

Brighton couple seeks county's help in 'saving babies'

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Local tomato grower has 1,500 plants to give away this weekend.

Alainia Hagerty-Williams is a bubbly and bright young lady who loves a challenge. When her father, Gilbert Hagerty, talked to her about establishing a garden together, she jumped on the idea.

They decided they wanted to plant tomatoes and bought some tomato plants from Wal-Mart but didn't like the taste after the tomatoes were harvested.

Together, they looked around the area and met Irene Schrader of Rosemark.

"She had the most awesome tasting tomatoes!" exclaimed Hagerty-Williams. "They were 'early giants' and they tasted great!"

That discovery started a competition between Hagerty-Williams and her father: who could grow the best tomatoes?

"The first year I lost," laughed Hagerty-Williams. "Dad's were the best. All mine burnt up!"

After that disappointing loss, Hagerty-Williams' father took pity on her and told her he would teach her how to grow great tomatoes for the next season.

"Next year, he showed me how to grow tomatoes, use manure and dig the holes," remembered Hagerty-Williams. "When they started growing, I carried them to him to see whose were better and he hadn't done any! He said he was just teaching me how to grow them. That was in 2001 and I grew them for two more years with his help."

Hagerty-Williams lost her beloved father in 2003, but not before he saw her take her tomato-growing hobby to the Internet. She started selling her excess plants on eBay.

"I started on eBay and sold ten different kinds of tomatoes," explained the Brighton resident. "He thought that was hilarious. I sold a couple of hundred and made a few hundred bucks."

After that first successful year on eBay, Hagerty-Williams was hooked and her alter-ego, TomatoGirl, emerged.

"I started out small," said the non-caped crusader. "I only bought 10 packages of seeds and soon had 300 plants to sell on eBay. I started selling so many plants, that people started referring to me as TomatoGirl and its stuck."

For those who have ever dealt with eBay, you realize how addicting it can be. It seems to bring out the competitive spirit in folks and for someone who is naturally competitive, that can be dangerous.

"She had 10 different kinds of tomatoes selling on eBay when she came across someone selling 20 different kinds," interjected her husband, Robert Williams. "She started tripping! So the next year she sold 30 different kinds, then it went to 80 varieties!"

"People would rather buy a decent plant from someone at \$2.25 a plant, then buy them from a seed company, say at \$6," explained a contrite but smiling Hagerty-Williams. "Plus a lot of seed companies will make them buy six of one kind. Because my dad and I wanted to try different types, I'm not going to make them buy six of one kind, they can try whatever they want."

Hagerty-Williams says she used to hate gardening when she was younger, but has grown to love her newfound calling, and also mentioned that she married someone who didn't like tomatoes but likes the ones they grow now.

"She plants more than we need in case someone wants a weird named tomato," said Williams, laughing. "And I'm developing a taste for tomatoes now!"

"I'm a sucker for names like 'bear claw' or Italian tree tomato," countered Hagerty-Williams. "I

mean, 'chocolate strips'... who wouldn't want to try a tomato called that!"

The tomato plants are not the only ones with the funny monikers. Gardeners and other agriculture people don't really call each other by name, but by what they grow. Tipton County has its own Justice League of Agriculture.

"There's the herb lady, rose man, the honey man, bread man and now tomato girl," she laughed.

Each year since she's started, her new business, TomatoBabyCompany, has grown and this year was no different.

Hagerty-Williams has evolved her love of growing tomatoes from an eBay business to selling online nationwide with the opening of her website last year and now sells to the local community.

"We have 103 different kinds of tomatoes this year," said Hagerty-Williams. "I planted half of them and my mom planted half."

That 103 different varieties of tomatoes turned into a crop of over 6,000 tomato plants, not to mention the peppers and eggplants Hagerty-Williams also started growing.

"It's a pain to start them," said Williams. "You really have to babysit them. We had over 4,000 tomato plants in the house when we started in January. We have 2,000 watt lights on them and you have to turn the trays to make sure they grow evenly."

"We would go through the house saying, 'water the plants, did you water the plants' then it would be like, 'which ones?'" added Hagerty-Williams. "So we came up with a system and that's how Tomato Baby Company started."

