

Stevens in her herb fields, which she started more than 30 years ago.



Herbal Business Grew Naturally

A request from an employer to plant an herb garden to dress up the corporate facility opened a door for Jane Hawley Stevens. Once she started learning about herbs, she didn't stop. Today, Four Elements Organic Herbs, the company she started out of her home more than 30 years ago, sells a broad array of herbal products nationwide. It's a business based on her belief in the benefits of herbs.

"I started learning about herbs and using them for health purposes and crafts," says Stevens. "When my son was born, he developed earaches, and antibiotics didn't help. I read about mullein being used for earaches and lung conditions. I tried it and

couldn't believe how effective it was. When it worked, it opened a world of wonder for me."

At that same time, herbalism was making a comeback. However, there were still only a few books on the subject. She studied them and saw opportunities.

"I always wanted to have a home-based business, and herbs picked me," she says. "I started growing herbs and selling the plants at local farmers markets. I realized there was a need for herbal creams and salves. While I could only sell plants a few months a year, I could sell products year-round."

Stevens' first product was a rose comfrey cream. It's still a popular product for her 30 years later. She began selling it at herbal

events and craft markets. As she added products, she realized those early markets were a great way to test demand and get the packaging right.

She was living in the Dallas area, and a new store opened, the second in what would become the Whole Foods chain. Stevens talked to the manager about her products.

"They explained what I needed on my packaging to be in stores," she recalls. "They became my first wholesale customer."

That was around 1989. In 1991 she got her first distributor. Sales began to grow. Today, she and her husband have a farm in Wisconsin where she raises many of the herbs that find their way into Four Elements products.

"My product list expanded as I learned about things I could grow and problems people were suffering with," says Stevens. "A good way to find a livelihood is to look at what people need and help them."

Unlike her startup days when she made the rose comfrey cream in her kitchen, she has a staff to formulate products.

One distributor has grown into three. Her products can now be found in a wide range of stores from Pennsylvania to California, as well as online. She recently had a product take off on Amazon Marketplace, reaching seven digits in sales.

"I found a woman in New York through LinkedIn (a business and employment-focused social media platform)," says Stevens. "She's a winner. Sales took off. My Wild Yam Cream has been recognized

as the number one unsponsored best seller on Amazon Marketplace. I've worked for 36 years, and now in my 37th, I'm an overnight success."

Stevens points to marketing as the biggest challenge she faced. "Find a distributor with the same vision and mission as you," she says. "If you share a common mission, they'll know how to market your products."

The FDA was her second biggest challenge. While the health benefits of herbal products are recognized around the world, the FDA tightly regulates health claims in the U.S. "You have to be very careful what you say," says Stevens.

She advises anyone going into business for themselves to seek out advice. "Network with other people and get referrals, whether selecting an accountant or finding vendors," she says. "The best advice I received was don't try to do it all and get rid of things you don't like to do."

In addition to running her company, Stevens can be found speaking at herbal and natural food events. She also authored "The Celestial Garden: Growing Herbs, Vegetables and Flowers in Sync with the Moon and Zodiac."

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Each heirloom toy is cut out, sanded, stained, and assembled by hand.

Family Shop Offers Homemade Toys, Entertainment

LARK Toys, voted "The Best Toy Store in Minnesota," is a toy destination in Kellogg, Minn. At 20,000 sq. ft., it's one of the largest independent specialty toy stores in the country.

The current owners, Kathy and Ron Gray, purchased the store over 15 years ago intending to maintain it as a family business. Today, they manage the store with their daughter and son-in-law, along with their two grandchildren.

The toy store is known for its high-quality wooden toys, made right in the onsite workshop. Each heirloom toy is cut out, sanded, stained, and assembled by hand. The stains are child-safe, and many designs date back 30 years. It's possible to look through the store's viewing windows to watch the toy-making process in action. But beyond its homemade offerings, LARK Toys sells a wide variety of other toys, including marbles, wind-ups, blocks, puppets, and plenty of games and puzzles for screen-free entertainment.

The bookstore includes a variety of children's board books and everything from poetry to biography and fiction, ensuring there's a book for every age and taste. Likewise, the Curiosity Shoppe expands beyond toys to sell men's and women's accessories along with kitchen

novelties, stationery, home décor, and LARK merchandise. A café and treat shop includes a variety of novelty candies, homemade fudge, and various ever-rotating meal options.

Another consistent highlight is Memory Lane, where visitors can stroll through antique toy collections set up as storefronts throughout the store. You'll gaze at thousands of popular toys from previous years, including Barbie, Erector sets, pedal cars, Howdy Doody, and hundreds more. Competing with this museum in popularity is a carousel that features an array of animals hand-carved from Minnesota basswood. It runs every 30 min. and costs \$3 per ride (kids under 3 are free with a paying adult).

If you're looking for outdoor fun, Lark Toys has an 18-hole mini-golf course with a play-through mountain and plenty of waterfalls, ponds, and streams. Outside the Candy Store is an observation deck where guests come face-to-face with LARK Toy's resident miniature llamas.

Lark Toys is open almost daily, though hours change by season. Check the website or call the store directly for the most up-to-date information.

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Online Class Helps With Marketing

If you want to be a better marketer of your farm produce, Corinna Beach may be a good place to start. Beach and her husband run a 400-member CSA. She's an advocate, practitioner, and instructor in online marketing. She remembers struggling to get members for their CSA.

"In 2016, I discovered the world of online marketing and began adapting the principles to our CSA," says Beach. "In 2017, our customer retention climbed from 66 percent to 78 percent in 3 weeks. Two weeks later, I had filled our CSA to within 95 percent."

Beach's success attracted other CSA operators, and she shared what she'd learned and applied. She continues to share her knowledge, but now to an increasingly broad audience.

"When I started the MyDigitalFarmer podcast, I focused primarily on helping CSA vegetable growers with marketing strategy," says Beach. "Over the past 2 years, I've noticed that more and more of my audience are other farmers—meat producers, flower farmers, market gardeners. I even have non-farmer business owners learning from me. As a result, my content has pivoted to marketing in general for all kinds of retail farmers."

Beach was recommended as a source of marketing knowledge in response to a query in the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association (APPPA) members-only forum. Her website introduces several for-pay products, including a pre-recorded online Farm Marketing School with nine monthly projects, Accelerator Small Group Coaching (live) with 15 members working on three monthly projects, and CSA Quickstart for vegetable growers wanting to start a CSA. CSA Membership Academy for CSA Farmers is a monthly membership giving farmers access to Beach's library of CSA resources. She also offers several one-stop programs.

At no cost, visitors to the website can access Beach's MyDigitalFarmer podcasts. It serves as an introduction to Beach and her marketing expertise.



MyDigitalFarmer offers online classes, podcasts, and other marketing info for small farmers.

Beach includes a list of digital marketing resources she recommends and uses in her own CSA marketing. They include several books and links to services she uses for digital communications and marketing. They range from online store services and email and website support to CSA Innovation Network.

Throughout the website, the courses offered, and the resources recommended, Beach is clear about her purpose. "It's not enough to grow a great product," she states. "You've got to know how to sell it too."

Beach also moderates a private Facebook group for her client community, as well as a public one. The latter includes a number of videos of Beach talking about digital marketing and client relations.

She promises to show farmer retailers "...how to build online marketing systems that fill your pipeline with leads, convert them to customers, and create a tribe of local superfans."

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