

A man with a beard, wearing a blue jacket, is kneeling in a garden. He is holding a bunch of freshly harvested radishes. The garden features raised beds with wire arches, likely for covering the plants. The background shows more garden beds and a building.

# MINI Farming

WHILE THE FAMILY FARM MIGHT BE SHRINKING, PART-TIMERS ARE GROWING STRONG

BY MICHELLE EIGENHEER | PHOTOS BY TIM WEBB



■ Chris and Mary Breeze pick through watermelon radishes at their Whispering Breeze Farm in Mayslick.

## HOW DO A HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER AND A QUALITY

engineer end up as the owners of a farm, a high tunnel, greenhouse and community-supported agriculture program? Well, if you ask them—just like anyone else.

“Can the average farmer who wants to get into vegetable production get a high tunnel? Yes,” says Mary Breeze, an HR manager by day. “Go get a grant and you can build your tunnel and have no debt.”

“You can have some capital left over,” adds husband, Chris, a quality engineer. “Or you can go very bare bones. You can do low tunnels like we still do. No. 9 wires that you can go get at Lowe’s, with row (tobacco) cotton.

“We’re not special. We had to apply three times, but just keep at it.”

The grant Mary and Chris reference is through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service.

“It took us three applications, but we finally got funded,” Mary says. “And now we have a high tunnel that’s bigger than our house.”

## Getting started

The Breezes began the Whispering Breeze Farm, LLC, in the 2015 growing season. It was the first year the Breezes, consumer-members of Fleming-Mason Energy, sold their produce and joined the Mason County Farmers Market.

In the seasons since, the garden in their yard has grown into a small farm, now producing enough to support a community-supported agriculture program (CSA) with 15 families—with enough left over to supply a few local restaurants.

The Breezes are no strangers to life on a farm—Chris’ parents and Mary’s grandparents were tobacco farmers—but neither had much experience with vegetable farming.

“I needed something to kind of get my farming fix and we just said, ‘Hey, we’re going to have a garden,’” Chris says. “The first spring that we were married, in 2003, we started our first garden together, and we grew and grew. It kept getting bigger and we would give stuff away and then, I guess it was six years ago, our county Extension agent Tracey Parriman says, ‘You should start selling your stuff.’”



At that point, the couple's farming style had expanded and evolved considerably, despite both working full time. When they started the garden, they used herbicides, pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, but after attending a workshop on organic growing at a Farm and Family Night at Maysville Community and Technical College, they decided to adopt more natural farming practices.

By the time they met Parriman at a Master Gardener program hosted by their local Cooperative Extension Service office, the couple had begun to explore and study successful market gardens and the possibilities that came with expanding their own.

The growth of Whispering Breeze Farm—now operating on about an acre and a half in Mason County—has been an exercise in experimentation and evaluation. The Breezes began using tobacco cotton and low tunnels as a way to protect their crops and extend their growing season. They started turning beds in a day, harvesting and planting fresh starters in newly vacant rows.

While the farm has grown, they've retained natural farming practices. Theirs is not a "certified

■ Left, the Breezes thin out seedlings in an electric-heated greenhouse at their farm.

■ Below, Chris Breeze cuts some red head lettuce, which will either be a part of the Whispering Breeze Farm community-supported agriculture program or be used in local restaurants.

■ Top, Chris and Mary Breeze work with vegetables growing inside their high tunnel. It took three tries, but the Breezes secured grant funding for this project.

■ Right, Chris Breeze steps outside the greenhouse, heated with help from Fleming-Mason Energy, and built with leftover funding from the high tunnel grant. The greenhouse is used to cultivate starters, which are then planted in the high tunnel.



## What's the difference between a high tunnel and a greenhouse?

High tunnels (also called hoop houses), above, and greenhouses, below, are similar with a few key differences. Both can be used to extend the growing season. A high tunnel is not heated and usually has plants planted right into the soil. A greenhouse is heated and often includes a ventilation system, with plants commonly grown in pots on tables. The Breezes primarily use their greenhouse to nurture seeds into starter plants that are transferred into the high tunnel or the field.

WSTOCKSTUDIO





Kentucky Living  
2019 Photo Contest

Enter at [KentuckyLiving.com!](http://KentuckyLiving.com)

Sponsored by:  Cave City Convention Center

Submit up to 2 entries per category:  
People • Nature • Humor • Animals • My Co-op

**Prizes in each category:**

- 1st place – \$100
- 2nd place – \$50
- 3rd place – \$25

Winners will be published in July.

**Five People’s Choice Winners: \$50 each category**

People’s Choice voting begins in May on [KentuckyLiving.com](http://KentuckyLiving.com).

**Enter March 1-31**

**NEW** Contest is open to co-op members and the public, both amateur and professional photographers. Entries accepted for ages 13\* and up.

\*Ages 13-17 must have consent from a parent or guardian when you enter online.

**RULES FOR ENTRY:** Read and follow all rules carefully or your photo may be disqualified. Entries must be the original work of the photographer making the submission. TWO ENTRIES PER CATEGORY PER PERSON, age 13 or over; USA. Entries accepted for ages 13-17 with consent from a parent or guardian. Submit Online: Use entry form and read official rules at [www.KentuckyLiving.com](http://www.KentuckyLiving.com). Complete a separate form for each photo submitted. Photos must be in .JPG format and high resolution for print purposes, preferably 1 MB minimum and 8 MB maximum file size. **SUBMISSIONS MUST BE RECEIVED BY MARCH 31.**

By submitting to us your photographs and other material, you represent to us that you are the sole creator and owner of your work and that it is original, does not infringe the rights of any other person or entity, does not defame or invade the privacy of any person, and that you have the right and authority to grant to us the following right of use. You agree that Kentucky Electric Cooperatives and *Kentucky Living* magazine may publish, post online, edit, revise and otherwise make unrestricted use of part or all of your work for commercial or non-commercial purposes, including, without limitation, publishing all or part of your work in *Kentucky Living* magazine, in print or online, shared on social media, in a calendar or other works, or in advertising for the same or for *Kentucky Living* publications. You agree that this grant of use is royalty-free and perpetual.

