



Winter can't stop Maine gardeners

Greenhouses, window ledges extend season

BY JULIA BAYLY
BDN STAFF

FORT KENT — Retired mill machinist Dan Birt is a pretty popular guy this time of year. Tucked away in a sunny room attached to his Millinocket house is a veritable jungle of vegetables Mainers are more accustomed to seeing at the height of summer, not the dead of winter.

"I had cucumbers for a while, and the tomatoes are really coming with some carrots and beets," the 92-year-old gardener said this week. "It's just a small room with some trays across some of the windows, and I just grow what I can and share them."

Inside
Starting seedlings indoors
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Birt is among a growing number of Mainers pushing the region's gardening season to produce fresh vegetables year-round.

"People are certainly doing it," Kate Garland, a horticulturist with the University of Maine's Cooperative Extension office, said. "How much or how involved depends on resources and how much [people] want to invest."

Extending the season

Maine's growing season averages 124 days, but those numbers drop the farther north in the state you go to around 111 up in the St. John Valley. Central Maine enjoys around 128 frost-free days while the southern end gets an average of 134 growing days.

Pushing the season on either end, according to Garland, can be as simple or complex as people want to make it.

"Personally, I like to look at it and make it as simple as possible," she said. "I have a busy life and a lot of other people have busy lives, so you really need to assess how much time you have to spend on it."

Garland said the easiest way to get fresh greens in the winter is to go with simple trays — foil lasagna pans from the store work great, she says. Fill them with potting soil and plant microgreens such as field peas right on a sunny window ledge.

"You are growing them just for the young leaves, and you can harvest in seven or 10 days from planting," she said. "Harvest and then start again, and the best part is you don't have to put on boots and go outside."

At Four Season Farm in Harborside, Eliot Coleman and Barbara See Winter, Page C2

'I'm free, we own our time'

Montville homesteader prizes independence, resilience



GABOR DEGRE | BDN

G.W. Martin has been homesteading in Montville for several years. Martin, his wife, Bridget McKeen, and their three children live on Hogback Mountain Farm.

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
BDN STAFF

On an unexpectedly warm mid-winter day, G.W. Martin's place, tucked into the shadow of Montville's Hogback Mountain, looked a little bedraggled, with its muddled-up yard and small, home-built greenhouses seemingly scattered everywhere.

But there is a method to Martin's plan. The 37-year-old farmer and greenhouse maker lives on Hogback Mountain Farm with his wife, Bridget McKeen, and their three children, 7-year-old Ora, 6-year-old Bea and 3-year-old Whit, whose sunny smile lightens up the February gloom. They share the 500-acre family property with pigs, a herd of cows, chickens and mules. They also share it with Martin's intense commitment to a certain ideal of homesteading, one which prizes community, independence and skills over creature comforts.

"I'm free," Martin said. "That's the American dream. It ain't to be rich. It's to be free. We own our time. It's ours. It's

given to us, and we get to choose where we spend it."

The burly, affable Montville native said he came to homesteading only after spending some post-high school seasons as a white-water rafting guide and hunting guide. When he decided it was time to come back to the land and maybe start his own family, it also was time to hone some of the traditional skills that he had learned as a boy.

Now, he and McKeen work together on their homestead. She is quieter than her husband, with a bright, quick smile, just like her son's. She homeschools the children, and together she and Martin make sure the younger generation will learn what they need to for a good life on the farm.

"Skills to prepare for the upcoming winter and to keep ourselves healthy, and thrifty, and independent," he said. "If we spent more time in our local school curriculum teaching about civics, about animal husbandry, about gardening practices, sustainable wood harvesting, using a wood cookstove — all these things that homesteaders find are skills that they can count



GABOR DEGRE | BDN

Bridget McKeen helps her 3-year-old son, Whit Martin, with a puzzle at Hogback Mountain Farm in Montville.

on," Maine would be better off.

Martin certainly has done his part in spreading the homesteading gospel. For seven years in the 2000s, he edited and published The Sap Pail, a bimonthly publication that was full of how-to information about gardening and small farms.