Hagerty-Williams' system is to actually treat her tomato plants like, well... babies.

"When we have a plant that's broken and we want to treat it differently, we put it in the infirmary room. The toddlers, the plants that just started to germinate, are in the nursery," laughed Hagerty-Williams.

"We started with a 12 x 60' wide greenhouse but she never ends up dropping any plants," said a laughing Williams. "She just keeps adding more. Someone will order 10 plants and she'll end up giving them three to four free. This year we built a 30 x 80' greenhouse and we're already running out of room!"

Through Hagerty-Williams' website she has made some lasting relationships, and once people heard about her and her plants, they started sending her more tomato seeds to plant.

"They send me their seeds, I grow them and then send the plants back to them," explained



Alainia Hagerty-Williams and her husband, Robert stand among her many 'babies' in her greenhouse.

the budding tomato connoisseur. "The people are just good gardening people. They're just great people to deal with."

In addition to growing tomatoes and fulfilling her alter-ego role as Tomato Girl, both Hagerty-Williams and her husband also work outside the home. Williams sells tires Monday thru Friday and Hagerty-Williams is a rural mail carrier for Millington.

"When they call me I'll run out to them and water them and tell them... OK babies, I'll be back soon," she laughed.

Hagerty-Williams starts her plants in January and starts selling and shipping them nationwide in April under the TomatoBabyCompany.com name. To keep her reputation, she refuses to ship before that and has even turned down orders to protect her 'babies.'

"I start these plants as seeds and babysit them. I brush them back and forth to mimic wind and talk to them," she laughed. "One lady called from Utah and wanted plants before their season there. She was very angry when I told her I wouldn't ship them but if she planted and then they died, she would hold that against me. I gotta protect the babies."

Hagerty-Williams' selling season is over and she has 1,500 tomato, pepper and eggplants left. It breaks her heart to think of them dying in her greenhouse and she would like them all to find a good home.

"Frankly, I'm sick of watering them right now and so is she," said Williams. "We're not planting them. We already have one of each so we can see what they look like and take pictures for the website. But she can't stand seeing them die, she's like 'the babies are dying' ...so she would rather give them away. We won't turn down donations, because we do have a lot of time and money in them, but we'd just like to get rid of them."

"The purpose was to keep the price down, sell lots of plants and everyone gets to

try a different kind," added Hagerty-Williams. "Then they tell me what they like and at the end of the year, I send out an email out and they tell me what they didn't like. And then the following year I can tell all my new customers what people like. It's a co-op. We're gardeners and we're telling each other what we like."

Hagerty-Williams' greenhouse is located at 5845 Munford-Giltedge in Brighton and her number is (901) 837-6878. She will be available to give away plants on Saturday and Sunday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and asks that folks bring a box to carry the plants away in.

"We're done selling and we're just ready to give them away," stated Hagerty-Williams. "My dad saw me sell on eBay, but he never got to see the end result of our adventure. He would absolutely love it. He'd be laughing, but he would be so proud."

Visit the Tomato Baby Company website to view the many different varieties of tomatoes, peppers and eggplants available at www.tomatobabycompany.com



Covington Care Center's CNAs thanked for 14 years of dedicated service to residents



Covington Care Center recently honored its certified nurse assistants (CNA) during National Nursing Assistant Week with a luncheon including gifts at Country Kitchen. We wish to express our deepest appreciation for 14 years of dedicated service.

Do you know who killed Johnny Poole?

Your information may be worth up to \$1,000 in cash!

On October 25, 1988, Johnny Poole's partially burned body was found in a pickup truck near the boat landing at Piljerk, near the Hatchie River in Tipton County. The 23-year-old Poole had also been shot in the back.

If you have any information about this crime, call CRIME STOPPERS
901-476-4411

You will **not** have to give your name.
You will **not** have to testify in court.

To be considered for a reward, all information must be given directly to
CRIME STOPPERS OF TIPTON COUNTY.



Bill "Bubba" Bussy (left) and Rick Burgess of the nationally syndicated morning show, Rick and Bubba recently made a stop in Atoka on their national book tour to promote their book, *Rick and Bubba for President*. The Rick and Bubba show can be heard on US 51 Country 93.5 weekdays from 5 - 9 a.m.