

Unique Concepts Attract Visitors To Willow Pond Farm

JINNY WILT

Adams Co. Correspondent

FAIRFIELD (Adams Co.) — Nestled in the valley east of South Mountain, the northern extension of Virginia's Blue Ridge near Fairfield in Adams County, sits Willow Pond Farm, home to a couple who recently retired after 32 years as American diplomats.

Visitors to the herb and everlastings farm, established in 1994 by Tom and Madeline Wajda (pronounced Vy-da), may walk through 10 demonstration gardens of edible flowers, and culinary and medicinal herbs all developed by the couple. There's also a butterfly garden, a crescent-shaped silver garden, a 200-foot long perennial border, a garden for scented geraniums, an everlasting flower garden and one for Biblical plants.

Tom said he hopes to plant the Biblical garden in such a way that it looks like an open book with Old Testament plants on one page and New Testament plants on the other.

A five-acre wildflower meadow is also open to visitors. And in the summer there are accommodations for a picnic lunch under a huge black walnut tree.

Standing in one of two greenhouses the Wajdas added to their 30-acre farm, Tom said with a chuckle as he surveyed the tables of herbs in front of him, "No matter how many greenhouses you have, you do not have enough space."

Noting that mint is the herb of 1998, he pointed to one table that was laden with 25 varieties of mint that will be sold by the couple in a shop they opened in a summerhouse replete with a walk-in fireplace and located next to their stone home — thought to have been built by the same mason who constructed the Fairfield Inn — and at a farmer's market in center square Gettysburg. They also can be found at herb festivals, and garden and craft shows throughout Maryland and Pennsylvania.

At the various outlets, the couple offers for sale live, fresh-cut and dried herbs, herbal vinegars, jellies, honey, herbal blends for dips and flavorings, herbal teas, herbal soaps, herbal gift baskets, dried flowers and arrangements, as well as books on herb culture, preservation, cooking and medicinal uses of herbs. At Christmas and in the fall they also have rosemary topiaries.

Tom walks further into the greenhouse pointing to scented geraniums. "We have 65 varieties of scented geraniums. Everything from the standard, good old-fashioned rose to red-flowering geraniums."

Madeline suddenly interjects, "Look your lemon tree's about to bloom." And sure enough, perched atop the small tree is a bud. Tom adds that he has taken cuttings from the Ponderosa Lemon Tree which they got in Connecticut "that are coming on quite nicely"

Next Tom shows off the angelica which he explains he is quite proud of because it is difficult to propagate unless you have fresh seed. "I simply took the seed off the plant last August. My experience with buying seed is that by the time you get them they don't work

Even the fresh seeds only have a 50 percent germination rate...when February or March rolls around and you toss these into a pot hoping to have the seeds germinate...two years running I had zero germination from purchased seeds. But taken from my own they've worked," he said.

Explaining that he had just spent three hours potting plants, he said, "There's basil over here and basil over there. This is sweet marjoram and there's more sweet marjoram," he said pointing in front of him. His plans were to continue with his potting using popular herbs of the day — St. John's Wort and valerian.

When asked how much time the two spend on their endeavor, Tom, who is a master gardener, answers with a sigh, "All of the time."

While he is busy with the growing of herbs, Madeline, who studied cuisine in France while the couple lived in that country as members for the U.S. Foreign Service, offers classes in herbal cooking and herb preservation. She also gives classes on dried flower arranging and provides advice and products for herbal weddings. Tom offers classes on herb propagation and culture.

Madeline uses herbs in her daily cooking, explaining that if you drop the salt and fat from your diet you need to replace it with something and herbs are the perfect choice to add flavor.

Walking through the gardens, she tells of one program the couple offers in the summertime. "It's called Weed and Eat. You are invited to come out at 5 p.m. and Tom will take you on a tour of the gardens and tell you all about the plants and then at 6 p.m. you get to the gardens while I cook a meal for you. At 7 p.m. we eat."

And then, with a twinkle in her eyes that seemed to denote her pleasure at thinking of the program, she said, "I'd rather cook than weed."

The couple who have grown herbs from Iran to New Zealand to France and, finally to Canada, decided in 1992 to turn their serious hobby into a serious business and began looking for a "retirement" farm in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

"We wanted to be within a couple of hours of Washington, D.C., because we had friends and family in that area. We wanted to have a house with some character and we wanted ideally 20 acres and some water and some out-buildings that were useable. So we got this 1760s house and two ponds and 30 acres," Tom said.

In the completely refurbished modern kitchen, Madeline brings out a box packed with some of her jellies. The delectable treat can be found in flavors from apple blossom to violet with others such as basil/tomato, lemon balm grape, lilac, parsley and pineapple sage cider among numerous kinds.

