



FAMILY FARMS

Freedom Valley Farm Grows All Year Long

STORY BY SHAWNDR A MILLER
PHOTOS BY JOSH MARSHALL

(Clockwise, from top left) Spring lettuce mix in full blossom; a tractor sits idle in the cold spring weather while plants grow in the warm high tunnel structures; Mokum carrots, planted in September and grown through winter, are harvested; Freedom Valley Farm owner Jim Baughman.

Jim Baughman opens the door to one of his unheated, movable high tunnels, where Asian greens, carrots, spinach and lettuce stretch like green carpet runners to the other end of the high-ceilinged, plastic-enclosed structure. “What’s kind of driven me here,” he says, reaching down as English setter Gus leans his head in for a pat, “is the passion to grow in the wintertime. So many other farms don’t.”

Before him is the manifestation of that passion. Even after the most ferocious winter weather Indiana has seen in years, each of the six long, raised beds is lush with small but viable veggies. On tables off to the side are trays of microgreens in various stages of growth.

This is how Owen County’s Freedom Valley Farm has made its name: salad bowl sweetness, available all year long. Baughman uses passive solar and organic methods

in his four-season operation. This year posed more of a challenge than the previous ones, but to an eye weary of snow and muck, all that greenery is a balm. Still, Baughman laments that he didn’t have enough to expand into the Indianapolis Winter Farmers Market as planned.

“We’re in our third year of winter growing,” he says. “The two previous years were very mild, and we had an abundance. ... But the extreme cold has just really put a damper on it. We really didn’t lose as many crops as I’d expected, it just really stalled them out.”

He’s in his third season in the Bloomington Market, so he targeted his limited supply there, where his customer base is already strong.

Though Baughman’s bread and butter, these days, is dependent on the plastic stretched over metal frames, a few years ago his life looked very different.

Back then he lived in Indianapolis, with a 9-to-5

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job dominating his time. Gardening was something he did on the side, a way of decompressing from his work installing HVAC systems in new homes. "I was from a large family. We had huge gardens, and I tended those quite a bit," he says. "It just stuck with me through my life. ... I had really large gardens for many, many years, and I just gave a lot of produce away."

He'd owned the 235 acres west of Freedom for a decade, renting the non-wooded half of the property to farmers growing beans, corn and hay. He thought it might be a place to expand on his urge to grow things, perhaps in retirement. Meanwhile he took a course in forestry and classified the woods on the land. After a timber harvest, he planted 10,000 oaks and other hardwoods.

As an avid hunter and outdoorsman, he loved coming to the property on weekends. He put a pond in and stocked it with fish, and generally enjoyed the good life. "That was one of the things that was so cool about buying the property. ... We'd come down here and spend the weekend and (say), 'We're in Freedom!'"

And he needed that respite, because his work became increasingly stressful. When the housing market took a dive, he thought, why wait till retirement—especially having learned about the possibilities of four-season growing. He rented out his house in Indianapolis and moved to Owen County to go all in.

He set up a partnership with his brother, Joe, who lives out of state but has roots in south central Indiana. With his brother in charge of accounting, he got to work.

That first year was dedicated to various infrastructure tasks. Baughman's construction experience proved crucial, though he jokes that he only knows enough of the trades to be dangerous. He began renovating the barn—a doorless structure stuffed with hay on a dirt floor. The first task was to add concrete flooring, in tandem with the outdoor wood-fired boiler he installed to heat both the barn and one of the high tunnels through radiant heat. (The barn facelift continues today: Baughman has moved on to adding a bathroom and office, as well as a dedicated cleaning station.)

In pursuit of his dream of year-round growing, he enlisted friends to erect the high tunnels and the lone hoop house. Only one of the structures is heated; it's the only high tunnel that isn't mobile. The other two rest on metal tracks three greenhouse-lengths long, allowing Baughman and a helper to haul the entire kit and kaboodle to another segment of beds when the time is right.

Preparing to raise vegetables, he took five acres out of corn and bean production. He planted cover crops like clover and rye in hopes of building the soil back up.

"I was a little naïve, thinking cover crops were going to be the answer to not having to add fertilizers or amendments to the soil," he says. "Just plant cover crops for a year and keep turning them into the soil, and you'd be ready to go. But the more I looked into it, I realized the soil was really depleted."

Baughman has come around to the fact that the soil needs additional inputs besides compost and cover crop till-ins. But he chooses natural fertilizers, like composted chicken manure and rock minerals, to help. The lack of a local source adds to the cost of bringing five tons of material in—sometimes shipping costs just as much as the product itself—but the outlay is worth it to improve the soil's quality.

Eventually, with the help of a few hired hands, he had his first vegetables ready for market. Freedom Valley Farm quickly gained a loyal following.

