

In pumpkin paradise

■ Gourd grower revels in large Walmart orders, and agritourism thrives in region.

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The field stretches nearly as far as the eye can see – full of ripe, orange pumpkins, some 18-pounders – a place Jill Stimatze considers her autumn oasis.

Not that most people would think of 30 acres of future jack-o'-lanterns as stress relief.

Stimatze stood in her field thick with pumpkins near St. John where she and four part-time employees loaded the produce into bins on a trailer. She called it her best crop ever, and except for improbable hail-storm this late in the season, life couldn't get much better.

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"I never dreamed we'd be selling to Walmart," she said, her largest customer of the past 10 years.

Nor did she ever think she'd have such a big garden – a chore she admits she hated while growing up on the family farm near Macksville.

Now, however, she couldn't imagine anything else.

This is her full-time job, in addition to helping her husband, Mike Osborne, on the farm, and serving as St. John's mayor. Along with the pumpkins, the family plants 10 acres of watermelons and 10 acres of cantaloupe. Which, along with the pumpkins, they sell to regional Walmart stores and other customers, including five in Wichita, one in Hutchinson and one in Pratt.

"It took a lot of work to get my foot in the door," she said of getting the big-box retailer as a customer, but adds that, honestly, she never expected her business to blossom as big as it has.

On this day, she and the crew had 400 pumpkins to load onto the truck, which in the morning she would drive to a Wichita store. Calls come regularly during this time of year, with Stimatze spending her days either hauling pumpkins or picking them.



Sandra J. Milburn/The Hutchinson News

Jesse Samples, left, and Lou "Bob" Graves load pumpkins into bins on a trailer Monday afternoon in Jill Stimatze's pumpkin field southwest of St. John. These pumpkins had previously been cut, washed and lined up to be loaded into bins on the trailer for delivery.

All part of her stress relief, she reiterated with a smile. It's easy to tell when a pumpkin is ripe or when it's rotten.

"I'm proud of what we raise here in Kansas," she said of what she considers quality produce – produce that goes straight from her field to the store's display. "I get pretty angry if I go to the grocery store and it's not top-quality on the shelves."

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Jill Stimatze arranges pumpkins on a display outside of Walmart on Monday. Stimatze raises not only pumpkins, but also cantaloupe and watermelons as her main produce crops.

Pumpkins

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Agritourism on the plains

Across Kansas, pumpkin patches have become a rite of fall – named agritourism as farms offer hayrack rides, corn mazes and pumpkin patches to educate about agriculture and to generate added income to the traditional farming operation.

At Sunny Side Pumpkin Patch just east of Lindsborg, Grant Nurnberg and his wife, Charisse, have 7 acres of pumpkins for the picking, as well as 4-acre and 3-acre Sudan grass mazes.

There's a horse-drawn hayrack, pumpkin slingshot and farm animals.

In fact, Nurnberg said, they have 50 field trips scheduled for the season that ends Oct. 31.

In Reno County, Gaeddert and Martisko Farms near Buhler offers a corn maze, pumpkin patch and fall festival-type atmosphere, said Ruth Gaeddert. This year's maze features a butterfly theme. Other activities include a concession, hay jump, barrel ride and a corn cannon.

The five acres of pumpkins, along with the maze, are the big attractions.

"We are hoping to get lots of people out here," she said, noting the farm typically draws from a 60-mile radius.

At Turon, Harvest Farm and Pumpkin Patch offers pumpkins and a day on the farm. In Dighton, Joe and Helen Hanks offer pumpkins free for the picking on their small acreage, which is amid their apple orchard, Helen Hanks said. Their annual pumpkin festival is from 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday, which brings out about 250 children from Lane, Scott and Ness counties.

"Some even dress up their little ones," Hanks said of the festival. Her husband hauls out an old apple press and demonstrates how to make cider.

Nearing season's end

On Monday, Stimatze unloaded a trailer of 400 pumpkins at Hutchinson's Walmart, helping to shape a display at the store's front entrance.

When the numbers begin to dwindle as customers purchase the supply, the store's produce department manager, Rachel Brian, said she'd be ordering more from Stimatze, her local supplier.

"I'd rather have local pumpkins," she said, noting she thought customers ap-

PUMPKIN PATCHES

Harvest Farm and Pumpkin Patch

Where: 1½ miles east of Turon.

What it offers: Pumpkins, pumpkin cannon, hayrack ride, hayloft slide, little farmer's field and more.

Hours: Monday through Friday by group appointment; Saturdays, 10 a.m. to dark; Sundays, 1 to 6 p.m.

For more information: www.harvestfarmks.com

Sunny Side Pumpkin Patch

Where: 6 miles east of Lindsborg.

What it offers: A 3-acre and 4-acre maze, horse-drawn hayrack ride, pumpkins and more.

Hours: Open daily, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Open until 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

For more information: sunnysidepatch.com

Gaeddert and Martisko Farms

Where: 3 miles east of Buhler on Dutch Avenue.

What it offers: Corn maze, hayrack ride to pumpkin patch, jumping pil-

low, corn cannon and more.

Hours: Monday through Thursday and before 6 p.m. Friday, by group reservation only; 6 to 10 p.m. (last admission at 9:30 p.m.) Friday; and 2 to 10 p.m. (last admission at 9:30 p.m.) Saturday and Sunday.

For more information: www.kansasmaze.com

Grammy's Pumpkin Patch

Where: Quivira Road, McPherson

What it offers: Pumpkins, general store, Pumpkin-Pult, pumpkin train and more.

Hours: 10 a.m. to dark Saturdays; 1 p.m. to dark on Sundays.

For more information: johnstowfarm.com

Jill Stimatze's pumpkin patch

Where: St. John

While Stimatze's pumpkin patch is a commercial business, she does offer pumpkin picking by reservation only. For more information, call her at (620) 549-3841 or (620) 546-3932.

preciated the fact the store tries to supply some products locally.

That includes selling some of Stimatze's watermelon and cantaloupe, she said. "Her cantaloupe, they're fantastic, ginormous," Brian said.

She had called Stimatze around 10 a.m. that day and Stimatze arrived with the 10 bins of pumpkins shortly before noon.

"Vendors like Jill, they go the extra mile," she said.

Delivering the pumpkins, Stimatze notes, is the culmination of her hard work. The pumpkin season starts in May with Stimatze and her crew of about a dozen part-time workers sowing

pumpkin seeds into the soil in her farm's greenhouse. After a week, the plants are transplanted into a 30-acre patch.

Pumpkins are then weeded by hand throughout the season. Drip irrigation keeps the crop thriving, even during this summer's 100-degree heat.

Stimatze, however, has a green thumb.

"I'd say this is my best crop," she said, adding she'd have plenty of pumpkins for customers.

"I would love to sell 1,000 bins of pumpkins this year," she said. "Maybe 30,000 pumpkins. Do I have that many pumpkins? I'm pretty sure I do."

