

Rockin' with crystals and gemstones

by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

My assignment was to write a story about the crystal and gemstone craze. Easy enough, right?

I drafted a first sentence and erased it, rewrote and erased. I was stressing. Then it hit me, why not try the calming technique I was writing about? I found a piece of black tourmaline in my daughter's room and sat it next to my laptop, trying to soak up its calming and de-stressing energy.

I'm not making light of the power of gemstones. To the contrary, my daughter, her friends and even some of my relatives are huge believers in healing crystals and I've started my own, albeit small, collection. True believers are adamant that gemstones and crystals hold energy and when we channel that energy they work to promote harmony between the physical body, mind and spirit. Sounds like a lot of hocus-pocus nonsense to some. But to many, crystals are an obsessive healing tool.

Healing crystals date back thousands of years to the Ancient Egyptians who wore them as amulets and anointed the tombs with lapis, quartz and topaz. Greek soldiers used hematite as protection before battle.

Crystals and gemstones were all the rage with the New Age movement in the 1970s and 80s when holistic and self-healing were in full swing. About 10 years ago—when crystals were no big deal—it was middle-aged women who were still seeking out the gems. But today, crystals are again in high demand with the Millennial and Gen Z sects.

Social media and celebrities have helped take crystals from a specialized, niche market to a social phenomenon. Just Google healing crystals and see what comes up—TikTok, Instagram, Facebook—pages and pages of information, videos, online markets and uses. In 2018, Hello! Magazine described crystals as the year's biggest healing and wellness trend.

Crystal and gem towers and hearts are very popular right now, according to Angie McNeal at Rocks to Gems and Crystals in Lancaster. Hearts were especially a hot item for Valentine's Day.

Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi



Rough cut stones are very popular.





Angie McNeal, owner of Rocks to Gems and Crystals, assists a customer filling a bag with rough stones. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi



Precious stones like this piece of jasper make beautiful pendants. Photo by Rachel Valdrighi

Crystals are used today in everything from watches and medical equipment to facial massagers, pipes and adult toys. Crystal shops and spirituality-centric stores like Rocks to Gems and Crystals in Lancaster, The Nurtury in Gloucester and Grow NNK in Kilmarnock are popping up all over. Step inside them and start to relax. Natural healing and wellbeing stores usually smell of burning incense or aromatherapy and play soft, soothing music. The atmosphere is quiet, not chaotic, and both the owners and clientele are calm and pleasant. It's easy to see why the stores and their merchandise are so popular.

Melissa Burke, who opened Grow NNK in June 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, has started to expand her inventory to include more crystals and gems. The store's primary focus is on terrariums with air plants and succulents, but its eclectic offerings now include CBD products, gemstones, aromatherapy, salt lamps and Selenite lamps, which help to renew your aura and remove negative energy.

"When people come in I want them to feel peaceful, positive,



Melissa Burke cleanses her crystals in a Tibetan singing bowl at Grow NNK in Kilmarnock. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

The Healing Power

Some of the most popular crystals and their properties

Amethyst, my personal favorite, is known as the relaxation stone. Lowers stress and carries a positive energy.

Rose quartz, stone of unconditional love. Encourages self love and forgiveness, as well as forgiveness for others. Great for nurturing and support.

Clear quartz, helps with goal achievement and protection.

Black tourmaline, clears negativity.

Carnelian, removes creative blocks and boosts creative energy.

Malachite, offers strength and courage and alleviates fears and doubts.

Selenite, renews your aura, removes negative energy for mental clarity.

Lapis lazuli, truth and wisdom.

Moonstone, brings peace, wisdom and protection.

Jade, stone of blessings and wisdom.

Tiger's Eye, good fortune, prosperity and protection.

Citrine, boosts self-esteem, confidence and harnesses talents. Opens mind to accept joy in life.

Sunstone, stone of good luck and fortune.

Jasper, source of healing energy.

Moldavite, one of the most powerful crystals. Improves mental health, spiritual healing and clearing away block and negative energy.

Agate, soothes inner conflict, enhances concentration.

*Refer to your local crystal shop owner or the internet on how to use each stone to its fullest potential



This large display of gemstones and crystals are at Rocks to Gems and Crystals. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

A prehnite pendant
Photo by Rachel Valdrighi

relaxing vibes,” she said of the store on South Main Street.

