

Family farm team includes mom Tonya (in plaid) and (from left) daughters Hailee, Leah, Amber and Moriah.



Pumpkin-palooza

Virginia farm mom and daughters cultivate a legacy.

The pumpkin doesn't roll far from the patch on the Marshall family farm in the heart of southwest Virginia.

Tonya and husband Travis sowed the seeds for their rural Dugspur farm 16 years ago when they hand-planted a half acre of pumpkins. "Now we own and rent 110 acres, and this area is one of the biggest pumpkin producers on the East Coast," Tonya says.

With their daughters—Amber, 19; Hailee, 18; Leah, 13; and Moriah, 8—pitching in, their crop is among the most pampered on the planet. "After planting in late May, we hand-fertilize and put our bees to work pollinating when the first pumpkin flowers blossom," Tonya says. "In summer, the vines grow as high as our waists!"

This time of year, everything's coming up pumpkins, she says: "From late August into October, we hand-pick them for seven weeks straight—every day except Sunday."

Tonya considers the family's strong faith a key to their success. "We pray over our fields after we finish planting," she says. "We know there's someone greater than us watching over things. Through the years, God has always blessed us with a bountiful harvest.

"We grow 30 varieties, from white, red and pink to deep green and bright blue. They go from golf ball-size minis to hefty 200-pounders. We also raise

butternut squash, warty gourds and sweet corn."

Thinking outside the patch has been profitable for the enterprising Marshall sisters. "For their high school graduation gifts, both Amber and Hailee asked us to pay their land rent so they could grow their own pumpkins," Tonya says. With the proceeds, "each bought a pickup truck to haul our crop to the farmers markets and local wholesalers" through 10 states. "I am one proud mama!"

Most rewarding are the life lessons her girls are

"On the farm and in our home, we laugh and work well together as a family."

learning. "They've developed a good work ethic," she says. "They've learned perseverance in the face of difficulty. They know we don't stop until the last pumpkin goes into the box.

"Even our youngest has a job putting sales stickers on the pumpkins," as well as decorating the yard with extra-pretty produce she picks. "Once she filled her purse full of mini pumpkins and handed them out to all the ladies at church."

Many of their pumpkins are edible. But after an exhausting harvest, "I frankly can't bring myself to cook with pumpkins," Tonya admits. "By mid-November I'm ready to make a pumpkin roll or pie.

"It does my heart good to think of people gathering around their Thanksgiving tables and enjoying our pumpkins together."

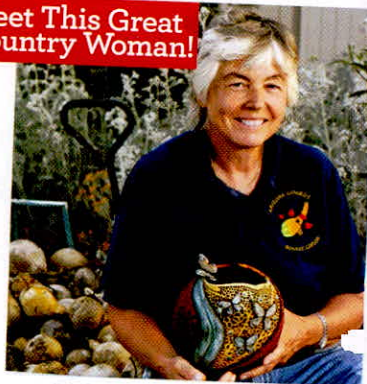
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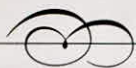
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