

F E R G U S

FEATURES

Member Newsletter ♦ Fergus Electric Cooperative, Inc., Lewistown, MT ♦ www.ferguselectric.coop

'TASTE THE LOVE'

Local garlic farmers seeing product spike during pandemic

Story and photos by **CHARLIE DENISON** | Contributing Writer



FOR the past eight years Paul Armstad and Jill Smith have grown garlic at their home outside Forest Grove.

This pastime - now known as Surenuff Organic Gourmet Garlic - started as a passion project, but through the years has become more than they ever imagined.

"We built up the crop for a couple years and then put a booth together for the farmers' market, the Chokecherry Festival and other local markets," Jill said. "From there, our garlic exploded with popularity."

Their many repeat customers - who they refer to as "garlicaholics" - simply can't get enough.

"We had one customer refer to herself that way the other day," Paul said. "She called and said, 'my name is Vicki. I'm a garlicaholic.'"

There is a reason Vicki and many other customers love Surenuff Organic Gourmet Garlic.

"I talk to it, I sing to it, I put loving energy into every bulb," Jill said. "You can taste the love."

For Jill, getting up and going out to her garlic is the highlight of each day.

"Working with the garlic in the vegetable garden - barefoot and grounded -



is the best therapy ever," she said. "I'm so in love with each and every bulb, and all the love that goes into it goes back out to everyone who orders it."

As cathartic as this process may be, Jill admits it's not easy.

"It's hard to dig 8000 garlic by hand in the hot sun," she said. "You should see my leg muscles before harvest and

ABOVE: Jill Smith takes pride in her garlic and puts much love into the garlic as it grows. 'I sing and dance with them,' she said. **TOP:** Jill says garlic bulbs remain the hottest items. Garlic powder is also a very popular item. | **PHOTOS BY CHARLIE DENISON**

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MANAGER'S MESSAGE

From Carson Sweeney

Safety, projects, cheers, solar and annual meeting

Check overhead clearances and practice caution

Recently I have had the opportunity to travel throughout central Montana learning the vastness of our Fergus Electric Cooperative service territory. There is certainly a range of colors in the scenery as some areas have received more moisture than others. Members are diligently working in the fields, dotting the landscape with bales.

As the sea of green transitions toward the harvest season, our activities in the fields increase. Please practice caution around overhead power lines and equipment. When operating machinery, pay close attention to guy wires, power poles and ground-mounted equipment. Semis will be exiting fields loaded taller than when they entered. Combines and other equipment will need to take caution to be sure there is plenty of clearance as they drive under our lines to enter fields. If our facilities are damaged or look out of the ordinary, please contact us 24/7 at 406-538-3465.

Projects on fall calendar

As the end of the growing season nears, our work schedule for new construction projects fills up quickly. If you are hoping to complete an electrical project soon, please contact our engineering department at 406-538-3465. We have been busy keeping up with new service requests and working on wrapping up Phase 1 of the new AMI meter project.

Crews have been installing new meters in the Hilger and Roundup areas. We are having success with the communication system and the remote reading of our meters. If you have any



Laura Warneke, left, and Office manager Sally Horacek chat at the 2020 Fergus Electric Cooperative Annual Meeting of the Membership | PHOTO BY MELANIE FORAN

questions about the new AMI metering system, please call our engineering department. The engineers would be happy to explain the system and its capabilities.

Congratulations!

Following on the heels of serviceman Richard Anderson's recent retirement, the Roundup workforce continues to experience a few changes in 2020, as two more employees who have enjoyed a long career working at Fergus Electric look towards retirement.

After 28 years of dedicated service, Don Criswell, assistant line superintendent, has decided to retire at the beginning of this month. Don started his career at Fergus Electric in February 1992 and was promoted to assistant line superintendent in July 1999.

I have not known Don long, but when others speak of him, they are sure to mention his friendly personality and strong desire to meet the needs of our

members. Spending time with family is a priority for the Criswells. Retirement will allow for more family get-togethers.

A couple short weeks later, Roundup foreman Dean Lawler will retire. Dean began working for Fergus Electric in May 1991 as an apprentice lineman. In October 2008, Dean was promoted to foreman. Dean is looking forward to retirement and spending more time with his wife, enjoying the outdoors, fishing and camping.

Don and Dean have set a standard of excellence and commitment to their work that we should all strive to achieve.

We thank you for your years of service to the co-op, and wish each of you the best in your retirement!

Bret Nellerhoe has recently accepted the promotion to assistant line superintendent in Roundup. Bret has worked for Fergus Electric as a journeyman lineman since May 2015, and will certainly work toward



General Manager Carson Sweeney addresses the membership at the 82nd Annual Meeting of the Membership. | PHOTO BY MELANIE FORAN

meeting the high bar set by his predecessors. Congratulations to Don, Dean and Bret!

Cooperative Solar – Phase 2

In June we were awarded a Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) grant, which will allow us to expand our community solar project here at the Fergus Electric facility in Lewistown. In a few short months we will be installing 192 solar panels on the south-facing roof of the new truck garage.

The expected output of this array is rated at 70 kilowatts (kW) which will complement the existing 100kW ground-mounted array on the west end of the property.

Members interested in purchasing solar panels to help offset their electrical usage can do so by contacting our engineering department. Each panel will be sold for \$215, and will be sold on a first-come-first-serve basis.

82nd Annual Meeting of the Membership

We were fortunate that the dark

clouds that hovered overhead the morning of June 25 held off and did not produce any rain while employees assisted members in parking their vehicles and registering them for our 82nd annual meeting, which was held in the fairgrounds parking lot.