Contest is open to persons age 13 or over, in the United States, except for employees or immediate family members of Kentucky Association of Electric Cooperatives, *Kentucky Living*, Kentucky’s electric co-ops and their respective divisions, subsidiaries, advertising, and promotion agencies. Entrants ages 13-17 must have consent from a parent or guardian. For complete rules go to [KentuckyLiving.com](http://KentuckyLiving.com).

organic” farm, but they do follow organic guidelines. The cost of maintaining certification and the associated paperwork aren’t worth it to them.

Chris says, “Most of our customers have been to our farm. They trust us to grow our food the way we say that we’re growing our food.”

The Breezes’ high tunnel helps extend the growing season and, with lights installed, enables Chris and Mary to work for several hours after coming home from work each day.

The couple also used leftover materials from the high tunnel to help build a small greenhouse where they can cultivate starters from seeds. They intended to use gas to heat it, but when that proved too difficult to control and too expensive in cooler seasons, they reached out to Fleming-Mason Energy to extend their service from their home to the greenhouse.

The electric cooperative featured the couple in last year’s annual report. “Their particular business was something that was very interesting to us,” says Lori Ulrich, Fleming-Mason Energy’s marketing and public relations manager. “And (it) showcases a large part of our heritage here in this region.

“Our particular territory that we cover has traditionally been very agricultural-based. And, the Breezes kind of represent how agriculture has changed in this region in the last 20 years, how agriculture has evolved. It’s exciting to see young families like this that are doing new and innovative things.”

### Savvy promotion

Alongside the agricultural methods, the business end of farming has changed for the Breezes. They made a point to market themselves from the beginning, creating a logo and associating the brand with their organic-style practices. They created brand recognition at the farmers market and among locals. “We joke and say it’s because we’re really great, personable people,” Mary says. “I think that’s where it started—we were really excited to talk about what we were doing at the farmers market. I think that our enthusiasm for what we were doing was kind of contagious.”

They collected email addresses and started a newsletter, sharing “The Menu” each week, along with photos and stories from the farm. The list quickly grew from 50 to 200 names. People began

**KENTUCKY**  
DEPT. OF  
FISH & WILDLIFE  
RESOURCES  
*fw.ky.gov*

# Summer CAMP

*A week that lasts a lifetime!*

- Fishing
- Boating
- Archery
- Hunter Education
- First Aid
- Water Safety
- Wildlife Identification

Boys and girls in grades 4 - 6. Summer camp runs Monday - Friday. Registration includes meals, transportation and camper insurance. Limited scholarships are available. **Junior Sportsman's License included with every camp registration!**

YouTube | Facebook

**Kentucky Conservation Camps: To register now visit [fw.ky.gov](http://fw.ky.gov) or call 1-800-858-1549.**

**Kentucky**  
Conservation Camps



■ Chris Breeze washes some watermelon radishes at the Whispering Breeze Farm.

■ Below, Mary Breeze works with some Bright Lights Swiss Chard growing inside the high tunnel at the farm in Mayslick.



to pre-order their produce for pickup at the farmers market. They started a CSA, first with five people, then 10. But the market was a full day's work each Saturday and after three years of selling there, they decided to leave.

## Advice for new farmers

### Use your resources

From the local county Extension agent to the Farm Service Agency office, and even local government, there are a lot of resources for beginners, from loan options for equipment to networks with other farmers. Learn what's out there.

### Don't set the bar based on someone else

You don't have to have what another farm has to be successful. "You can go out with minimal equipment and crush it," says Chris Breeze, who farms part-time in Mason County. "You don't have to be an expert at every single thing."

### Be prepared for some setbacks

Whether it's an early frost, being denied a grant or not selling out at the farmers market, don't let it get you down. Don't look at these as failures.

### Know that not everyone will be your customer

The price of organically grown produce may be higher than what the local grocery offers. "You can't compete with large-scale farms," says Breeze. "Don't lower your prices, don't lower your expectations for someone else. Your time's in it, you know what it's worth."

"It's a big trade to say what we could have done, had we not been sitting at the market," explains Mary, as she recounts the collective 16 hours spent there each weekend. "So, it was a tough decision. And Chris really struggled with it. But we came to the agreement that we weren't going to do it in 2018, and we didn't. It was a hard decision, especially because Chris, at the time, was the vice president of the local farmers market. I can honestly say this: had we not made that decision, I would be in a different place with it today. I think I would be past burnout and ready to say, 'I'm kind of done.'"

The choice to leave was one that suited the needs of Whispering Breeze Farm. Following this move, the CSA grew to 15 and the couple established a pick-up spot at a local café that also began using their produce in its meals. Later, a restaurant reopening in nearby Augusta approached them to begin supplying produce for its new farm-to-table menu.

Despite the business expansion, the Breezes have scaled back some of their acreage, optimizing the use of a smaller space with better techniques. They continue their full-time jobs, with no intention of leaving them. As they settle into this new model of farming and business, they're exploring ways to share what they've learned—such as food literacy and career paths in farming—as well as shed light on how to start a farm like theirs. **KL**