FEATURED FARMER: DENISE KILGUS AND FAMILY OF LIVING WATER FARMS.

Meet Denise Kilgus: mother of eight, co-owner of Living Water Farms Inc., and green-thumb extraordinaire. Throughout the year she's supplying garden-fresh greens and produce not only for her family, but to supermarkets and restaurants across Illinois. I caught up with Denise last week to find out just how she does it.

**How long have you been farming?**
Ever since Kevin and I have been married (31 years) we have had some sort of garden. It grew and changed as our family grew and was the Saturday family activity, in which all were involved!

**How did you get started in the farming field?**
After moving back to the Central Illinois area we became involved with a few other local gardeners growing produce for our local grocery store and some Chicago chefs. Ultimately we, along with a few other gardeners, formed the Stewards of the Land, LLC which flourishes as a group of farmers growing sustainably and taking their products to upscale restaurants in Chicago. This was the springboard for Living Water Farms' beginning in 2008.

**What crops/livestock do you raise? Can you tell me a little about them?**
Our first products raised in the greenhouses were tomatoes, cucumbers, green beans and a few varieties of...
Lettuce, wheatgrass, basil and a number of micro-greens. Our product line has changed over the years as we've also raised edible flowers, herbs and spinach. Our current product line consists of a variety of lettuces, Asian greens, dandelion greens, upland cress, arugula, mizuna, choi, escarole, endive, pea tendrils and shoots. Additionally, last fall we were given the opportunity to lease a facility in Urbana where we grow mung bean sprouts. They are used often in stir-fry foods. We also raise wheatgrass, sunflower shoots and Bulls Blood micro-greens.

We find it very rewarding to be able to provide local chefs products that typically weren't grown year-round in the Midwest. Our greens are typically harvested, packaged, cooled and delivered, impeccably fresh, direct to the restaurant within a few days. Common compliments we receive are: superb taste, extremely fresh and a shelf life that far surpasses most greens. We purposely work closely with our chefs and will grow 'greens to order' for them. The one challenge in working with chefs is that they commonly change positions and locations. The blessing in it is that we meet more chefs and our old acquaintances take Living Water Farms with them to their new position!

**How are you able to grow produce in the middle of winter?**

We grow our product in environmentally controlled greenhouses. I know that may sound like it should be easy since we're able to 'control' what goes on in the greenhouses, but it's not always so easy. We are able to monitor and adjust the temperature, humidity and lighting to a degree. We use a NFT (Nutrient Film Technology) system to feed the plants. We also use Geothermal for heating and cooling the greenhouse as well as the water that feeds the plants. This along with the natural solar energy in the greenhouses, allows us to grow product during the long winter days!!
It is an amazing thing to walk from bitter cold, snow blowing weather into the moist, warm and earthy smells of the greenhouse and to have wonderful fresh greens all year around!

**How many acres do you have in production?** Approximately 9000 square feet.

**Can you tell me a little bit about your family. Do they help on the farm?**
We have eight children. Our three oldest, all daughters, are married with children of their own, while the other five live at home. At the time of construction all able bodied hands were needed and used! Currently, our daughter and son-in-law Natalie and Mark Schneider (who are partners in the farm), and four of our five children still at home work in various capacities for the farm. Brooke (20) works in the office, Stuart (18) manages our facility in Urbana, Blake (16) works in production in the greenhouse, and Shea (14) helps in the office on Friday. Mark’s brother Matthew came on board as a partner and we have several other employees working in the greenhouses. Since we do all of our own propagating the chores range from planting seeds, separating and transplanting plants, to harvesting and packaging product.

**What is the most challenging issue in your line of work?**
Maintaining the efficiencies for the large variety of products we grow.

**What's your favorite part of farming?** Eating the fresh product and being able to share it with others!

Living Water Farms Inc. products are available at Dave's Supermarket in Fairbury, Green Grocer in Chicago, and Common Ground in Urbana, as well as various Schnucks and WholeFoods retailers throughout the state. You can also find their greens being served at: Destihl in Bloomington and Champaign; Bacaro in Champaign; 5 Bistro, Mike Shannon’s, Union Station, Square One, and Ibby’s in St. Louis, as well as Spiaggia, Girl and the Goat, Balena, The Bristol, Dave Burke’s Primehouse, The Ritz-Carlton, Terzo Piano, Atwood, and Sable in Chicago.

All photos courtesy of [Jankun Studios](#).