

From Seed To Store, Herbal Tea Grewer Does It All

Tony DiMaggio's Sacred Blossom teas are a labor of love. He handles everything, from planting seeds in his greenhouse to harvesting, drying and packaging for sale. It's a hands-on business that he built from scratch.

"This was our third season, and we grew, processed, and packaged 1,500 lbs. of herbal tea," says DiMaggio. "We have so many flowers growing here, I don't even know what they all are."

He starts the season by planting the annuals he needs and mulching and supplementing perennials. He uses hoop houses made from recycled silo rings that are covered in plastic.

"This past spring, I moved 40,000 plants from the greenhouses to a 1 1/2 acre field," says DiMaggio.

DiMaggio uses a polyculture planting method for most of his plants, mixing them up in groups, rather than leaving them in rows. He believes the diversity improves the soil, and the concentration of so many plants in a small area reduces weeding.

"It's working out pretty well, but may take 20 years to fully understand," he says. "I've had tremendous yields, but I'm still learning which plants work well together, where they feed in the root zone, and timing."

Timing is also key to harvest, which DiMaggio determines by the smell of the herb. Everything is cut in small bunches by hand before being cut up on a mechanized, paper cutter refurbished with a food grade surface. The herbs are then laid out on shelves in what he says is the largest herb dryer in the Midwest. He designed and built it himself.

"Each rack is 32 in. wide by 7 ft., 6 in. long for a total of 19 1/2-sq. ft.," says DiMaggio.

"The dryer has 1,000 sq. ft. of surface in total."

DiMaggio built it big so that when a lot of herbs are at their peak, he can handle them all. He uses a solar heat trap and heat sink to provide the high temperatures needed.

The dryer is in a 12 by 24-ft. building with a concrete floor. A shop with a steeply pitched 35 by 35-ft. roof stands about 15 ft. away. He painted the shop roof black and buried an insulated box with about 9 yards of washed rock in between the 2 buildings. Heat from the shop is pushed through a double-walled culvert pipe into the box or directly to the dryer building. Thermostats control where the heat goes.

"During the hottest days in the summer, the air can get up to 100 degrees, which lowers the relative humidity needed for drying," explains DiMaggio.

DiMaggio put a lot of time into the solar-powered dryer, but admits payback is slow. Considering the cost of all the components and the energy used for fans, he would go a different and simpler route if starting over.

"I didn't want to have to buy propane," he says. "Trying to be cheap can cost more, but I wanted to take advantage of the infrastructure here, and I had no money available to spend on alternatives."

He also designed and built a motorized shaker table to separate the leaves and flowers from stems. It has two, 24 by 30-in. screens made with food grade plastic and 2 sizes of galvanized screening.

"Most herbal tea companies use a hammer mill to grind up leaves, flowers and stems, which reduces the quality," says DiMaggio. "I push the cut and dried bunches through



Herbal tea business uses hoop houses made from recycled silo rings covered in plastic (top left). A home-built motorized shaker table separates leaves and flowers from stems (top right). Home-built solar-powered dryer (below left) removes moisture. Screened material is stored in DiMaggio's farm house basement.



the larger screen by hand to remove most of the stems. Then I run leaves and flowers through the shaker table 3 more times for 6 screenings."

Even then, DiMaggio searches for bits of stem as he packages the screened material for storage in his humidity-controlled, farm house basement.

Once harvest is complete, DiMaggio begins assembling the components for his teas. "When I started, I imagined you would just add a few things together and have a tea," he recalls. "It took months to try 300 different iterations, mixing them, brewing them, and tasting to get the 3 mixes I sell."

DiMaggio sells his herbs in quantities of 5 lbs. or more, as well as in mixes packaged

in canisters and zip bags through more than 50 retail outlets. A Mylar zip bag holding 7 oz. (100 servings) is priced at \$35. A set of 3 canisters, each holding 1.4 oz. (20 servings) is priced at \$36. Each mix consists of herbs designed for a specific purpose, whether wakefulness and energy, calm, or to help promote sleep and relaxation.

"We use no flavor additives, just vibrant herbs, flowers and fruit we grow, blended to support health and taste delicious," says DiMaggio. There's a video at farmshow.com.

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Horse Burial Service Fills Huge Need

David Heidt buries horses. It's a job that's not easy but fills a huge need that exists in many communities. Heidt says it's also a good business opportunity for the right people.

"Last year we buried 350 horses," says Heidt. "This year I figure we'll handle 370 to 380. The business has been growing about 10 percent a year since 2003."

That was the year his wife Marta lost her horse. Since he owned a backhoe, Heidt was able to bury the animal on the farm, but recognized many other horse owners wouldn't have that option.

The first challenge in setting up a burial service was to get his farm rezoned and acquiring any needed permits. By the time he was done, he had permits from the Oregon Dept. of Ag, the Dept. of Environmental Quality, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. A special use permit from the state required he notify the neighbors within a certain distance.

"The permits took more than 6 months and \$1,200 when we got into the business 20 years ago," says Heidt.

In addition to horses, the Heidts have buried pigs, alpacas, sheep and goats. However, 90 percent of their business is horses. When they get a call, the Heidts takes their customized, 26,000-lb., 2005 Freightliner on the road. It is equipped with a knuckle-boom crane and a large box coated to protect it against blood and urine. It also carries a Polaris 700 ATV with a large sled.

If Heidt can drive close to the dead animal, he uses the crane to lift it into the box. Otherwise, he uses the ATV and sled to retrieve the body and carry it back to the truck.

Once back at their 377-acre farm, he picks a spot for the burial. Using either his large

JD 710 backhoe or his 18,000-lb. Komatsu excavator, he simply digs a hole and buries the animal. The GPS coordinates of each gravesite are recorded. "By the end of the year we will have buried at least 3,700 horses here," says Heidt.

The GPS information is helpful when picking a new burial site, but also when owners come to visit the graves.

"Perhaps 5 percent of customers visit their animal's grave," says Heidt. "Some come every year on the anniversary of the death. Some plant a tree or place a marker."

GPS coordinates are important for finding a particular site, as once the burial is completed, the land is returned to hay ground or pasture.

He estimates 80 percent of his customers are women. Often times, they may have had the horse for much of their life and that of their children. The average age of the horses he buries is 23.

"Where we live, a lot of people are not comfortable with the logistics of handling a large animal, combined with their emotions at the time," says Heidt. "I think there is a pretty big need in a lot of areas of the country for this service."

Other considerations include the local permit requirements and the number of acres and the type of soil on the farm or ranch.

"You should have at least 30 acres, and it should have a low water table, especially if you plan to offer the service year round," says Heidt. "You don't want the hole to fill with water. We have gentle, well-drained hillsides that are good for winter excavation. That's important, because that's when we are the busiest."

Heidt charges a flat fee of \$300 for horses within 25 miles. If the owner brings the animal to the farm, either alive or dead, they



David and Marta Heidt use this collection vehicle to bring deceased horses to their farm.

pay only \$150. However, if alive, the owner has to handle euthanizing it. If the animal is more than 25 miles away, the price goes up. Most of Heidt's business is within 150 miles of the farm.

Heidt doesn't advertise. Business is mostly referral, though he does have a website. What he doesn't have for backup is labor. It is just him and his wife.

"You have to accept that you are always on call," says Heidt. "This started out part-time, but with maintenance and repair, it has become a full-time job."

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