Burke started her own crystal collection about five years ago with a rose quartz.

“That one opens your heart and is about self love,” said Burke. “I had a lot of transitions in my life at the time and thought, wow is this little thing doing all this for me.

“Crystals are a tool for so many holistic types of treatment,” she added. “A lot of people aren’t aware of all the healing properties and what they can do for you.”

Burke demonstrated how she uses a selenite wand to start her day, swiping the whitish, clear piece of crystal around her.

“Selenite is like a reset button,” she said. “It recharges your aura and is a great first tool for someone getting started,” with a gem collection.

Burke recommends beginning collectors hit the books. Two good ones are *Crystals for Beginners* and *The Crystal Directory*. She also recommends *Soul Magic*, which also discusses the seven chakras. The word chakra from Sanskrit means wheel but refers spiritually to energy centers in the body. There are seven along the spine, through the neck and crown of your head.

A chakra crystal set includes clear quartz, amethyst, lapis lazuli, green aventurine, yellow jade, carnelian and red jasper. Each stone has a corresponding chakra which it helps to support in the natural healing process. Most gem stores, like Rocks to Gems, sell the chakra set or can put one together for you.

Angie McNeal, owner of Rocks to Gems, went to her first



Peacock ore is one of the strongest stones among minerals with healing properties. It is a stone of happiness and joy.
Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

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--Melissa Burke

“Selenite is like a reset button. It recharges your aura and is a great first tool for someone getting started.”

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Melissa Burke at Grow NNK is expanding her stock of precious stones and crystals. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

gem show in Tucson and was hooked. She opened her store in Kilmarnock in 2019 and relocated to Lancaster in June 2021.

“I absolutely believe in them,” said McNeal of the healing properties of gemstones and crystals. “God put them here and it’s a reason for them.”

She credits social media and YouTube instructional videos on how to use crystals and make jewelry for the increase in popularity among the 20-something sect.

Teenagers and those in their early 20s are reintroducing crystals and gems to their parents and grandparents who were “into collecting” in the 1960s and 70s, she said.

“I have kids come in here everyday that saw something on TikTok and want to know if we have it,” said McNeal.

She said rock and crystal towers and hearts, along with rough not tumbled rocks, are popular right now.

Gem mining is also hot right now among younger children. McNeal has had folks come from as far as Virginia Beach just to mine. In fact, one couple vacationing in the Outer Banks from a northern state, drove the 3.5 hours to mine one day then returned to Nags Head.

McNeal sells lots of gemstone and crystal jewelry, most handmade by her father and local artisans.

Those little pieces of rocks and crystals can range from \$1 or \$2 to thousands of dollars for a single piece, depending on its type and size. However, most are very affordable.

Both McNeal and Burke suggest beginning collectors start with rose quartz, amethyst, clear quartz, black tourmaline, citrine and selenite.

My daughter has all of those and more in her pretty expansive collection. She’s even started making pendants.

They also suggest following your intuition and picking the stones you are drawn to. Also research them and find out which ones will fill your special need, whether it be for anxiety and stress relief, happiness, courage or romance.

As for me, I have a couple of amethysts, a clear quartz and a selenite. And if you see me on my patio with a dish of rocks late at night, know that I’ve joined the believers and I’m charging my crystals under the light of the full moon. Because, yes crystals have to be recharged and also cleansed every now and then because they absorb negative energy.

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From left, Todd Ohler greets customers and Angie Kirk waters plants at A New Bloom in Heathsville. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

A New Bloom is more than a business

by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

Sometimes it's not about the money. It's about supporting community, friends and neighbors.

That was Tina Hinton's goal when she opened A New Bloom, 6291 Northumberland Highway, Heathsville. And it was a dream of hers.

After a long career in the dental field, she decided she wanted to "chase [her] dreams full time," and last summer started selling fresh produce and plants under a pop-up canopy tent three days a week in Heathsville. She also assumed the role of caregiver for her cousin, Todd Ohler, who now works alongside her at the farm stand.

Hinton married into a farm family. Her husband Jeff is a fifth generation farmer who supplies A New Bloom with its sweet corn.

