

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Rochelle King

Small seeds blossom into bigger, more beautiful things.

Rochelle King never imagined what the garden she started for her daycare kids in Spencer, Okla. would one day grow into. Now 11 years later, the certified organic fruits and vegetables she grows can be found in local Whole Foods and Natural Grocers stores in the Oklahoma City area.

It all began in her barber shop when she mentioned to one of her clients, who happened to work for the USDA, she would like to grow fresh fruits and vegetables for the kids in the daycare she ran. He then told her about the plasticulture program at the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ODAFF).

Though King knew very little about farming or growing produce when she began, she sought out opportunities to educate herself such as becoming a master gardener through OSU, attending workshops, conferences and reading. With the help of Micah Anderson at the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ODAFF), King began her garden using plasticulture—a method of growing crops with the assistance of plastic and irrigation.

She utilized seven acres of family land, two next to her grandmother's house where the daycare was and five across the road next to her barber shop for tomatoes, okra, squash, cucumbers, watermelons and peppers.

“My grandmother always had a garden,” King recalled, “that just seemed like the place to be so I thought ‘We’ll call it The Garden Spot, because it’s the place to be.’”

Over the last decade King has made several changes and adjustments to The Garden Spot, whether it was rotating crops or changing the method she used to grow them.

“It’s all been a journey,” said King. “I’m just living and learning.”

At one point there were over 10,000 okra plants in the garden, but King laughs and says you won’t see more than four rows today because she’s still recouping from the “first experience.”

Over the years King has learned how to be innovative while still using the same methodology learned from the plasticulture program. Now, she uses a soaker hose and landscaping fabric that she cuts holes in to plant the seeds. The equipment needed to properly do plasticulture can be expensive, so King said she had to be innovative.

“Money is important,” she said, “but that’s not why I do it. While I am excited about our growth, I am more focused on providing fresh organic produce for everyone to enjoy.”

And of all the things she has learned through gardening, King says there is really one main takeaway.

“Life is not about us,” she said, “but more so about touching other’s lives in positive ways.”

There is no doubt about that. King’s face lights up when she is asked about the time she spends in her garden working. It is not only clear she loves what she does, but she takes great pride in the healthy product she is producing and providing to her community.

Though King has seen a significant amount of tragedy in her life—losing her mother and siblings at early ages—her resilience and commitment to giving back even more because of those heartbreaks is truly inspiring.

“I know they would have touched lives if they were still here,” King said. “I try to extend myself to the community as much as I can. At this point in my life it has actually become my purpose and mission in life.”

In addition to donating some of her produce each year to the food bank, she has also been instrumental in helping with her local farmers market. The Community Health Center of Spencer-Farmers Market is a proud member of the Oklahoma Grown Farmers Market Program, registered with ODAFF. King, along with four other local vendors, can be found at the Valero station in Spencer every Thursday from 4-7 p.m. through the end of August, making fresh, local, organic produce available to her community.

“The market was established to expand fresh and healthy seasonal produce choices that will improve health outcomes in the Spencer area,” said Marguerita Shaw of Community Health Centers of Oklahoma.

King also hosts workshops for kids’ tours with OSU and Langston camps, teaching them about horticulture.

“Gardening is a science,” she said. “If you just take the time to read and follow the directions of the people who have already dedicated their time and lives to researching this, you can learn so much.”

King spends the winter months prepping for her next season. Most recently, she decided to let the soil rest for a year and a half after previously rotating every three years.

“It was so hard to let it rest,” King laughed, “but even the Bible tells us to rest. I’ve noticed such a difference in the soil this year, the plants are healthier and greener.”

She is also focusing more on square-foot gardening instead of spreading everything across the seven acres, allowing her to utilize more of the space in a confined area. This year she planted 950 tomato plants, 600 pepper plants, 34 blackberry stalks, 125 squash plants, 166 cucumber plants and four rows of okra.

She spends approximately six hours per day, or 42 hours per week, working in the garden either caring for the crops, harvesting, packaging or labeling. She works meticulously to ensure everything is done just the way she wants it. She even makes all of the weekly deliveries to the grocery stores herself.

“I harvest and package everything myself,” King said. “If I’m going to market this, I want to ensure no one else’s hands touch it before it’s purchased by the customer.”

All of her produce, with the exception of large items such as watermelon, are carefully packaged in either plastic containers or vented bags and proudly marked with her Garden Spot label, ensuring they are not handled by other customers in the grocery store or market prior to being bought.

If that doesn’t sound like a lot of work, add on another job at Delta Airlines. But there is not a trace of exhaustion on King’s face.

“Neither of them feel like work to me,” she said with a warm smile, “I just love it, there is nothing like it. I have come to truly appreciate nature.”

For King, her garden has yielded far more than just produce. It’s even the reason she has her job at Delta. After taking her garden portfolio with her to the interview, she spent a good portion of the time discussing her work at The Garden Spot. Apparently they too recognized and appreciated her dedication and commitment.

“It’s funny how God’s plan for our lives works out,” King said. “It takes all kinds of twists and turns but it all comes back full circle.”

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Editor’s note: This is part of a continuing series of stories on Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture. The project is a collaborative program between the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry and Oklahoma State University to recognize and honor the impact of countless women across all 77 counties of the state, from all aspects and areas of the agricultural industry. The honorees were nominated by their peers and selected by a committee of 14 industry professionals. If you would like to make a nomination, visit <http://okwomeninagandsmallbusiness.com/>.

Photo Captions



IMG_1325.JPG: Rochelle King of Spencer, Okla., is pictured among okra plants in her garden which supplies local, certified organic produce to nearby grocery stores.



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IMG_1329.JPG: Rochelle King of Spencer, Okla., is the proud founder and owner of the Garden Spot.