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Ken Thompson *** for *** City Commissioner

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The best legal drug there is

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 By Ashley Trosper
June 25, 2008

Photo By State Journal/Hilly Schiffer

"Tomatoes are the best legal drug there is," says farmer Joe Cleary, who grows more than 500 tomato plants in his Anderson County greenhouse.


Photo By State Journal/Hilly Schiffer

Joe Cleary stands in front of his \$30,000 greenhouse that is the home to about 500 tomato plants on his 90-acre farm in Anderson County. "I start almost every plant in the greenhouse," Cleary said. "It adds an extra step, but I get everything earlier."

Joe Cleary used to be painfully shy.

That's why he became a farmer.

"My idea of farming is a person who doesn't have to deal with people," Cleary said. "I was very shy growing up."

Joining the Franklin County Farmers Market six years ago, however, forced Cleary out of his shell.

"Out in the field is my ideal spot," Cleary said. "But the Farmers Market has helped. I used to only go with my daughter. I couldn't do it alone."

Cleary and his daughter, Adrienne Lewis, 32, began selling at the Anderson County Farmers Market.

Currently, they work the markets in Anderson, Franklin, Fayette and Woodford counties.

"We had more produce than we could sell in Anderson," Lewis said. "We had to branch out. By doing Franklin County on his own, he (Cleary) is much more social now."

Cleary and Lewis grow a variety of produce on their 90-acres including cucumbers, melons, strawberries, radishes, potatoes, lettuce, corn and hanging flower baskets.

"If it grows in Kentucky, we have it," Lewis said.

But their pride and joy is tomatoes " not just any tomatoes, but greenhouse tomatoes.

In his \$30,000 greenhouse, Cleary said he has about 500 tomato plants.

"Tomatoes are the best legal drug there is," Cleary said. "On Saturday morning I'll have a line of people waiting at 7 a.m. The demand will outpace our supply."

Tomatoes originally were Cleary's replacement for tobacco.

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"I began with cattle and tobacco," Cleary said. "Tomatoes are my alternative for the tobacco buyout that happened six or so years ago."

But not everything works. Before hitting the jackpot with his locally famous tomatoes the two tried growing greenhouse lettuce.

"The lettuce had shallow roots," Lewis said. "It ended up with Pythium, a bacteria that killed it off."

With the help of the University of Kentucky's greenhouse specialist, Bob Anderson, Cleary tested a single row of tomato plants.

And that single row quickly multiplied into the forest of tomato plants that stand several feet high.

With the help of a "fertigator" " an automatic irrigation system " Cleary and Lewis said they can grow many more plants.

"The fertigator eliminates the labor of watering," Cleary said. "If I had my choice, I would put everything under a roof. You can control everything that way."

Though he doesn't grow the majority of his crops in the greenhouse, Cleary says he does transplant a lot of them.

"I start almost every plant in the greenhouse," Cleary said. "It adds an extra step, but I get everything earlier."

Along with tomatoes, Cleary also said he sells a tremendous amount of strawberries.

On his fourth of an acre, Cleary and Lewis have planted close to 1,000 strawberry plants. He said they pick them 8-10 hours a day.

"We usually have the strawberries from mid-May to mid-June," Cleary said. "On a given day I can sell 96 pints in about half an hour."

And Cleary says that sometimes there aren't enough hours in the day.

"We can only work as long as we have light," Cleary said. "We try to pick in the greenhouse in the evening because we have light in there."

But the hours of tedious farming can be financially beneficial.

Cleary's stand brought in around \$18,000 last year at the Franklin County Farmers Market, he said.

Lewis keeps track of everything sold on a spreadsheet, which Cleary uses to decide which crops are more successful.

"We write every sale down," he said. "For example, though we used to grow three different types of radishes, we realized that only one was really selling. So now we just grow that type."

Cleary says that Lewis is the heart and soul of the operation.

"I'll keep growing vegetables as long as I can do it," Cleary said. "Or as long as Adrienne wants to do it. I couldn't do it without her."

And though Lewis has three children, Alastair, 12, Nichalaus, 11, and Victoria, 10, the youngest contributes most to the family business.

Cleary's granddaughter grows parsley, basil, dill, sage and cilantro. her herb garden.

"She's into the money," Lewis said.

"She'll ask who will be busier," Cleary added. "If Lexington is, she will go with her mom or if we say Franklin County will be, she'll go with me."

Though the Farmers Market remains a family affair for Cleary, he said he wasn't exposed to the farming niche as a child.

Born and raised in Wayne, New Jersey, Cleary said he didn't move to Kentucky until 1973.

"I bought my first farm in 1976," Cleary said. "I saved my money building custom made furniture and bought 37 acres."

About a decade later, Cleary began farming full-time.

Though the Farmers Market season consists of 27 weeks of selling, according to Cleary, he said the work never ends.

"By the time I grow it, pick it and sell it, I'm sick of it," Cleary joked. "I eat out at restaurants a lot."



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