"It takes community resiliency and knowledge to be truly secure," he said. "These local skills we need to be independent, we need to keep in practice."

Martin has hung up his editor's pen.

"I got busy applying all the things I learned by doing it," he said of his decision to stop publishing The Sap Pail.

His days remain full of projects. He spent the beginning of February butchering two fat hogs in the part of his property he calls the "Sausage Factory" and which he said is close to becoming a commercial kitchen. There, Martin and his clan intend to sell barbecue supplies to customers.

A short walk away is a long, homemade greenhouse, where Martin and some friends are busy making more modular greenhouses. See Martin, Page C2

Old barn gets new spirit from small-batch distillery

Owner 'loves the bones' of circa-1887 structure, slated for tours and tastings

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE
BDN STAFF

It takes 24 months to create a straight bourbon. It's taken David Woods 13 months and counting to turn the neglected barn in York Corner into a distillery of bourbon whiskey, vodka and other premier quaffables.

He first laid eyes on the New England relic in 1983 when "the old beat-up barn" was for sale. At the time, the eager 20-something turned down the opportunity to buy it. Now, decades later and with multiple businesses under his belt, Woods has sunk a million dollars into the circa 1887 barn for the newly expanded production facility of Wiggly Bridge Distillery.

"I love the bones of this old building," said Woods on a recent tour of the Route 1 work-in-progress as carpenters whizzed about.

Amid the serial entrepreneur's holdings, which include a pizzeria, a campground and a coffee shop, Wiggly Bridge is his first venture into manufacturing. The small-batch distillery opened in York Beach in 2013 and soon outgrew its space. The startup's bourbon whiskey, white whiskey, vodka and rums have become so

popular across Maine and New Hampshire that Woods needed to increase production to stay alive.

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By opening a second, two-still distillery, he expects to break into new markets such as Massachusetts to meet the public's thirst for handcrafted spirits.

To get ready for a spring opening, his crew has been working around the clock.

A year ago, the barn, which had been a hardware store for 30 years, was in rough shape. It was listing, saddled with uneven floors, and chipmunks had chewed through its electrical wiring. The dirt foundation on the south side needed a do-over. And that was the short list.

"We saved all the hand-cut nails and spikes and reused them along with repurposed lumber," said Woods. "Very little was thrown away."

Most material came from the funky foundation on the south side. Between a multi-layered network of tree limbs and telephone poles, a two-inch sheet of hay and horse manure was unearthed.



TROY R. BENNETT | BDN

David Woods II (left) and his father, David Woods, of Wiggly Bridge Distillery work on constructing a still at their secondary location in a barn on Route 1 in York on Wednesday. They opened the distillery in 2013.

Where it wasn't rotted, lumber was removed plank by plank and reused elsewhere in the barn.

Now poured concrete and new windows delineate the production room, where spirits will be made in stills made by his son, David Woods II. This alchemy will be on display when the barn doors open for tours and tastings.

Future plans include opening

an intimate steakhouse in the mezzanine above with live acoustic music and food prepared table side. Soon the smell of sawdust will be replaced with the earthy scent of sour mash, molasses and citrus.

"It's a little bit of a gamble. We didn't know what it would entail," said Woods.

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Aroostook pioneers look to the future

BY ANTHONY BRINO
BDN STAFF

Jim Gerritsen came to Bridgewater, Maine, from the West Coast in 1976 for practical reasons. "The research showed it was

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the best soil for the best price."

Forty years later, after growing the Wood Prairie Farm into a successful organic seed business and fighting the likes of Monsanto, Jim and Meg Gerritsen are stepping back a bit and starting the process of passing on the farm to their four children.

"We're going to still be around, so we're going to be helping them," Gerritsen, 61, said. "But what I've learned as a parent is you've got to give your kids freedom."

Of two daughters and two sons, 22-year-old Caleb, the second oldest, is taking on a leading role in the 80-acre farm, while Amy and Sarah remain in school and Peter, the oldest, works in carpentry in southern Maine. For now, Caleb See Future, Page C3