

A man with a grey beard and a woman with blonde hair are sitting in a field of tall grass. The man is wearing a green sweater and blue jeans, and the woman is wearing a blue denim jacket over a red shirt and blue jeans. They are both holding woven baskets. The background is a dense forest.

FOGGY BLOSSOM FARM

FIRST-GENERATION FARMERS DAN AND BETSY BROCKETT LEARN THE
ART OF BENDING, NOT BREAKING, AS LIFE TAKES ROOT AROUND THEM

Perennials, handwoven willow baskets, and sincere beauty
are the specialties of Foggy Blossom Farm.

In the early gray of the morning, when the first light begins cracking the dawn, the fields surrounding Dan and Betsy Brockett's property are blanketed with a quiet, clingy fog. So dreamy is the effect that it inspired the name Foggy Blossom Farm. It's also a nod to the ever-blooming perennials dotting their 12 tranquil acres nestled between the Allegheny and Kiskiminetas Rivers that bend lazily through Westmoreland County.

This is a dream turned reality that did not happen overnight, did not come easy, and was peppered with burdens that, really, were blessings in disguise. "We're first-generation farmers," says Betsy. "When we met 10 years ago, we immediately connected over a love of nature and big farm dreams: livestock, growing endless rows of vegetables... at the time, we had zero education on farming and were renting a house in suburbia. As far away as one could be from having a farm."

By the time they acquired their current property in 2017, they had become skilled at growing vegetables and flowers over the course of a decade, were armed with the education and knowledge necessary to get up and running, and along the way realized that the Big Farm dream was nice for someone, but not for them. So, they focused on cultivating a market garden and flowers that they envisioned selling at farmers' markets. They did the training. Were ready to go. "That's when everything changed," says Dan, who got hit with Lyme disease. "I was knocked down for six months where I could just barely walk around the yard. It really made me question our original focus."

"So, we pivoted again to the perennials and the perennial nursery," adds Betsy.

The Foggy Blossom Farm does not sprout seedlings in pots or bring anything in when the frost comes and icy temperatures freeze the ground, sticking instead to hardy and native varieties that can weather the temperamental nature of the Western Pennsylvania climate. Most of their tools are human-powered, practicing no-till farming without the use of inorganic fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides, or herbicides, making their own compost, and irrigating with rainwater.

Their daily activities center on nurturing their 12 acres into sustainable microenvironments, teasing out of the earth anything that is edible or medicinal like nuts, fruits, and tubers. "Every perennial possible," laughs Betsy. "Anything we can harvest and eat, but we sell sticks and seedlings in the spring and fall."

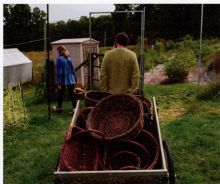
Offered in their online shop are over 50 items comprised of seedlings and bare root seedlings, hardwood cuttings, herbaceous perennials, tubers, and eight varieties of willow cuttings and branches. There are American Persimmons, Black Chokeberry, Buckeye, Black Walnut, Goji Berry, Garlic Chives, Thornless Blackberry, Siberian Peashrub, Seaberry, and Shagbark Hickory. "If you want to plant your seeds and

not see the fruits of your labor for five to 10 years, then we're your people," she adds. "It's a difficult path we've chosen, but it's the right one for us. Not many people want to buy a job that they have to tend to, potentially for the rest of their life. That's where the crafts come in."

The crafts they sell include earthen, functional pottery made by Betsy and Dan as well as willow baskets that he hand-weaves; four, six, or eight hours of intricate, painstaking weaving following patterns from a book, having self-taught the process of making round bases, oval bases, square bases. The first basket he ever wove was made from blackberry brambles. "It was terrible," he laughs. The branches were too stiff and kept breaking. "I didn't get all of the little

pokers off either, so my hands were all cut up, but there was something about it that was really fun. To think about what goes into making a basket, you think someone just sat down and wove it. But someone had to grow that willow, harvest it, dry it for six months, soak it... to get to the point where you weave a basket, it takes almost four years, from the time you get a cutting until you can harvest enough."

While the farm is not currently open to visitors, a weekly newsletter written by Betsy offers a glimpse into more than just the nitty-gritty details of what's sprouting out of the ground. Instead, subscribers are treated to musings that are beautifully honest about the challenges that life has volleyed



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in their direction. Much like the willow that Dan weaves, the Brocketts have become schooled in the art of bending and not breaking, and their vision for the Foggy Blossom remains one of being able to flex as life unfolds around them.

"Choosing a life enmeshed with nature is not an exclusive view of paradise, but rather an experience of the full spectrum of life, death, disease, and all that's in between," she wrote in her July newsletter, *The Beautiful and the Burdensome*. "I've come to see all of our hardships as opportunities for grace and growth. Perhaps we've been gifted with these obstacles because we have the potential to transcend them. Resiliency is the promise of nature, beauty its fleeting byproduct."

"As long as we can still laugh, all is well," she adds.

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Top: The Brocketts bring in their glorious dahlias before the end of the growing season. Middle and bottom: Dan begins the process of weaving a willow basket.