She gets the rest of her produce and plants from other farmers in the community. Her baked goods



From left A New Bloom owner Tina Hinton accepts a chocolate-covered strawberry "bouquet" from Melinda Beauchamp. The fresh produce stand sells fresh cut flowers and chocolate-covered berries by Beauchamp, along with vegetable and flowering plants, hanging baskets, fresh baked goods and handmade gift items. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

and butter come from the Amish in Richmond County. And the Mennonites in Richmond County built her stand in four days this spring. They finished construction on a Thursday and she officially opened Saturday, April 16. Much of her fresh produce comes from their farms.

"I wanted to stay true to who I am and although it helps to make money to pay the bills and employees, that's not primarily what it's about," she said. "From the start, it was about helping the community and now it's become a ministry.

"Making money is not my first priority. It's not even in my top five," she added.

A New Bloom, billed as a fresh produce stand, is so much more. Inside, visitors will find fresh cut flowers, wreaths, pocket pillows perfect for holding a book or laptop, resin cups, gourd birdhouses, goat soaps and shirts, all handcrafted by local artisans. She also carries chocolate-covered strawberry bouquets and Amish-made baked goods, as well as

flowers and vegetable garden plants.

"People just love coming to a farm stand, doesn't matter whether you're black, white, rich, poor, Republican or Democrat," said Hinton. "None of that matters here."

A family-affair, A New Bloom is on Hinton's sister's property in Heathsville. Her daughter Chelsey and son-in-law Charlie Fox are raising produce and cut flowers and sell their USDA meats at the stand on Saturdays. The couple own Northern Neck Meat Processing in Miskimon.

"It really is a family operation," said Hinton. "My grandsons even work here. It's all hands on deck."

A New Bloom is open from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursdays; 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Fridays; and 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

Hinton plans to stay open through the end of the fall growing season but will reopen for holiday markets. She held two holiday markets last winter with handmade gift items and holiday greenery.



Down on the farm:

the evolution of agriculture

A field of canola surrounds an old barn in Northumberland County. Photo by Jackie Nunnery

by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

When Virginia Cooperative Extension Agent Trent Jones addresses clubs and organizations in the Northern Neck one of his first questions is “are you a farmer.” Few, if any hands, are raised. He follows with “do you have a parent who’s a farmer?”, which results in a few raised hands.

“But when I get to grandparents, about 75% of the people in the room have their hands raised,” said Jones. “What that tells me is as a community we’ve gotten very far away from farming.”

First-time farmers are a rarity, he said. Most young farmers are third, fourth or even fifth generation farmers, working family-owned land that’s accumulated over time.

What we’re growing

The roadways in Lancaster, Northumberland and Middlesex counties are lined with fields of drying, brown corn and lush acres of green, thick soybeans this time of year. It’s harvest season for corn and growing season for beans.

Residents in the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula have lived off the land for hundreds of years. Agriculture and seafood industries are mainstays of the rural economy.

Virginia’s role as an agriculture mecca dates back to Jamestown when the settlers grew their own crops for survival. With a lesson or two from Native Americans, the settlers learned to grow not only life-sustaining crops but tobacco, which shaped the future of Virginia’s tobacco industry.

Data collection related to crop plantings—something now required of farmers—dates back to 1760 when President George Washington began record-



Trent Jones surveys a field in Heathsville. Jones is the Virginia Cooperative Extension Agent for Lancaster and Northumberland counties. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi



A collection of tomato cannery labels adorns the wall at the Virginia Cooperative Extension office in Heathsville. In the early 20th century, tomato canneries grew rapidly on the Northern Neck. The last tomato cannery on the Northern Neck—Lake Packing Company—ceased its operations in 1997. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

keeping of his crops at Mount Vernon.

Tobacco growing and processing dominated Virginia’s agriculture economy for over three centuries, but now, the tobacco growing counties are almost all in southwest and southern Virginia. Corn, however, has been a staple in Virginia since 1607 and continues to be the primary plant grown in eastern Virginia.

According to the 2017 United States Department of Agriculture census—the most recent available—Lancaster County has 16,238 acres of farmland with a market value of \$860,073 for land and buildings. Some 772,804 bushels of corn were produced on 5,102 acres on 23 farms. There were 57,357 bushels of wheat harvested from 853 acres on seven farms.