A note in their catalog states, "All of our jellies and vinegars are carefully made by Madeline, one batch at a time, with fresh herbs from our garden. This is a time-intensive process (on a good day she makes 100 jars of jelly), but it insures that you will receive a product of unparalleled taste and quality."



Tom and Madeline Wajda check plants in the greenhouse to the rear of their home along Tract Road in Adams County.

Madeline's herbal honeys come in such flavors as cinnamon basil, lemon verbena and rosemary.

The couple will hold the Willow Pond Farm National Herb Week Open House May 2-4. On May 8-9 they will be at the Landis Valley Herb Fair in Lancaster and on May 23, they'll be at Baltimore Herb Festival, Leakin Park, Baltimore, Md.

Because mint is the year's herb, the couple offers these tips for growing mint: Mint prefers part sun, but will grow well in full sun and tolerates a fair amount of shade. Mints spread easily and need to be contained.

Do this by cutting the bottom out of a large (3-4 gallon) plastic pot or a plastic bucket. Dig a hole and bury the pot leaving three inches above ground. Fill the pot with soil and plant your mint in it. Trim back any branches that start to trail outside the pot.

Harvest mints every four weeks during the growing season. Cut them back to about two inches above the ground, fertilize and water, and watch them come back again.

Drying mint: Mint (and other herbs) can be dried by hanging them in a dry area out of direct sunlight. Drying time is three to ten days. You can also use your microwave. Place the mint leaves between layers of paper towels and dry on high for two minutes. Check the leaves for dryness, and continue the process 30 seconds at a time until all the leaves are dry (usually not more than 5 minutes total).

Mint Recipes:
Mint Butter Cookies
Makes 5 dozen.

- 1 cup butter
- 1 egg
- 2 1/2 cups flour
- 3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh (or 1 tablespoon dried) mint*
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon mint extract

Cream butter and sugar, add egg and mix well. Mix in flour and baking soda, then mint and mint extract. Roll into two long rolls about 1 1/2 inch in diameter and refrigerate overnight. Slice into 1/8-inch slices, sprinkle with sugar, and bake on a

greased cookie sheet at 350 degrees for 10-12 minutes.

*Rose geranium, lemon verbena, or tarragon may be used instead of mint. If you do use these herbs, replace the mint extract with 1 teaspoon of rose water, lemon extract, or vanilla, respectively.

Mint Vinaigrette

- 2 tablespoons cider vinegar
- 1/4 cup orange juice
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh mint (or 1 tablespoon dried)
- 3/4 cup safflower or corn oil
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- Pinch of paprika

Combine all ingredients except oil in mixing bowl. Slowly add oil, whisking all the while. (Or combine all ingredients in blender for about 15 seconds). Check for taste: add sugar or mint if desired. Serve on greens or fruit salads.

*Try chopped mint with cooked peas or green beans (add mint just before serving).

*Have a cup of peppermint to relieve indigestion.

House Hunt: Home Ownership Answers

HUNTINGDON (Huntingdon Co.) — If you are thinking about buying or building a home, maybe "just looking," or interested in financing remodeling, the "House Hunt '98: Questions and Answers on Home Ownership" educational program will provide you with up-to-date information about the homeownership process.

"House Hunt '98" will be held on Tuesday, March 31, from 6-8:30 p.m. at the Ellis Hall Ballroom on the Juniata College Campus, 18th Street, Huntingdon. "House Hunt '98" is a community education program of the Penn State Cooperative Extension in Huntingdon County in cooperation with many local businesses.

At the "House Hunt '98" you can talk with more than 20 experts in the housing and

finance industry who will have helpful information at display tables available from 6-8:30 p.m. Seminars with in-depth information about the homeownership process start at 6:30 p.m.

Information about Pennsylvania's Fair Housing Act, will be available as well as pre-qualifying financial information. A

question and answer period will be part of each session. Refreshments will be available.

"House Hunt '98" is open to the public and walk-in attendance is welcome. For more information, call the Penn State Cooperative Extension Office in Huntingdon County at (814)643-1660.

ARE VITAMINS DESTROYED IN FOOD PREPARATION?

Some vitamin loss occurs the minute food is harvested. Modern methods of harvesting, storage, transportation, processing and preparation minimizes these losses. Vitamin losses occur by oxidation, by light, heat, exposure to acids and alkali and by leaching into water. Considerable amounts

of various nutrients remain even in food, however, even after it has gone through processing. You can take some food preparation steps to prevent vitamin loss: Peel thinly or cook in skin; cut food into large pieces; use a minimum amount of water; cook with the lid on; serve immediately; cook until just tender, not mushy; store in refrigerator or freezer and cover tightly.