

# Watch Now: Amherst family stays busy with home-grown produce business

Justin Faulconer

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Rob Campbell checks on one of the multiple tubes of greens available for purchase in the Mt. Pleasant Growers greenhouse.

Photo by Lee Luther Jr., for the (Amherst) New Era-Progress

In a greenhouse near U.S. 60 West in the Mount Pleasant area of Amherst County, Steve and Susan Bailey are growing a business that delivers fresh produce to customers' doorsteps.

Their daughter, Betsy Campbell, and her husband, Rob, on a recent afternoon joined in on treating and preparing the vegetables as part of a family venture, Mt. Pleasant Growers, a hydroponic producer of fresh, clean and nutrition-packed microgreens, lettuces, greens and herbs.

The state-of-the-art greenhouse, which Steve Bailey began building five years ago on his wife's mother's property, has a closed loop hydroponic system that gives plants the exact amount of water and nutrients needs to grow, resulting in water conservation, Bailey said.

"My wife and I both work full time so this has been a hobby until recently when we started selling," said Bailey.

He said the seeds of Mt. Pleasant Growers came from his interest in starting an aquaponic system for raising fish in tanks to see if the process works.

"You can see all the YouTube videos all you want, but until you actually do it, you don't know," Bailey said.

The system had just more than 70 tilapia, but it was hard to manage with the couple working full time, he said. A hydroponic operation was born out of that hobby, and now the family sells produce at farmers markets.

“Primarily our sales are online,” Steve Bailey said. ““We deliver direct to the customer.”

Mt. Pleasant Growers has customers in Amherst and Nelson counties and is reaching out into Lynchburg. It never uses herbicides, pesticides or preservatives in the production of its product, which is better for the environment and a healthy alternative to customers, according to its website.

“We pride ourselves in not having to use chemicals,” Steve Bailey said.

Growing items in a climate-controlled facility keeps products in season all year long.

In explaining the workings of a 1,000-gallon tank in the greenhouse, Steve Bailey said PH levels are at precise levels for getting nutrients to the plants.

Customers can view the website to see what it is stock and place their orders.

“We grow to deliver, meaning it’s just in time,” said Steve Bailey. “We try to maintain as fresh a product as best we can.”

Susan Bailey is a teacher at Amherst Elementary School and her husband is building maintenance manager for the City of Lynchburg. The venture is suitable as they near retirement age, she said.

“We’re not the kind to sit around after we retire,” said Susan Bailey. “We want to be busy.”

“Susan’s our green thumb,” Steve Bailey said.

The couple lives in Amherst and come to the greenhouse typically on Wednesdays and Saturdays, Steve Bailey said. They plan for the operation at home and have a chamber there for germinating seeds that are brought to the facility, he said.

“The biggest challenge is the marketing of it,” Steve Bailey said.

The Baileys recently began harvesting tomatoes to add to the inventory. Mt. Pleasant Growers has 30 items for customers to choose from.

“We’ll plant it and harvest it for you,” said Steve Bailey.

Elizabeth Campbell said she enjoys coming to her family’s land to take part in an operation she’s seen built from the ground up that they all enjoy. Produce grown there will stay fresh for weeks, she said.

“It’s awesome to see,” she said of the greenhouse’s goods. “Just look at these plants. They’re so lush and beautiful.”

Rob and Betsy Campbell have a garden of their own and his mother is a florist.

“Anything to do with plants and the outdoors, we love,” Betsy Campbell said.

# Bennie's Seafood in Madison Heights nets 40-year milestone

Justin Faulconer

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Jeannie Shelton, right, and her daughter, Karris Dryden, are pictured at Bennie's Seafood and Oyster House in Madison Heights. Shelton's father and Dryden's grandfather, the late "Bennie" Dryden, started the business four decades ago this year.

Justin Faulconer photos, The News & Advance

The ocean is several hours away, but any Lynchburg-area beach lover can find a home away from home at Bennie's Seafood and Oyster House in Madison Heights.

The business on U.S. 29 Business between Sheetz and Walmart is stocked daily with fresh seafood handpicked from the East Coast or shipped in fresh from ocean waters.