On behalf of the board, staff and membership, I want to give a big thank you to KXLO Radio of Lewistown! They were kind enough to make our modified 2020 annual meeting possible by broadcasting it live for our members to tune in and listen from the comfort of their vehicles or homes.

We were joined by 58 members. Making our quorum, the meeting commenced.

Board President Paul Descheemaeker conducted the meeting, which lasted from 11 to 11:30 a.m. Incumbents Brett Maxwell from District 2 and Cathy Kombol from District 4 were elected by acclamation to serve for another three-year term on the Board of Directors.

Outgoing General Manager Scott Sweeney made a brief farewell speech to the members he has so thoroughly enjoyed serving throughout his 41-year career.

It was a pleasure to see those who were able to join us in person, and I thank you for attending. I do hope that by the time the 2021 annual meeting rolls around, we will be able to enjoy each other's company in a more typical setting.

Staying safe during the pandemic

Please be safe and join us in practicing caution as we all work through these troubling times. Fergus Electric Co-op's facility doors will remain closed to the public until conditions with COVID-19 improve.

Social distancing remains necessary, yet the office staff is conducting business as usual and can be reached by phone at 406-538-3465. Likewise, our line crews continue to perform their routine work.

When our line crews are constructing new line or responding to outage calls, please stay safe by keeping at least six feet between our lineworkers and you.

Take care and enjoy these long, warm days while they still continue to be with us. RM

Scholarships awarded at annual meeting

S**SCHOLARSHIPS** for \$1,000 each were awarded to the following students: Jacy Ayers – Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association, and Kallie Zinne – Basin Electric Power Cooperative. The 10 Luck of the Draw Scholarship Winners were Caleb Hess, Kylee Weeden, Timothy Horan, Jace Aune, Jada Scheffelmaer, Trinity Metcalf, Levi Boyles, Carson Weeden, Chloe Derks, and Alyssa Thomas. Congratulations! RM

GARLIC

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Paul Armstad and Jill Smith are seeing an uptick in demand for garlic during the pandemic. Garlic, Jill says, is an immune-boosting crop. | PHOTO BY CHARLIE DENISON

after. I think I gain five pounds of muscle per leg!"

"It's a lot to dig it all by hand," Paul added. "But it's satisfying and rewarding work."

Growing and preparing garlic comes with many arduous tasks, some of which are more time-consuming than others. Cultivating, Jill said, can be especially tiring.

"You're never done cultivating," she said. "Once you've got the garlic all dug up, you have to tag them all, hang them and dry them. Once they are all cured then you have to take them all down, chop the tops off and take a toothbrush to every one of them to clean them. I mean...the process seems never-ending."

However, all the hard work pays off, as Paul and Jill are continually amazed by the response of their loyal fans. Their garlic is constantly in demand.

"People have told me, 'I always thought garlic was garlic until I had yours,'" Paul said. "It doesn't take much for them to taste the difference. It takes one clove to change their whole meal."

"And once people taste it...they can't get enough," Jill added.

An essential product

Selling garlic at the local farmers' market, the Chokecherry Festival and around central Montana has given Paul and Jill a new mission, and they're honored to serve Fergus County with a crop they consider vital for public health.

The recent coronavirus pandemic has furthered their cause.

"It's always been our passion to grow something that is so good for people medicinally," Paul said. "Garlic has a profound influence on digestion and circulation, and is proven to boost the immune system. Also, when it's raw, it's strikingly anti-bacterial. Garlic is good for just about every-

thing."

The long list of health benefits involved with garlic helps inspire Paul and Jill to keep going with such a labor-intensive crop.

"Knowing how much the garlic helps people warms our hearts," Jill said, "especially as we battle a global pandemic."

Considering the wellness incentives involved with their crop, Jill said she's not surprised they've seen a spike in business since March.

"One lady even called us from New Jersey, saying she couldn't find any garlic anywhere in her state and hoped we had some available to ship," Jill said. "We've also had people request we stop selling so much because they're concerned we won't have enough for them." It seems garlicaholics simply can't get enough of a good thing, and when it's also good for them, who can blame them?

Surenuff Garlic is available at Mari-gold Market, Winifred Grocery, Ol' Mercantile in Grass Range and The Breaks General Store in Winnett.

For more information, contact Jill Smith on Facebook or by calling (406) 538-9877. 

Identify Account Number*

Win a \$32.50 credit

If one of the following account numbers is yours, call Fergus Electric (406-538-3465) and identify yourself and your account number.

**Account 387120 ● Account 47300
Account 395091 ● Account 359015
Account 396902 ● Account 133550**

You will receive a \$32.50 credit on next month's statement.

Russ Bentley of Lewistown, was last month's winner!

**Numbers are drawn monthly.*

Fergus Electric Cooperative, Inc.

LEWISTOWN, MT

Your Touchstone Energy® Partner

FOR OUTAGES

First: Check the fuses or breakers in the building in which the electricity is off.

Second: Check the breaker below the meter.

Third: If electricity is still out, call a neighbor to see if they have electricity.

Fourth: Call 406-538-3465 day or night or:

Dale Rikala.....	406-366-3374
Bret Ophus.....	406-366-7523
Scott Olson.....	406-366-5822
Carson Sweeney.....	406-366-0971
Don Criswell (Roundup).....	406-366-3465
Melanie Foran.....	406-462-5650

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