Middlesex County has 19,512 acres of farmland on 79 farms with an estimated market value of \$979,876. Farmers in Middlesex harvested 834,508 bushels of corn from 5,445 acres on 19 farms and 162,137 bushels of wheat from 2,076 acres on seven farms.

In Northumberland County, there are an estimated 43,480 acres of farmland on 134 farms with a market value of \$975,400. Producers harvested some 2,129,092 bushels of corn on 13,185 acres at 34 farms and 462,243 bushels of wheat on 6,742 acres at 27 farms.

According to a publication by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, agriculture has an economic impact of \$70 billion per year and provides more than 334,000 jobs in the Commonwealth. The state’s 43,225 farms spread across 7.8 million acres.

Trial and error

Fields of cotton and yellow canola flowers—which are crushed to make canola oil—sporadically popped up in the Northern Neck three or four years ago; however, neither caught on with local producers, according to Jones.

The attempt to grow canola was a result of farmers exploring other products which require a growing season “that fits our area,” said Jones. “It had the same growing season as winter wheat, but few farmers had any luck with it.”

Farmers also bailed on their attempts at growing

cotton.

“I think the issue there was our proximity to a gin,” said Jones. “If you can’t get it there in a certain amount of time, you have to be able to store it.”

After the cotton is harvested, it can be bundled into round or square modules and left in a field for a limited time before transport.

“I think the year they were growing cotton, the modules were sitting in the field, and a hurricane came and ruined all the bales,” said Jones. “That’s when farmers realized it wasn’t feasible [to grow cotton here].”

Although Virginia ranks ninth in the nation for tomato production, that industry has disappeared in the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula, where canneries once littered the landscape. The lack of workforce was a contributing factor to the decline of the tomato industry in our area, which happened in the 1980s, said Jones.

Climate change—which has resulted in milder winters in Virginia—has not created a new growing trend, said Jones. The growing season for crops in eastern Virginia has remained relatively the same.

“We still can get a late frost in the spring, so farmers aren’t planting any earlier. The only real change is farmers are able to plant their winter cover and small grains like wheat and barley a little later than they used to because it does stay warmer longer.”

What has worked, and taken off as a local prod-

uct, is grapes. Vineyards and wineries are popping up like vines across the local landscape.

The reason, according to winemaker Floyd Oslin, is the area’s ideal growing conditions. He likens the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula to the Bordeaux region of France.

“There’s a river to the north, river to the south and the Chesapeake Bay out in the front,” said Oslin, who begins his 45th year of making wine in Virginia. He’s currently making wines for Triple V Farms in Northumberland County, Zoll Vineyards in Gloucester County and Rivah Vineyards at the Grove in Westmoreland County, as well as for a winery in Henrico.

“I’ve had my hands in just about every winery in the Northern Neck,” said Oslin, who has witnessed a major surge in wineries and vineyards in eastern Virginia. He estimates there are about 400-500 acres of vineyards in the Northern Neck.

According to the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Virginia’s wine industry generates \$1.37 billion annually as a result of 300 wineries on over 4,000 acres planted with more than 28 types of grapes.

“We have perfect growing conditions and can grow just about any variety, to a certain extent,” said Oslin. “We’re fortunate to have a long growing season which can ripen them thoroughly.”

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—Floyd Oslin

Growing with a purpose

When Mason Brent and the late Billy Dawson joined forces at Bay's Best Feed nearly two decades ago, the plan was to start a grain mill for cleaning and bagging seed for animal feed.

"But lo and behold our first customer had nothing to do with animal feed," said Brent.

Rick Wasmund of Copper Fox Distillery was in the market for a specific variety of a six-row barley, a hybrid created by Virginia Tech, for making his whiskey. Bay's Best Feed started providing Wasmund with the barley and the partnership took Bay's Best in a new direction. Today, the Heathsville-based company sells to over 25 malt houses and distilleries.

A few years ago, Brent partnered with Heathsville farmer Keith Harris to grow non-GMO corn to sell to a Northern Virginia-based tortilla chip maker, which distributes to companies including Costco and Whole Foods.