One customer who has been with him from early on is Barb Bonchek. The Green County resident, along with several of her neighbors, first connected with Baughman at the Owen County Farmers Market. It was parking convenience that drew them to that market versus Bloomington's; the drive is about the same. "But Jim was one of the main reasons we kept going back to the Spencer market," Bonchek says. "He consistently, every time, had the most wonderful produce."

When winter came and the Owen County market took a break, Bonchek and her friends worked out an arrangement with Baughman to preorder his vegetables every week. She has nothing but praise for his operation, noting the difference in storage time between Freedom Valley Farm and store-bought organic lettuce.

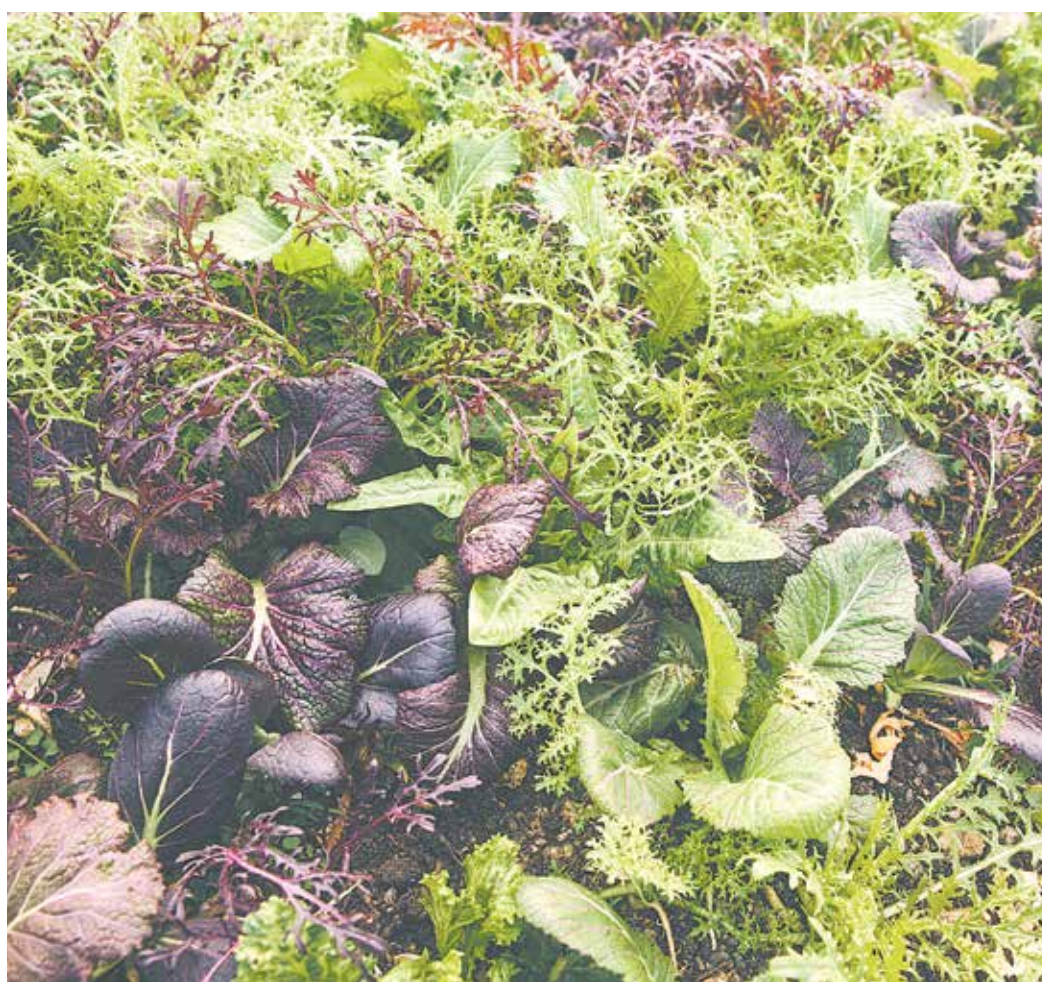
"His lettuces will last for two weeks," she says. "One of the reasons is that he really washes and dries it. He's very meticulous. Because he does such a good job with the drying, he has very little water left in the bags."

"But what has set Jim aside from everybody else is his ability to grow quantities and quality of what he does year-round," she says. "Nobody else has been able to duplicate that." As a hobby farmer herself, she appreciates being able to eat well throughout the winter months when her own garden is done producing.

Baughman would like even more people to



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Where to find Freedom Valley Farm Produce:

Restaurants: The Muffin Top, Spencer and Feast Bakery Café, Bloomington

Local Fresh Produce Plan: Sign up for weekly delivery at www.freedomvalleyfarm.com (starts in May).

