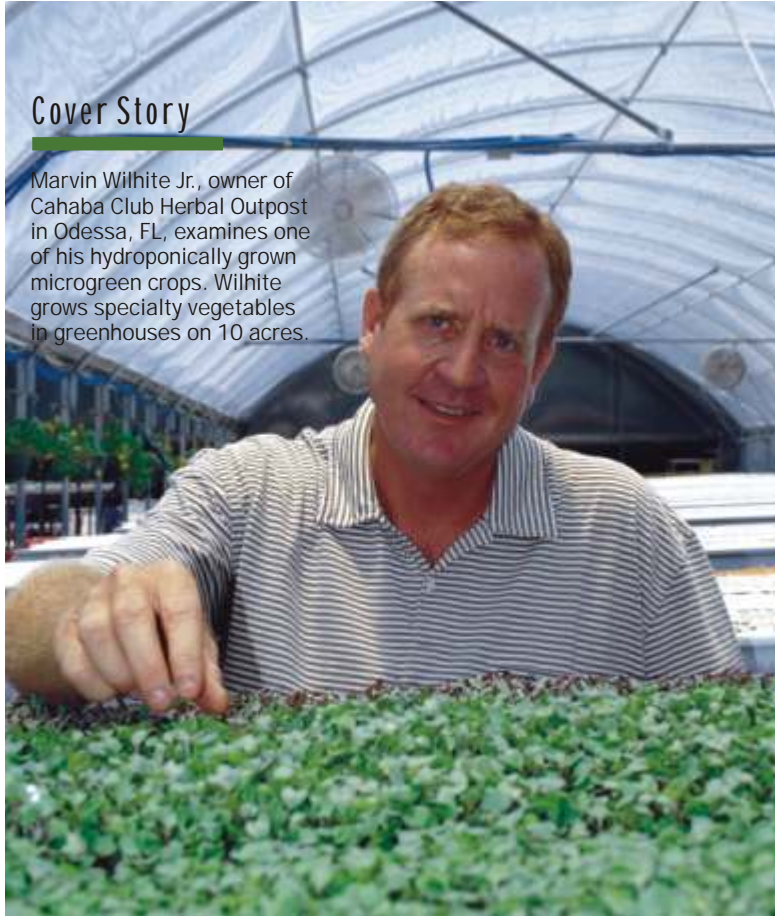


Cover Story

Marvin Wilhite Jr., owner of Cahaba Club Herbal Outpost in Odessa, FL, examines one of his hydroponically grown microgreen crops. Wilhite grows specialty vegetables in greenhouses on 10 acres.



Photos by Roy Padrick



Perlite sits atop a crop of microgreens grown at the Cahaba Club Herbal Outpost. The perlite is pushed up as the plants grow. The crop is harvested only weeks after planting.



Marvin Wilhite Jr. examines an evaporation cooler outside one of his 10 greenhouses. Wilhite keeps the coolers inside a canvas enclosure to help filter out contaminants, and keep the water cool.

A Different Approach

Marvin Wilhite Jr. makes the most of his hydroponics farm in the extreme heat of Central Florida.

By Roy C. Padrick

JUST north of Tampa, FL, only an hour drive from some of the state's largest growers, sits a 10-acre parcel of land known as Cahaba Club Herbal Outpost. Accessible only by dirt road, Marvin Wilhite Jr.'s farm consists of 12 greenhouses. It is a modest farm, to say the least, when compared to the huge acreages of some of Florida's other vegetable giants.

What isn't small, however, is Wilhite's determination to make his farm the best it can be. And judging by last year's sales of more than \$750,000, Wilhite has turned those 10 acres into pure success.

"I know I have one of the smallest farms in Florida," Wilhite says. "But, I have a great staff and family who help me make it the best 10 acres in the state."

Water Works

According to Dr. Steve Sargent, a horticulture professor with the University of

Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and AVG postharvest columnist, Wilhite does things a little differently.

"Marvin grows completely hydroponic," Sargent says. "And, his facility is very impressive."

Cahaba Club Herbal Outpost has been growing hydroponically since it opened its doors in 2000. Before he opened his own farm, Wilhite grew hydroponic vegetables for Frolick Farms in Odessa, FL. It was at Frolick, Wilhite says, that he learned how to grow in the wet medium.

"I learned the basics at Frolick," he says. "But, I really started to understand the job after I started here."

"Growing vegetables hydroponically is very difficult. But, it can also yield some tremendous results."

Wilhite uses three methods of hydroponics to grow his vegetables: an ebb-and-flow system, a nutrient film technique, and a perlite-growth medium.

When Wilhite first started out, he says,

it took some time before he learned which method was best for each product.

Trial And Error

"I was told, 'You can't grow hydroponic vegetables here in Central Florida,'" Wilhite remembers.

While that may be true for many who have tried, Wilhite has proven it can be done. He says innovation helps him stay alive where others have failed.

