

herbal espresso

Mother and daughter grow herbs and handcraft products for bath and body



maggie Julseth Howe feeds fresh herbs and flowers into a copper still, boiling the concoction so that steam can pick up essential oils and various plant substances and condense into a milky liquid. “It’s sort of like making herbal tea,” she explains.

But the liquid is much more potent than tea. The hydrosols it contains can be used in making a variety of herbal products. “Some people describe it as an herbal espresso,” Maggie explains.

Maggie and her mother, Donna Julseth, have cooked up a backyard business called



Prairieland Herbs that is growing like it was fueled by espresso. The mother-daughter business team have taken their love for gardening and combined it with their concern for the environment to create a business that suits their lifestyle. Or perhaps it is a lifestyle that has become a business. Either way, the duo has developed a loyal clientele around

Above: Donna Julseth and Maggie Howe Julseth grow herbs and flowers on an Iowa homestead. **Left:** Natural ingredients are used to handcraft bath and body products.

By Dean Houghton



Above: Fairy rose is a prolific bloomer and hardy for Midwest climate. **Left:** Maggie tends a copper still used to harvest essential oils from herbs and flowers.



the world that buys Prairieland's handcrafted and natural body and bath products, ordering from the company web site (www.prairielandherbs.com) or by visiting a retail store that the women built with their own hands on the family's two-acre homestead. Soaps, scrubs, bath supplies, perfumes, baby products, and even pet products are featured in an ever-expanding product line.

Those products are generated from the herbs that Donna grows on every square inch of the gardens surrounding the turn-of-the-century farmstead located near Woodward, Iowa. The definition of herb goes beyond parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme in these

gardens. Donna and Maggie also grow and use flowers and even some common weeds such as nettle and mare's tail in their concoctions. "People tend to think of herbs for their culinary uses, but they can also be used in bath and body products," Donna says. "You can eat them, or you can wear them. Similarly, flowers may be grown primarily for their esthetics, but you can use the petals for potpourri or to capture the fragrance oils or essential oils. So they also have a second use."

Environmental good sense. Donna and Maggie grow their backyard herbs and flowers gardens naturally (no chemicals) and in an environmentally sensitive way. They haul tons of mulch in order to preserve moisture and provide a natural weed barrier. They also grow plants that are adapted to the Midwest



Above: Donna tends an eclectic mix of flowers, herbs and grasses. **Left:** Lavender not only is beautiful but is used in many herbal products.



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and don't require a lot of special care to grow. For example, Donna prefers roses such as the tiny but beautiful fairy rose. "Tea roses are great if you live in Portland, Ore., but those of us living in Iowa need a hardy rose." The fairy rose isn't a good choice for picking to use in arrangements due to its tiny stems, but it is a prolific bloomer. It's the rose petals that are used in making many Prairieland products, so this variety is a perfect fit.

Similarly, many herbs are a good fit for the average backyard gardener. Donna points out that herbs are fun to grow even if you never harvest them for culinary or other uses. "Even a small planting of herbs can produce an abundance of growth, and growing herbs can attract birds and butterflies to your yard and gardens," she says. You

will have a yard full of fun things to watch if you plant some herbs."

The gardens at Prairieland are an oasis of diversity, mixing flowers and herbs along with grasses and ornamentals in an eclectic mix. There is a method to this maze of plantings, however. The mix of plants and the fact that plantings are rotated year-to-year helps hold down diseases and insects naturally.

Of course, there is an abundance of animal life drawn to the gardens as well, some of it domestic stock. Dogs and cats roam freely among the plantings as does Babe, the family's "retired" horse. "She's our source of organic fertilizer," Donna points out.

One of the most beautiful and useful herbs found in these gardens is lavender. The blossoms are dried for use in bath scrubs because it is balancing, good for both dry and

"Growing herbs can attract birds and butterflies to your yard and gardens."

—Donna Julseth



Above: Yellow blossoms of St. John's wort are harvested for use in a healing balm.

oily skin. It's also used to make dryer sachets, muslin bags stuffed with dried lavender that can be tossed into your dryer to impart a pleasant fragrance to laundry. Lavender also is used in many baby product formulations, since it is known to have a calming and soothing effect.

St. John's wort is an herb with a number of beneficial properties. Donna and Maggie har-



Above: Prairieland Herbs offers an ever-expanding line of scrubs, bath salts, and other natural body products.

vest the plant's striking yellow blossoms to make a healing balm. Interestingly, when the yellow blossoms are infused into oil, the final product turns a deep red.

Many other herbs, flowers, and grasses are harvested and studied in the informal test kitchens at the Prairieland shop. Maggie challenges Donna to grow new varieties, and Donna challenges Maggie to create new bath and body products. That's how the business started back when Maggie was in fifth grade and challenged her mother, a serious gardener, to try to grow some herbs. Maggie then came up with innovative ways to market the crop. After Maggie received dual degrees from Iowa State University, the duo decided to formalize their partnership into a business. The result has been six years of rapidly expanding sales.

m ever before have so many people been concerned about the source of their bath and body products, Maggie points out. "The popularity of organic food shows that people are concerned about what they put *in* their body," she says. "People are now beginning to realize that what we put *on* our body can have a direct and lasting impact on health." Mike Rossi of Soulflower, a lifestyle store in St. Paul, Minn., sells some Prairieland products and agrees that natural bodycare is becoming more mainstream. "Aromatherapy and natural body care is growing more every day," he says.

That means more hours tending gardens so that Donna and Maggie can provide those products. "We put in a lot of hours, but we are doing something we believe in," Donna says. "We put in hundreds of hours, but we get to enjoy working outdoors and seeing the results of our labor. We're lucky to have the opportunity to do what we want to do." **H**

