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# GROWING SELF-SUFFICIENCY

## Grass roots to Mountain Roots

BY RACHEL BRANHAM

Documented history of farming and agriculture in the Gunnison Valley is sparse. Historical records of crop production available to us are etched as tally marks on the walls of pole barns, marking the poundage of potatoes harvested in 1923 or the number of calves born the following spring. Beyond sheep and cattle ranching, Gunnison Valley's food production may currently be in its prime.

In the 1880s, commercial farming was largely a service for mining camps and settlements of white Europeans which developed with the mining industry. With an average of less than 11 inches of rain



Susan Wyman.

Emily Ogden

and fewer than 65 frost-free days per year, Gunnison doesn't boast the easiest growing conditions. By the year 1900, ranching overtook the mining industry. Through trial and error, ranching families grew backyard gardens to feed themselves. They soon found potatoes and hay to be the most reliable crops.

In the 1970s, recreation was increasing in popularity and the region gained value in the growing tourism economy, soon surpassing the value of ranching and mining. People like Jan Scheefer moved to the area in the early 1970's to attend what was then Western State College and stayed to build lives in the Rocky Mountains.

Scheefer was told, "Oh, you can't grow a garden here," but she hauled some composted cow manure from a ranch, scraped it into the dirt and grew a season's worth of salad. She still remembers her neighbors' disbelieving smiles.

She moved from Gunnison to Ohio City where she and her partner bought a quarter acre and started experimenting with year-round food production by way of grow pits — sunken greenhouses dug into the earth. Even when the winter nights dropped to 30 below zero, by covering the pits with carpet scraps the hardy greens thrived. In the summer months, tomatoes, strawberries, peas and beans produced enough to feed the neighborhood.

"Self sufficiency became a lifestyle," Scheefer says. She moved back to Gunnison with her family in the early 1990s and contin-

ues to live as self-sufficiently as she can.

Speak with any farmer or gardener in the Gunnison Valley, and they'll mention the importance of season extension. The short growing season means that most seedlings must be started indoors to be given a chance to flower and fruit. Outdoor gardens don't get the consistent warm temperatures required to grow most peppers and squash and even tomatoes prefer warmer weather. These crops can thrive inside of greenhouses and high tunnels, which are common among backyard gardeners.

Susan Wyman, owner of Gunnison Gardens, relies on three high tunnel hoop houses to grow her crops. "Brassicas like cabbage, kohlrabi, and broccoli do great out in the fields," said Wyman, "along with carrots, radishes, and several varieties of greens. The squash and cucumbers like it hot, so the high tunnels are the place for them."

Wyman and her team also grow winter squash, green beans and other warm season vegetables on her urban farm, which began in 2015. Gunnison Gardens also grows raspberries, honeyberries and sour cherries, which all do well in the cold climate. They started with 10 cold-hardy apple trees and the orchard has gradually grown to include 50 plum and apple trees.

Agriculture in and around Gunnison is being adopted by a new generation of farmers. Matt Ozyp purchased 133 acres in 2017 and created Iola Valley Farm when he was 26. Matt has several tomato varieties that he

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grows in his 15-foot high tunnel hoop houses. He grows a variety of vegetables while incorporating chickens, sheep and cows. Matt believes that animals and plants are both necessary to create harmony in organic farming.

He and his partner, Alexis Taylor, operated a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) for two seasons and are excited to be collaborating with Gunnison Gardens this year to bring more variety to their shareholders. Taylor made another pivot this year, launching Sundrop Flora, the first flower farm in the Gunnison Valley. Sundrop Flora focuses on edible and medicinal flowers as well as fresh-cut flower bouquets, available for purchase at local farmers' markets and through CSA subscriptions.

When Holly Conn moved to Crested Butte with her family, her interest in vegetable gardening also met with skepticism. Conn is motivated by a challenge so she set to work with fellow community members to build a shared garden in a lot on Elk Avenue. The small plot produced gorgeous vegetables and led to an organization focused on bolstering local food production and backyard gardening.

Ten years later, Mountain Roots Food Project manages eight growing spaces including school gardens at both Crested Butte and Gunnison Community Schools and two small production farms that grow vegetables for a CSA.

Mountain Roots does more than grow organic vegetables at 8,000 feet elevation. Their Farm to School education program teaches kids the importance of nourishing their bodies and minds with healthy food that is grown locally. Their programming connects produce grown all over Western Colorado with chefs and restaurants, food banks and families to minimize the environmental impact of the food we eat and maximize the economic viability of small-scale local farming.

Together with Gunnison Gardens, Iola Valley Farm, Sundrop Flora and other players in the local food movement, the Gunnison Valley Producers' Guild works together to build the market for local food, share knowledge and support each other in learning and applying the best organic, high altitude growing practices. The same pioneering qualities that brought Europeans to the valley 150 years ago are alive and well in the entrepreneurs and visionaries that are making local food in Gunnison Country what it is today.

*(Rachel Branham is development director for Mountain Roots Food Project, a non-profit devoted to food education, resilience and security in the Gunnison Valley. For more information visit [mountainrootsfoodproject.org](http://mountainrootsfoodproject.org).)* ■



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