"I use evaporative cooling systems in my greenhouses," Wilhite says. "So many people told me I wouldn't be able to do it because it's too humid in Florida."

He proved them all wrong.

Wilhite's greenhouses are consistently cooler in the summer than the outside temperature — sometimes by as much as 15°F. He also uses shade cloth over the plastic covering his greenhouses to keep the temperature down in the summer. While there is extra expense in doubling the greenhouse covering, Wilhite says his plants — not to mention the workers

—benefit from the cooler climates.

“Some of our workers have worked in greenhouses before and have said ours is considerably better to work in,” Wilhite says. “Plus, we have virtually zero wilt on any of our products.”

But keeping the inside of the greenhouses cool isn't the only challenge when dealing with Florida's scorching daytime temperatures. Sargent says keeping the irrigation water cool is next to impossible in 90°F to 100°F weather. And to his pleasant surprise, Sargent says, Wilhite is able to do it well.

“He keeps his water in underground tanks, which use the ground's natural thermographics to keep the water cool,” Sargent says. He added that Wilhite's water stays around or below 80°F, even in July and August, when it can get to more than 100°F in the sun.

“I never believe people who tell me that I can't do something,” Wilhite says.

By keeping it in underground tanks, not only does Wilhite control the water temperature, but also the pH balance and electro-conductivity levels as well. His staff checks the water's balance four times a day — both in the tanks and in the trays. His thoroughness helps him stay compliant with state regulations governing hydroponic farms.

Keeping It Clean

Even in the protected environment of the greenhouse, insects and diseases can devastate a crop. An insect infestation could bankrupt an operation like Wilhite's, so he spends a great deal of time and energy on pest management.

“I know with a farm as small as mine it only takes one bug to destroy me,” Wilhite says. “So, I keep on top of pest management as tightly as possible.”

Part of his pest management program is constant scouting. He also trains all of his personnel to scout for insects and diseases. His employee handbook outlines the methods and procedures he uses to keep his farm pest-free.

“Cahaba Club is one of the cleanest farms I've been to,” Sargent says. “I have never seen signs of an infestation of any kind, and his plants always look great.”

Taste Matters

Besides being an innovator in production methods, Wilhite grows vegetables that many growers haven't even heard

Growing A Small Business

Before starting Cahaba Clubs Herbal Outpost, Marvin Wilhite Jr. worked as sales manager for Frolick Farms. And while holding a leadership position such as that provides some needed fiscal experience, Wilhite says nothing prepared him for running his own business.

“It was very, very difficult in the beginning,” Wilhite says. “Especially if you grow produce in hydroponics.

“Not only do you have the regular challenges of running a new company, but you have added regulations and standards to follow as well.”

Wilhite says one of the most challenging aspects of running a farm is finding quality labor.

“If you can find a good worker, it's hard to keep them because someone else may be willing to pay them just a little bit more,” he says. “But, finding enough good workers is a never-ending job.”

Wilhite says he spends most of his time training and educating his ever-changing personnel on the day-to-day operations. A great deal of his work is very technical, he says, as his water is checked using electronic meters, which require the operator to understand English and oftentimes complex information.

“Running a small business is like a family,” Wilhite says. “Everyone has a specific role, and it's my job as the leader to make sure they understand their roles.”

of. For instance, Cahaba Club Herbal Outpost is one of only a small handful of growers in the state who grow cinnamon basil and lemon basil. Wilhite sells the fragrant and flavorful herbs to some of the best resorts in the state. Along with the specialty basil, Cahaba Club grows a miniature version of greens called “microgreens.” They include Beet Bulls Blood, Swiss chard, purple kohlrabi, red cabbage, red Russian kale, arugula, red mustard giant, and Mizuna mustard. Cahaba Club also grows gourmet greens, such as red oak leaf, red lolla rosa, yellow pea shoots (which he grows in complete darkness to prevent the vegetable from turning green), and lolla verde.

“I knew right away that I couldn't compete with the big boys,” Wilhite says. “So I grow what they can't or won't. And, I think I do it pretty darn good, too.”

It wasn't always easy, says Wilhite. He says it took him more than three years to break into the mainstream market.

“I just kept sending samples to distributors and restaurants,” he says. “Eventually, the chefs started asking their distributors for my products, so they had to carry them.”

This marketing tactic would not have worked if his product wasn't terrific, Sargent says.

Secrets Of Success

“I think the thing that makes me successful is that I'm never afraid to try,” Wilhite says. “Whether it's a new product, new way of doing something, or even a new customer base, I am never scared of what might happen.”

While Wilhite may not be able to jump tall buildings in a single bound, Sargent says he is no less a marvel than a superhero.

“Marvin does things that most growers can't do,” Sargent says. “When it comes to hydroponics, Marvin Wilhite is Aquaman.” AVG

Padrick is managing editor of Florida Grower magazine, a Meister publication; rcpadrick@meistermedia.com.