Another target market for Bay's Best is bird lovers.

"Long before Billy and I started the mill, I asked him to grow about 10 acres of sunflowers on my property, at my expense, for dove hunting," said Brent.

It occurred to Dawson he could grow it commercially and sell for birdseed. The mill cleans the dried sunflower seed with a two-step process, first it's filtered through a screen then run through a centrifugal cleaner.

"Our customers tell us it's the cleanest seed they've ever seen," said Brent.

Bay's Best has five growers farming about 2,000 acres of land for specific markets. In 2020, the company processed over 6,000,000 pounds of grains, including barley, corn and sunflowers.

Gizmos and gadgets

In 1800, it took 200-300 hours of labor to produce 100 bushels of wheat. The McCormick Reaper, the cast iron plow, threshing machines and grain drills were patented between 1800 and 1850, according to Jones. A commercial fertilizer—superphosphate—became available in 1843.

In 1850, it took between 85-100 hours of labor to produce 100 bushels of wheat, but by 1890, the invention of the gang plow, steam tractor, horse drawn combine and first gasoline tractor, lowered that number to 40-50 hours for that same output.

From 1900-1950, gasoline combines were put into production, rubber tire tractors were patented and horses were replaced by tractors, which allowed farmers the ability to produce 100 bushels of wheat in 15-20 hours. One farmer could feed 10.7 people.

Organic chemicals, no-till farm practices and sustainable agriculture allowed farmers to produce 100 bushels of wheat in about 6.5 hours of labor. One farmer could feed 15.5 people by 1950, 47.7 people by 1970 and 100 by 1990. By 1987, it took only three hours of labor to produce 100 bushels of wheat.

Technology really started to play a part in the agriculture industry in the second half of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. Internet access to data, weather monitoring and global position systems or GPS have totally changed how farmers work.

Today, one farmer feeds 155 people, said Jones. A farmer can produce 100 bushels of wheat in less than two hours of labor. The average wheat yield is 43 bushels per acre.

These increases are courtesy of continued advances in crop breeding, precision agriculture adoptions and sustainable agriculture practices.

The Information Age has allowed for more efficient planting, managing and harvesting. Precision agriculture includes



Dried sunflowers are used by farmers with Bay's Best Feed in Heathsville to produce bird seed. Small farms across the Northern Neck also open their fields for picking. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi



Fields of grape vines are becoming more prominent on the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

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The inside of combines today include elaborate computer systems. Photo courtesy of Robb Hinton

“All those catch phrases. I’m just a conservationist at heart and I believe you have to keep trying to do different things on our farms to see what works.” —Robb Hinton on regenerative farming, soil health, and sustainability

auto-steer equipment, GPS guidance systems, yield maps and variable rate technology. Combines are self-guided.

“We’re doing grid sampling and making nutrient applications to specific areas in fields,” said Jones. “Before, we were doing blanket applications with lime and fertilizers.

“The same is said for seeding rates,” he added. “We have yield maps for specific areas of a field and can create a planting prescription. With technology, you can program a planter to plant more in an area of the field where production is greater.”

For instance, if the corner, shaded or sandier area of a field produces less yield, the planter can be programmed not to “waste” seed in that area.

Genetics, or GMO crops—whose genomes have been altered by genetic engineering—“provides a tool that allows us to increase production,” he said.

“A farmer almost has to be a computer scientist or computer programmer now to be able to work with the systems we have,” said Jones.

There are both pros and cons to technology, said Robb Hinton of Cedar Plains Farm in Northumberland County.

“The whole farming industry is running as hard as it can towards high tech, and that’s not necessarily a good thing sometimes,” he said.

The equipment and computer programs for data collecting are sometimes “fragile and glitchy,” said Hinton.

“When it works, it’s great. It’s unbelievable what these engineers can think up.”

Hinton says he’s more focused now on regenerative farming, soil health, sustainability—“all those catch phrases. I’m just a conservationist at heart and I believe you have to keep trying to do different things on our farms to see what works.”

And although college degrees related to business and agriculture are crucial for managing a farm and operating new and evolving equipment, Jones says, “there’s nothing like hands-on, working-on-the-farm experience.”

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