Shop: Bloomington Farmers Market

prioritize fresh vegetables in their diets. "I wish I'd see more people buy into eating healthy," he says. He's had his own brushes with high blood pressure and cholesterol, and knows firsthand how much difference a clean diet makes.

That commitment to health is a major driver for his endeavor. "I think a lot of the food in the grocery stores today—this may sound a little harsh and I don't want to sound radical—but I think they're poisoning people," he says.

Though not certified organic, Baughman follows organic principles to the letter. The only inputs used are OMRI-approved. Eschewing chemicals, he's learned to strategize carefully on timing and placement of crops for highest productivity.

With only two wells on the farm, water needs were a big factor during his start-up year and second year (when Indiana was officially declared as drought-stricken). He planted sweet potatoes in the lowest, moistest bed he had and held off irrigating them to direct precious water to other crops. He hopes to eventually put in an irrigation pond to catch some of the early spring rains.

As he's found, if drought or extreme cold isn't the problem, it's flooding. Last year's wet

spring meant a delayed planting and subsequent weed control problems. And even though he grows on raised beds, the unthinkable happened in midsummer. "At one point in July we lost all our greens crops due to flooding," he says. "And we're not in a flood zone."

People in his Local Fresh Produce Plan, though, weren't affected by these trials. That's his version of a Community Supported Agriculture plan, in which people sign up for a weekly delivery of produce to a central location either in Bloomington or Spencer. "Through it all we've still been able to do our CSAs. They take priority."

Many of his customers are surprised to learn that much of the winter growing happens without benefit of a heat source, aside from the low slanted rays of a winter sun. He's been known to say things like, "As long as it stays above 10 degrees, I'm happy," making marketgoers shake their heads in wonder.

The heated high tunnel is where he starts tomatoes in late winter, in hopes of having the first ones at the market. Ripe tomatoes in May invariably bring a long line of excited buyers to his stand.

This year he plans to also try 20 varieties of later-ripening heirloom tomatoes in the field. He

spent his winter poring over seed catalogs and reviews of heirlooms, looking for prolific varieties less prone to cracking.

He's also growing heirloom cabbage, beets, eggplant, winter squash and garlic.

At some point Baughman may add a venture like beekeeping, aquaculture or possibly maple syrup to his to-do list. "I have the woodlands and the maple trees; it's just a matter of putting that together," he explains.

Blessed with two good workers, young men who grew up nearby, Baughman would like to be able to give them steady work even when the growing season slows. "One of the struggles with small farms is keeping your help year-round," he says. "If we could do a maple syrup operation that would be something they could do in the winter months."

Ask him what's most challenging about his chosen vocation, and he will talk about the fact that it's his second career. His gray goatee tells the story; this is not an easy gig in midlife. "It's a lot of physical work," he says. "I can tell you that I'm sore most every morning that I get up."

Then there's the fact that he can't step away from the farm. The last time he did was for a

LEFT: Baughman opens the doors to his high tunnel greenhouse as his English setter, Gus, waits in anticipation. Gus likes to chase birds that have found their way into the greenhouse and are unable to find a way out. **OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP:** Baughman, Grant Pershing and Chip Darling. **OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM:** Asian green mix.

growers' conference in Missouri in January 2012.

"It's funny," he says, "I always tell everybody I decided not to have livestock because I didn't want to have to feed and water and tend to them like you do on a daily basis. And yet I find that growing in greenhouses is not that much different." Between watering and venting, the maintenance needs are nearly as high. "You can't walk away from this for two days. Not growing the way I currently do as an all season grower."

But the rewards are many. He relishes the never-ending learning curve. ("Last winter it was soils; this winter I was consumed by heirloom tomatoes.") He's justifiably proud of offering products people crave. Baughman has stood at his market stand and heard, "You need to buy your greens from this guy, because he's got the best greens in the market." And restaurateurs have praised his greens for their color and freshness.

Then there's the challenge of getting the jump on the season. He started beets and onions on an experimental basis last fall; once the weather warms, he'll delight his customers with these early offerings. Already his carrots have been drawing raves.

"We grow carrots year-round, and the winter carrots are just phenomenal," he says. "They're so sweet and flavorful in the wintertime."

Baughman heads back outside the mobile high tunnel, indicating several low tunnels under which carrots have been growing, albeit more slowly than last winter. Two layers of plastic protect the root crops from cold and snow.

He moves sandbags to pull back the plastic. The feathery foliage looks a little beat up, and snow melt waterlogs the channel between the rows, but he squats and lifts carrots one by one from the soggy ground. Their orange flesh gleams in the late winter sunlight. He tosses one to Gus, who stands in the mud and crunches it down. ***FI**

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