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Couple Makes Light Fixtures From Antlers

By Carolyn White

Mike and Cynthia Bowers of Cedaredge, Colo., know antlers. They've been making chandeliers, lamps, appetizer spreaders, bottle openers, key chains, ice cream scoops, and Christmas decorations out of them since the mid-1990s. "We love being creative and artistic," Cynthia says. "It's good to make beautiful things for people to use and display in their homes."

Mike started dabbling with antler art while working as a sales associate for another company. He set up a shop in the back of the Livestock Exchange Building in Denver, where his sister-in-law had an office. He taught himself how to put chandeliers and lighting together and quickly started selling what he had made.

Mike and Cynthia now use a shop in the back of their house. They have wholesale accounts with other galleries in Colorado, Texas and California.

The couple ships their creations all over the United States and Europe. "We have family and employees who are craftsmen," Cynthia says. "It's a very dependable crew."

Browsing through their showrooms, it's clear the attention to quality runs high. "We never use antlers that are in velvet or still growing," she explains. "They're too soft." The couple also shies away from farm-raised game animals, which eat synthetic diets. "Natural forage is best for elk and deer. It helps grow the hardest

and best racks."

In the spring, locals go into the woods to "shed hunt" for elk and mule deer antlers, common in Colorado. They sell the sheds they find to Mike and Cynthia, who pay them by the pound. Value is based on grade, type, and quality. The Bowers also have a supplier from Canada who hauls white-tail deer and moose antlers to them.

In their shop, drills and drill bits, a band saw, a belt sander and a drill press are used to shape the antlers into art. Chandeliers require exceptional precision. "The little antlers are the most nerve-wracking," Cynthia says. "Sometimes they break, or the bit gets stuck."

And yes, the dried marrow that is inside those antlers smells bad. "Some are more stinky than others," she laughs.

A Dremel tool smooths the holes before electric wires are passed through. Screws anchor two or more antlers together.

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"One of the best things to experience," Cynthia concludes, "is our customers' reactions. After they've hung something we made for their homes, we hear, 'Wow!'"

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Special Events Boost Farm Income

As a rural entrepreneur, raising pastured poultry and other farm enterprises may be satisfying. But if it's not quite enough to make a living, there are ways to boost income. In an article for the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association, Caitlin Caserta offered a few suggestions for special events to reach out to potential customers.

She and her husband, Chris, started raising chickens when they joined his parents and sister to save a former 100-acre dairy farm in New Hampshire. The house, built in 1774, was transformed into a B&B, which attracted visitors from far off but wasn't well-known locally. The Casertas began making local connections when selling eggs, chickens, and other meat and produce at farmers markets and an on-farm store.

One of their first special events was a Farm Day, with no entrance fee, but food was available for purchase.

"It was not only promotional, but also led the community know farmers, so it was also educational," Caserta says. To attract visitors, they hung flyers, took out ads, and articles about them ran in local newspapers.

She and her husband highlighted their products with a barbecue, while other producers shared their products and gave informational talks, and 4-Hers gave a butter-making demo. There were old-fashioned games like sack races and other activities.

"It was grassroots, reaching out to everyone we knew," she says. "The event brought awareness to our farm that we couldn't have

captured through a simple print or radio ad."

"During the event, we were able to sell quite a bit of frozen meat, and we gained many new customers," Caserta wrote in her article.

Check local regulations for permits and noise ordinances and add an insurance rider for any special event days, suggests Caserta.

As their farm, Walpole Valley Farms, has grown, the family has hosted movie nights with documentaries, such as "Fresh" and "Kiss the Ground," to further educate people about farming. They've brought in musicians, hosted weddings, started a restaurant, and plan to offer ticketed dinners with a guest chef serving in the barn or a field.

But special events don't need to be complicated or expensive, Caserta emphasizes.

"A weekly or monthly farm tour is really important. People are happy to buy from you when they see what you're doing. Be as transparent as possible," she says.

Adding an on-farm store or working with a local food co-op and offering samples of your products are also great ways to add income to your farm business, she concludes.

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It's not unheard of to find elderberry syrup selling for over \$20 for a 4-oz. bottle.

Elderberry Syrup Offers Health And Profits

Elderberries contain vitamins A, B and C and are renowned for their ability to "wake up" the immune system for better protection against illness. Elderberry syrup can also reduce cold and flu symptoms, help clear sinus infections, promote bowel health, and even ease allergy symptoms.

The berries are rarely eaten raw. Instead,

they're processed into a potent syrup that sells for a premium. Elderberry products are a \$320 million business worldwide, and it's not unheard of to find elderberry syrup selling for over \$20 for a 4-oz. bottle. Whether you're interested for yourself or considering it as a cottage industry, making homemade elderberry syrup is rewarding and

cost-effective.

Elderberry bushes are native across most of the U.S. and thrive in moist areas along borders between forests and open space. They're commonly spotted around lakes, ponds, and roadways. The season for fresh berries is usually mid-August through mid-September. It's also possible to grow the berries in backyard gardens.

It takes less than an hour to create over 30 servings of elderberry syrup. While it's possible to use fresh or dried berries, the ratio of water will change within the recipe.

Start with two cups fresh or frozen berries or one cup dried and up to four cups water, two cups honey, and 1/4 cup lemon juice, along with your preferred add-ins. Popular options include cinnamon, raw honey, ginger, thyme, cayenne pepper and echinacea root.

Bring the water and berries to a boil, allowing them to simmer for 15 min. Mash the berries to release their juice, and strain the resulting liquid to remove all solid material. Continue simmering until the juice is reduced by half. Take it off the stove and let it cool to room temperature before adding honey and lemon juice, stirring until dissolved.

Store in sealed jars in the fridge or further process by canning. This requires bringing the syrup back to a boil and pouring it into mason jars. Water bath can them for 10 min. When canned, elderberry syrup is shelf-stable and should last a year or longer. Opened jars belong in the refrigerator and can be kept for up to two months.

Only small doses (one teaspoon) of elderberry syrup are needed. Some people take it straight off the spoon, while others mix it into smoothies or drizzle it on baked goods. As elderberry is an immune system supporter, it's okay to take a daily dose. If you're dealing with illness, consider upping the dosage to as much as a tablespoon every three hours. Note: Do not serve syrup that contains honey to children under one.

Another method toward profitability with elderberry is to prepare "syrup kits" with dried berries and necessary add-ins, along with instructions. These make excellent gifts and are easier to ship than pre-made syrup.