

# FarmLIFE™

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## FLOWER POWER

*A grower of exotic lilies finds her sweet spot  
in hybridizing beautiful flowers and in the  
life she's created on her family farm. p. 8*



PHOTO: ALLEN-KENT PHOTOGRAPHY



# A PEACEFUL

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# PLACE

STORY BY DEBORAH R. HUSO  
PHOTOS BY ALLEN-KENT PHOTOGRAPHY



**SOMETIMES LIFE TAKES YOU PLACES** you never expected to go. That's certainly been the case for Di Rau, a fourth-generation farmer who says she returned to her family's Michigan land "kicking and screaming." These days, however, she's glad she moved back and it shows in her success. Not only has she maintained the land that's been in her family since 1873, but she's also created a thriving farm in the process.

Today, the farm, which is officially designated a Michigan Centennial Farm, includes 76 acres of mostly wooded land bisected by the Betsie River. A few of its acres are, however, covered in flowers—exotic lilies to be precise—many of them Rau's own creations. Ironic, given how Rau says, as a child, "I hated being outside."

## KEEPING THE TRADITION ALIVE

Rau's grandfather—the son-in-law of the original farm owner—built a barn in 1890 that still stands on the Rau land today, as both a part of the working farm and as a sort of milestone in family history. Rau's great-grandfather gave 10 acres to the newlywed couple, but stipulated his daughter would have complete control over that land. That, says Rau, "was unheard of at the time."

Such a history has made Rau all the closer to her family land, which she inherited from her father, and helped her realize how special it is. "To find farm properties in Michigan this old now is very hard," she says. "I'm really partial to keeping [this] tradition going." That said, she hopes and expects the farm to move into the hands of a fifth and even sixth generation. And lilies may provide the impetus for that ...

## A PASSION BECOMES A CAREER

Rau left the family farm in 1966, and worked for many years in the Grand Rapids, Mich., area. When Don, her husband of 45 years now, suggested moving back to her family's farm almost 27 years later—several years after her father's death and right before the couple's third and youngest son was preparing to enter his senior year of high school—the decision wasn't an easy one.

"I grew up feeling such isolation here as a child," says Rau. "My closest friend was 2 miles away, and I was an only child, so there wasn't anyone to communicate with."

She says today, though, the change was for the best. "Moving here made things easier, because there had been six years of running back and forth after my father died in 1984. I left a good-paying job," Rau >>

**Clockwise, from below** Rau holds the flower of one of her creations, while another grows on the farm. The farm's sign and bottle trees welcome visitors to what many call a "peaceful" place.



adds, but she acknowledges that trying to balance an urban lifestyle, careers, three kids and all their school activities—not to mention taking care of the family farm in a sort of absentia—had gotten to be too much.

While she continued to work her corporate job for a time, living the country life allowed the family to “step back,” she says, and shortly after the couple moved to the farm, Rau began attending classes at Michigan State University to become an Advanced Master Gardener. That’s where, she says, “I got hooked on daylilies.”

Eventually, she began planting some on the family farm, hybridizing her own varieties, and gradually falling in love with growing flowers in the sandy soil of northern Michigan, surrounded by woods and quiet. “It was a hobby for a lot

of years,” she says of her hybridization of daylilies (she’s been at it 16 years now), but, as these things go, the hobby eventually got out of hand and became a business.

Today, on what is now known as Betsie River Centennial Lily Farm, Rau grows lilies on about 3 acres, while her husband creates steel and glass art pieces that pepper the farm with exotic color not so unlike the lilies Rau grows.

## FLOWERS AS HEARTY AS THEIR GROWER

Why daylilies? “They’re a wash-and-wear plant,” Rau chuckles. “They are extremely drought-tolerant.” And they’d have to be hardy to grow as abundantly as they do on Rau’s farm, where she calls the soil “nothing

but dirty sand.” She also considers daylilies easy on the environment. Because of their hardiness in dry conditions, she explains, “they don’t rob the aquifer.”