"I love it when a new customer walks in and says, 'It smells like the ocean,'" Jeannie Shelton, manager of Bennie's Seafood, said during a recent interview.

Shelton is daughter of the late Ben "Bennie" Taylor Dryden Sr., who started the business 40 years ago driven by his deep love for seafood. She recalls her dad selling items out of the back of his truck and setting up shop at the Community Market in downtown Lynchburg.

Bennie's Seafood operated at a location at 12th Street in Lynchburg and moved to its current spot in Madison Heights more than a decade ago. Bennie Dryden, who died in October 2018 at age 65, was born in Hampton and grew up a lover of the water known as "the Fishman."

"That was his thing and I ... always worked with him," Shelton said of his passion for the seafood business.

She follows in his footsteps of traveling once per week to the Chesapeake area and Gloucester to get fresh seafood handpicked. The store's oysters are from Virginia only, she said, and Bennie's Seafood is part of the Virginia Oyster Trail. The business is

open 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Wednesday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday or until product sells out.

“You either sell it or you smell it,” Dryden said in a 2008 interview with The News & Advance.

As a boy, Dryden spent his summers sailing on the Chesapeake Bay on his father’s fishing boat and they harvested fish, clams, oysters and crabs, among other catches. The son of a fisherman, Bennie Dryden bought his own boat and tried to make it on his own, working long hours six days per week.

“It was Daddy’s lifestyle,” Shelton said of his love for seafood she carries on. “It’s in my blood. It’s all I’ve ever done. I love seafood the way Daddy did.”

Bennie Dryden set down anchor in the Lynchburg area after attending a friend’s birthday party and meeting his wife of 44 years, Janet, who is from Bedford County. The two were married a few months later, Shelton said.

Shelton’s grandfather, Norman, made the net that hangs in the Madison Heights store.

“Every knot on that net was tied by grandfather and that net is probably over 120 years old,” Shelton said.

She recalls with a smile a story of her dad and his brother gathering so many oysters their small boat sank. Other memories include him taking excess seafood and giving it to those he knew couldn’t afford it, not hesitating to help anyone in need, Shelton said in a previous interview.

“He was honorable, loyal, loud, funny,” she said shortly after his death. “Over everything, he was a hard worker. And family came first.”

Her dad loved the customers and serving them, she said.

“We have some customers, their kids are coming to us and their grandkids are coming,” Shelton said. “I remember their parents coming in when I was a child. A lot of our customers have stayed with us.”

As sentimental as the business is to the family, the challenges of rising prices are pressing as they navigate through new waters of inflation and spiking gas prices.

“It’s just the fact everything keeps going up in price — everything,” Shelton said. “Just this week alone we spent \$236 alone [in gas] going to the coast in a one-day trip. It hurts you.”

The store doesn’t have a product that hasn’t changed in price in the past year because of the current economic climate, she said. Because of the current economic climate, the store doesn’t have any products that have maintained the same price in the past year, she said.

As an example, about 18 months ago she paid \$9 to \$10 per pound for scallops and sold them at \$11.99 per pound. Now she’s paying \$20 to \$23 per pound most of the time, she said.

“And you move an item up 50 cents to offset the cost, and it kills you,” she said.

Driving to the beach to handpick many items is important for quality, she said, adding the business has been buying from a wholesaler in Gloucester for 30 years.

The store is very appreciative of its new and returning customers, she said. Christmas time also is busy because oysters are a popular item.

Reeling in the milestone of 40 years in business is a satisfying catch.

“It means a lot to our family,” Shelton said.

# Madison Heights family-owned company thrives in machine, archery parts production

Justin Faulconer

Sep 7, 2022



A Summers & Sons Inc. employee works on a product at the Madison Heights company on Sept. 2.

Justin Faulconer, The News & Advance

Just before Labor Day weekend kicked off, the factory of Summers & Sons Inc. in Madison Heights was bustling with activity. Next door the assembly building within the same family-owned business was busy on Sept. 2 with workers assembling T.R.U. Ball/AXCEL Archery products.

