

WOMEN OF WILLOWBROOK FARMING THE GREEN ARIZONA



STORY & PHOTOS BY
SANDY BOYCE

Willowbrook Farm, nestled on the green banks of the Verde River in Camp Verde, is a small family farm started by a mother and her two daughters in 2005.

Surrounded by weeping willow trees & the burbling offshoots of the river, Willowbrook Farm feels like a cool, lush paradise in a dry desert. **Denise Gould**, a 4th generation Arizonan, and her daughters, **Hope & Hilary**, come from a long history of ranchers & farmers.

Denise has been a teacher, landscaper, owned a bed & breakfast inn and is co-founder of the Verde Valley Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program and the Camp Verde Farmer's Market.

Over a lunch of Swiss chard quiche (eggs are from their chickens, who cluck contentedly nearby and the chard is grown on the farm), potato salad and homemade cheese-cake, I ask Hope why she wanted to come home and help her family on the farm.

"All of our family on my mom's side have farmed; I wanted to get to know my roots, learning what I could from my mom while she was still an active farmer. I really love pottery but it was important for me to connect with my roots, where my family came from. I feel like farming is in my blood."

Hope earned her undergraduate degree in Ceramics from NAU and studied ceramics in Japan for 7 years, earning her graduate degree in Ceramics from Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Art & Music in Japan. She currently teaches ceramics at Coconino Community College.

Hilary recalls, "My mom always had a giant garden, even when we lived in upstate New York; it just comes naturally. But taking care of the farm was too much for mom to do by herself." Hilary & Hope are now in charge of vegetable production. "Mom is phasing out, but does take care of the chickens, eggs, fruit trees, nuts, bees and preserves," says Hilary.

Denise is also a beekeeper and has taken classes from local beekeepers on how to maintain healthy hives. Bees are necessary to pollinate crops, but colonies in the US and Europe have been suffering from colony collapse disorder and have greatly diminished in the last few years. Scientists have attributed that devastation to a deadly cocktail of pathogens, as well as pesticides and beekeeping practices that stress the insect's immune system. Denise uses sustainable, pesticide-free methods to take care of her bees.

"When I was in Japan, just about every household, even in urban areas, had a small vegetable garden. Even if you had a little patch of dirt, in every little space, people were growing vegetables. I worked for a couple of young, hard-working Japanese guys in the small, rural, agricultural town of Shitara, Japan. They were just making ends meet, but were extremely passionate tomato farmers. They treated me just like any of the other hired help, which was refreshing as I was the only foreigner in the area. We would share simple lunches together, and talk shop, laugh. I loved it. I worked for them for a full

season," says Hope.

"In Japan, people have been growing vegetables in their backyard gardens for thousands of years; however, after World War II it became even more important. Here, we can buy produce in so many places: health food stores, markets, CSAs, farmers markets—we have so many options. We are very lucky here," Hope adds.

"I'm really proud of our CSA and our business model for it. It's non-profit, volunteer run, the farmers get paid market price for what they grow — we pay our farmers fairly. All our volunteers receive a share of produce. We have no middleman, no markup, so all the money we take in goes directly to the farmer. The CSA supports high quality growers like Whipstone Farm in Paulden and local growers, who are trying to grow in like-minded fashion, right here in Camp Verde," added Hilary. Hilary earned her herbal certification from The Southwest School of Botanical Medicine in Bisbee, started a small mushroom operation on the Oregon coast called Misty Hill Mushrooms and has experience farming and cultivating mushrooms in both Washington and Oregon.

"I feel so lucky to be part of a small family business with my sister. We see eye to eye on so many levels, you don't really have that with anybody else; our philosophy is the same," says Hope.

"People buy fancy cars or iPhones and go to the grocery store and expect to buy an apple for 60¢. I think if you can create a connection with somebody who is growing your food and spend your money there, then it's not just about quantity, it's about quality. We're into nourishing the soil — we do soil testing, cover cropping, amending — everything we put into the soil is natural, we don't use chemicals, we practice all organic methods from start to finish. Those nutrients benefit the biology of the soil and are passed onto your body. If you have healthy plants, you have less pests, more toads, bees, and beneficial insects," says Hilary.

All seeds used at Willowbrook Farm are organic and non-GMO. They save seeds from year to year and also exchange heirloom seeds with other farmers.

Denise, Hope & Hilary sponsored a soil fertility workshop last year with famed soil expert **Neal Kinsey**. Forty people, including commercial growers, backyard gardeners and vineyard owners attended the three-day intensive course at Red Rock State Park. They organized the event, as well as cooked all the food for the attendees and volunteers. That worked out to about 50 lunches and snacks every day.

"It was a lot of work, but it was really worth it. We learned so much about soil testing and balancing the nutrients in the soil — it's pretty great that 40 people were interested in spending three days learning about dirt! We'd like to invite Neal back some time for another workshop," says Denise.

Willowbrook Farm has about 2 acres of land under cultivation. Their main crops are tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, garlic, onions, chard & kale. They also have eggs, peaches and various canned items like apple chutney, pear butter, marmalade & pickles. They have a large hedge of blackberries, as well as fig, plum and pomegranate trees.

Willowbrook Farm also hosts the annual

Verde Valley Birding & Nature Festival. Bird-watchers walk through the Verde Riparian area near their farm and end up with a home-cooked meal prepared by Denise and her daughters. "We spent about three days getting ready for the event this year — my sister got out the weed-whacker and we really cleaned up the whole place. It looks like we could have a wedding here! We set up tables outside and served brunch, with most of the food coming from our farm. We even had orange juice from citrus we picked in Phoenix," says Denise.

Most produce sold in health food stores and supermarkets comes from California, which is having the worst drought in recorded history.

According to the *Arizona Republic*, drought conditions in California's agricultural fields are going to push prices higher for fruits and vegetables this year. The biggest price hikes are likely for lettuce, up 34%.

Shoppers at health food stores and grocery markets may expect an average increase of 30% in their grocery bill this season as the California drought causes fruits & vegetables to be more and more expensive.

Willowbrook Farm waters their crops from a gravity-fed irrigation system from the Verde River. They use water from the OK Ditch, an irrigation system hand dug by the Kovacovich family three generations ago. Users of ditch water maintain it by hand, pruning plants back and cleaning it several times a year. In June & July there is enough water from the monsoons, so during that time they don't need water from the ditch. "We pretty much always have enough water," says Hilary.

Relying on local sources for your produce has some distinct advantages: foods grown far away spend significant time on the road, and therefore have more time to lose nutrients; farmers growing for local markets favor taste, nutrition and diversity over shipability; produce is typically sold within 24 hours after harvest, at its peak freshness and ripeness; produce is not harvested with industrial machinery and is handled by fewer people, decreasing potential for damage

"All our produce is picked either the day before or the day of our CSA delivery. All our greens are picked that morning. We're only a few miles from our Sedona and Cornville delivery points so our produce is spending very little time on the road. We keep all our vegetables in coolers after picking, and make sure nothing is sitting out in the sun. We take really good care of our produce — it's important to us that it not only tastes good, but looks good, too. We've been growing for the CSA since 2007 — our customers seem pretty satisfied with their weekly baskets," says Hope. "Our focus is to grow good, healthy soil and to provide naturally grown, nutritious food to our community." 🌱

| Sandy Boyce is the co-founder and director of the Verde Valley CSA and has a daughter who loves her veggies. verdevalleycsa@gmail.com