“Daylily blooms are only open 24 hours, and then they’re gone,” says Rau. Thus, she breeds new varieties with one major goal in mind—“heavy bud count to keep lots of flowers blooming for weeks.” To date, she has hybridized hundreds and registered 39 daylily varieties. Hybridization is a lot of work and waiting ... as well as a frequent disappointment. Once she creates a new variety—often trying for features like ruffled edges on the flowers with colors that are different from the rest of the bloom—she has to wait years to see if her work produces a beautiful winner.

The process begins with Rau making the seed, putting it in cold storage, then



## RIGHT-SIZED VERSATILE TRACTOR

**DI RAU RUNS A MASSEY FERGUSON® GC2400** on Betsie River Centennial Lily Farm, using it for a variety of tasks. “My Massey tractor is my baby,” she says.

A 22.5-HP subcompact utility tractor with a cab, the GC2400 provides the right size and comfort for Rau—“This tractor is made for a woman,” she says—and also offers the ease of hydrostatic steering.

“It saves on the muscles in your arms!” she laughs. “And it makes really quick turns in the rows and keeps me from hitting the fence.”

In winter, Rau uses it for moving snow and appreciates that the snow blower mounts on the front, where she can see what she’s doing. “I use it for snow blowing as often as every day in winter, because the driveway is a quarter-mile long.” Rau adds, “I have a heated cab. I’ve been out there when it’s 19 degrees, snow-blowing in a T-shirt.”

The tiller mounts on the back using a 3-point hitch. “It’s like a quick-release hitch, so it’s really easy to back up and hook on a big tiller or a bush hog. You’re not struggling with it.”

Rau has run her GC2400 for seven or eight years. “I wouldn’t be able to function without it,” she says. “It’s perfect for me.”

Rau’s dealer is Gillison’s Variety Fabrication, Inc., in Benzonia, Mich., 8 miles from the farm.

When she purchased the tractor, Rau was looking for something “woman-friendly,” easy to operate, yet still powerful enough to handle Michigan’s wet and heavy snow. Gillison’s showed her the GC2400 and offered her a 0% financing deal from AGCO, which helped make her purchase a no-brainer. She’s found the tractor completely reliable and easy to operate on her own and has had no need for any repair or servicing.



starting it in the sunroom. Once it’s well-established, she’ll transfer the newly created plant to the field, where it will take three years before it offers its first blossom. And then, she still waits even longer before crossing a promising new variety with another lily to create yet more exotic hybrids. “It’s rare I ever cross a flower the first year it blooms,” she says.

Remarkably, given Rau’s isolated location south of Traverse City, she does almost all her selling direct to customers. “Flower people are my customers,” says Rau.

## THE PLACE TO BE

Rau says her success as an exotic lily grower has been almost accidental. An article in *Midwest Living* on her husband’s garden art drew new visitors to the farm, as has a new

partnership with Benzie County’s Magical History Tour that includes Betsie River Centennial Lily Farm as a destination.

Rau is starting to think about the future of the farm these days and whether or not it will persist without her. A three-time cancer survivor, she says she is starting to “recognize my age,” but an 18-year-old grandson Reese and her longtime field manager Steve Braem seem likely candidates to keep the hybridization of lilies going. Rau isn’t planning to quit anytime soon, however, given, she says, “it’s an addiction.”

It’s also been therapy. “Coming here was total less stress,” Rau explains. “Eighty percent of the people who come up that quarter-mile driveway say, ‘This place is so peaceful.’ People who are having problems, especially medical problems—they love it.

I’ve had so many medical problems myself; maybe that’s why I love it too.”

In addition to the 3 acres of lilies, the Rauses have personal gardens on just over 2 acres and also grow blueberries and Frontenac grapes, the latter with the hope of attracting pollinating honeybees. “The gardens have been my way of getting through cancer the second and third times,” Rau remarks. “Go dig in the soil, and make something grow. Have something to look forward to in the spring.”

While Rau may not have appreciated the rural lifestyle as a child, that definitely changed when she returned to the farm in later life. “When we moved up here, it was the right time,” she says. “Once I was here—it was less than a year—I said ‘this is the last stop; this is where I want to be.’” **FL**