort Meade operation is expected to begin selling memberships in about a year under the direction of Daniel Weisgarber, a 29-year-old from Lakeland who looks to Bilbrey for inspiration.

"Rodger is one of the more old-school guys" who can talk from experience, said Weisgarber, whose six-acre spread will produce a broad range of vegetables. Unlike the Auburndale CSA, Weisgarber's Radiant Farms will employ volunteer labor in exchange for goods.

Youth has its advantages when it comes to farming, said Weisgarber, which makes Bilbrey all the more remarkable for his ability to go it alone, with the aid of a tractor. Raised in a family of citrus and cattle farmers, Bilbrey always has lived

close to the earth. Slim as a bean pole with a weathered face framed in gray hair and cropped beard, the Winter Haven native ran his own ornamental plant nursery and tree farm for 22 years until business went slack in 2000 with increasing competition from big box building supply and garden stores.

With no formal education outside of a high school degree and membership in Future Farmers of America, Bilbrey worked two years at the nonprofit Polk Training Center for Handicapped Citizens, overseeing nursery operations. From there, he took a job as nursery manager for a 118-acre native plant nursery that included a tree farm and organic vegetable farm.

Based in San Antonio, a rural outpost southwest of Dade City known for its annual rattlesnake festival and nearby St. Leo University, the position afforded him experience in seed propagation, crossbreeding and other horticultural practices.

That job dried up in 2012, a victim of the economic meltdown, Bilbrey said, leaving all 30 of the farm's employees out of work, including him.

"We literally came to a stop," he said. "There would be weeks where we didn't sell one plant."

After a few months of job searching and collecting unemployment benefits, Bilbrey hit upon a way to earn income using the land he purchased from his father, Owen Jr., 83. Originally a 40-acre tract that housed the family's ornamental shrub and tree farm, the Auburndale property had been sold off in pieces, leaving Rodger Bilbrey and his wife, Carol, with six acres.

It was more than enough for a CSA, a farm-to-table concept that originated in Europe and jumped to the United States in the early 1980s. A burgeoning vegetarian crowd liked having a personal connection to growers, most of whom employed chemical-free, organic practices.

Billed as an alternative to the industrial food system, CSAs remove the middleman, putting more money in farmers' pockets and giving customers food that is as fresh as possible, with very little if any carbon footprint, said Shawn Steed, an environmental horticulture production extension agent for Polk and Hillsborough counties.

It was during Bilbrey's days in San Antonio that he became acquainted with

Steed. Their relationship, though professional, gave Bilbrey the idea to try community farming.

Together with his wife, Steed operates a 2½-acre CSA in Plant City, averaging 20 members. Their success motivated the Bilbreys, whose operation has grown to 45 members in less than three years.

"I think Rodger has a good knack for growing," Steed said. "I even learn stuff when I go over there. We're friendly enough with each other so we bounce ideas — how to deal with problems, what varieties work well."

AGRICULTURAL FAMILY

Born Feb. 20, 1960, at Winter Haven Hospital, Rodger Howland Bilbrey was the youngest of three children to parents Owen Jr. and Phyllis, who managed a family fruit company along with a 660-acre ranch in Hardee that produced cattle, citrus and watermelon.

It was the perfect environment for a youth with a keen interest in plants.

"He was always a very sweet, gentle kid, very interested in growing plants early," said Bilbrey's sister, Cindy Hallinan of Sarasota. "I remember buying him a small plant when I was in middle school, and he had it for years. He's extremely smart, really a fascinating person."

Hallinan said her younger brother never showed much interest in taking over the family citrus business, especially with all the risks involved — disease, pests and killing freezes. Yet he soaked up plenty of horticultural knowledge, she said, and grew to appreciate the natural environment.

"Rodger has a God-given gift with growing things," Hallinan said. "He gave me some vegetables one day that were so incredibly beautiful, I took them home and took a picture of them. He is truly one of those rugged individualists, independent and strong."

After graduating from Winter Haven High School in 1978, Bilbrey entered what was then Polk Junior College but dropped out after a year when money ran low. He went to work as a gardener at Cypress Gardens, then tried his hand at land surveying. His independent streak motivated him to start his own nursery, with help from his mother, now deceased.

His career has come full circle now that he's returned to earning a living off his own land, where neat rows of rainbow-colored Swiss chard share space with broccoli and other hardy, winter vegetables. Bilbrey's wife, Carol, retired several years ago from her 25-year career as executive assistant to the chiefs of police in Winter Haven, and now helps her husband manage the farm. In March, they'll celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary.

"He lives and breathes growing (plants)," she said. "(At night) I'll be reading "People" magazine and there he'll be with a seed catalog."

Ever the whole foods evangelist, Rodger Bilbrey was one of the first growers in Polk to sign up for a new state program that doubles the value of food stamps when used to buy fresh produce at a number of farmers markets, including the Lakeland Downtown Farmers Curb Market, where the Fresh Access Bucks program made its debut Saturday.

Bilbrey's goods are produced under guidelines provided by Certified Naturally Grown, a nonprofit dedicated to organic farming without the paperwork involved in attaining the USDA organic certification. The operations of CNG growers are subjected to the review of their peers, insuring adherence to standards, said Steed, the extension agent.

"He (Bilbrey) is very conscientious about what he's doing, how he treats his produce," Steed said. "He does a real good job of pest control, and he's good at sharing information, which is a great attribute."

Julie Newquist, a neighbor of the Bilbreys, has been a loyal customer from the beginning.

"I'm a diehard juicer, they know my likes and dislikes," she said. "I'm raising five boys so we definitely partake of meat. I'm not a vegetarian, but I do enjoy my juice. The kale and celery and cabbage (at Bilbrey farm) is awesome."

As a weekly member, Newquist pays Bilbrey roughly \$600 a year, keeping her in fresh produce in all but the summer months.

His vegetables taste vibrant and stay fresh longer than store-bought produce, she said, which saves money in the long run.

"To me, it's more affordable," she said. "I used to call my (refrigerator) vegetable drawer the rotter, but that is no longer the case."

Bilbrey said he hears that often from other customers.

"They don't mind paying the price," he said, "when something's harvested less than 24 hours before it's handed to you, it tastes better."

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