Nearly 38 years after Greg Summers, the company's president and CEO, started a machine shop in Amherst County, the manufacturing facility on Crennel Drive has grown to include 125 employees with more jobs planned, said Ben Summers, vice president. The company's expansion plans include a new manufacturing facility, in addition to its current space, that would serve as an assembly office complex without about 25,000 square feet of new space within the commerce park in close proximity on Virginia 130.

Summer & Sons has much machinery work it does locally for various companies and is a manufacturer of archery parts and bow-hunting equipment, Ben Summers said. Archery dealers throughout the world distribute the products, he said.

"It's been a really, really great way to make a living," Ben Summers said. "We're really proud of everyone who works here."

The company receives daily shipments of materials to make the archery parts that are sent all over the globe, he said.

“From beginning to end, it’s 100% American made product,” Ben Summers said, adding of athletes who use the equipment: “We have Olympic athletes and pro athletes all over in almost 150 different countries, from South Korea to England to South Africa and everywhere in between.”

His father, company founder Greg Summers, is originally from Michigan and moved to Virginia to give his family a better life, Ben Summers said. He started the business in Elon and within a year moved to the current facility during the 1980s.

The company for a while had a contract with BWX Technologies to do much machinery work and later began making archery products. In the past several months the company has added more than \$1.5 million worth of machinery to keep up with demand, Ben Summers said.

Despite the pandemic, business is booming as far as demand for the company’s products.

“Ever since COVID hit, archery has exploded,” he said. “All of our machinery work has exploded.”

In the past month the company has had visitors from England, Belgium, France, Canada, and within the U.S. from Arizona and Pennsylvania, according to Ben Summers. In turn he’s traveled this year alone to France, England and South Korea as part of business interactions. The company’s top international distributor is in the Netherlands and the second is in Belgium, he said.

When he was a boy, Ben Summers said he wanted to be a machinist like his dad. He said he had no idea he would be traveling the world on behalf of his family’s business, which is a testament to its success.

His brother, Brian Summers and sister, Kelly Reyes, also are heavily involved with the company. He said his dad, within a few years of moving to Virginia, became one of the highest paid machinists in the Lynchburg area and has always been an extremely hard worker.

“He’s just been one of the hardest working people I know,” Ben Summers said.

From being on the line working, Greg Summers cares about the people he hires and trains them to be better machinists and workers, Ben Summers said. The company has a system where employees teach a person how to perform tasks so they can advance their careers, he said.

“We’ve been able to promote from within quite a bit.”

Summers & Sons has some of the best machinists in the Lynchburg area, Ben Summers said. “These guys, they’re incredible,” he said of their expertise.

Ben Summers, 46, has been working at the company since he was 10. He’s witnessed how the business has changed over the decades.

“When I was a kid you had to hand crank everything and now it’s all done on laptops,” he said. “It’s a different world.”

His father is very involved with the design team and each of his family members working there have their own niche, he said.

“There’s a lot of people who really, really put in a lot of effort into this business and matter,” Ben Summers said. “And if it weren’t for them it wouldn’t be a business. We’re really thankful for everyone here.”

The company hires directly from Central Virginia Community Center and some come in directly with little to no experience in machinery and are trained, he said. Some employees could have stayed 25 to 30 years and remain because they like the atmosphere, Ben Summers said.

“We teach people with good work ethics how to be a success in the machining industry.”

The company also has a great home in Amherst County, he said.

“The caliber of people that we have from Amherst County has been extremely great,” Ben Summers said. “You can’t ask for much better. We’ve been able to find people who are hardworking, have good values and good ethics.”

He also thanked Victoria Hanson, executive director of the Economic Development Authority of Amherst County, and county officials for making it possible to expand at the commerce center and become a stronger company.

“I can’t say enough good things about her and about what the county government has been trying to do to be more business friendly.”

Hanson said the machine shop with a humble beginning has grown into a company with products used by archery enthusiasts throughout the world and achieved the highest recognition when one of its components was used to win a Gold Medal at the Olympics.

“S&S/TRU Ball is not only a stellar business but a great partner in the community,” Hanson said.

The machine business crafts the Golden A awards given to Amherst County high school seniors for excellence in academic achievements.

“It is exciting to see a local business not only succeed but thrive at a world level,” Hanson said.