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Female moxie, hard work, determination result in Frey Farms' success

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Sarah Frey-Talley, chief executive officer of Frey Farms LLC, headquartered in Keenes, IL, founded the company 20 years ago — when she was 16. Today it farms approximately 12,000 acres in numerous locations, in addition to sourcing from growing partners.



Frey Farms Autumn Couleur heirloom pumpkin line. "Growing up, we had a small, 100-acre family farm," Ms. Frey-Talley explained. "My mom had a

small route of about 12 grocery stores that she delivered melons to in the summer. When I was 16 I bought my own truck and took over her route. Mom went to work for a radio station, and my four older brothers went off to college.”

Her brothers, she noted, knew that the family farm was too small to provide them with a living, so their intentions were to go into other careers.

Once she had taken over the melon route, Ms. Frey-Talley began marketing to more stores. Ultimately she had 150 stores on her route, forcing her to source melons from other farms in Illinois and Indiana to fill her customers’ needs.

“Over time, some of these small farmers began to retire,” said Ms. Frey-Talley. “As they did, I bought their land and operations. I had a pretty sizeable operation by the time I was 18, and I also purchased our own family farm.”

As the business continued to grow, and as her brothers, Leonard Frey, Harley Frey, John Frey and finally Ted Frey, finished college, they one by one returned home to work with their younger sister.

Within a short time, Ms. Frey-Talley converted the company’s acreage from soy, corn and other grain crops to fresh produce, and pumpkins were the first item she planted.

“People thought I was absolutely crazy to plant pumpkins,” she reminisced. “But I was pretty determined, and it has evolved into a major part of our business.”

In 2004, Frey Farms was the first supplier Walmart featured in a national commercial. Today the company has growing operations in Florida, Georgia, Missouri, Arkansas, Indiana, Illinois and in the panhandle of West Virginia. Ms. Frey-Talley said if the company isn’t the largest producer of pumpkins in the country, she’d be hard-pressed to guess who is.

Frey Farms also produces cantaloupe, watermelon, sweet corn, green bell peppers, all varieties of winter squashes, gourds, decorative corn and even pinecones, of which it ships about 80 loads every year.

She said that the current drought is affecting the Midwest dramatically, forcing the company to take extreme measures to keep the pumpkin crop irrigated.

“Our corn this year will be sold as shocks — corn stalks tied together and used for decorative purposes,” she said. “We’ll have hundreds of loads this year. We have a fairly decent wheat crop, and we’re being creative in finding ways to move it. [The old saying] ‘Make hay while the sun shines’ is certainly true this year, and we had plenty of sunshine to make hay.”

The upside of the drought is that it eliminated disease pressure on the crops, and the pumpkin crop is decent due to the company’s efforts.

“We do a major volume in Jack-o’-lanterns,” said Ms. Frey-Talley. “And we have a strong business with what we call our Autumn Couleur, which is French for ‘color.’ The bins contain about 10 unique heirloom varieties, many from foreign countries.”

Frey Farms also produces decorative items, such as pine cone and potpourri wreathes, which it markets under the “Sarah Marie Styles” brand.

“My passion is the fall crop because of the wonderful decorative items,” said Ms. Frey-Talley. “By that time of the year, we’ve been through the ups and downs of the seasons, and these beautiful fall items make a perfect wrap-up to our growing season.

“The pinecones go primarily to the floral and lawn and garden industries, but some small retail chains also feature them,” she continued. “We work with most major retailers across the country on all other crops.”

Frey Farms’ work ethic and the family bond are its strengths today.

“Working with my older brothers by my side is a true joy,” said Ms. Frey-Talley. “We’ve been working on a farm since we were young children. There is exactly a two-year difference in all of our ages. Together we’ve built our business quietly over the years, and we’ve built strong relationships with our retailers and other customers.”

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