In the heart of the Midwest, a growing company called River Hills Harvest is riding the new wave of demand for elderberry products. At the helm of this enterprise is Terry Durham, a longtime advocate of sustainable agriculture, a builder of groundbreaking organizations and an elderberry expert best known for his devotion to developing the elderberry market from the ground up.

I met Durham in 2014 as he tended his company’s booth at the Missouri Organic Association’s annual conference in Springfield, Missouri. Curiosity drew me to the colorful table featuring rows of canning jars packed with elderberry stem cuttings and sparkling bottles of dark purple elderberry juice. Before I had time to say anything, he warmly offered me a sample of River Hills Harvest 100% Pure Elderberry Juice. As a longtime gardener and native plant enthusiast, I intended to ask about the cuttings, but after one sip of the delectably rich and naturally sweet elixir, my questions changed. I wanted to know more about Durham and how he came to be selling such a beautiful brew. His answers were both inspiring and educational. Over the last few years I have come to know and respect Durham as a walking encyclopedia for everything elderberry and as the driving force behind the cultivation of elderberries.
a brand-new elderberry market in the United States.

Durham’s journey began in 1978 in the tiny historic Mississippi River hamlet of Hartsburg, Missouri, where he grew organic vegetables at Eridu Farm, named for the oldest city in Mesopotamia and the birthplace of modern agriculture. At that time “organic” was a form of agriculture defined only by its practitioners and admirers and often required explanation to uninitiated retailers and consumers. Because there were few farmers’ markets in those days and little understanding of the benefits of eating organic produce, growers had to work hard to sell their products.

HELPING HANDS

In 1988, Durham and other organic producers scattered throughout the Ozarks of Missouri and Arkansas came together to form the Ozark Small Farm Viability Project. One of the group’s priorities was to define standards for organic agricultural practices in the region and use them to educate producers, consumers, retailers and legislators. They also hoped their work would become the basis for future organic certifications in the state.

The group went on to organize the Ozark Organic Growers Association, a cooperative that combined the produce of farmers and collectively sold and delivered them in bulk to wholesale markets. Because obtaining loans to start organic farms or businesses was difficult, they also formed the nonprofit membership group and community investment program Financing Ozarks Rural Growth & Economy (FORGE), through which organic and sustainable agricultural projects and small businesses could get financing via the deposits and savings of its members. Throughout the years, Durham has been an active member of all three organizations, traveling throughout the Ozarks of Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma educating producers, recruiting new members and helping to write legislation that would define Missouri’s new organic certification program. Meanwhile, Durham sold his produce through a small community supported agriculture business to the few willing health food stores, co-op shops and restaurants he could find.

In 1990, Durham decided to take what he had learned in Arkansas and apply it specifically to organic producers in his state through a new organization he co-founded called the Missouri Organic Association (MOA). Recently MOA changed its name to the Mid-America Organic Association in order to fully represent nine Midwestern states. Durham was MOA’s first president and served in that capacity a second time several years later. He also served on the board of directors for many years and was given a prestigious award for his dedication.

Although MOA’s goals have always been multifaceted, one of their earliest achievements was the development of a new organic certification program to be implemented by the state of Missouri. The group divided their membership into chapters representing the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA), which worked directly with the state legislature to draft organic certification legislation in Missouri. In the first two years, 1,000 people applied for certification, overwhelming the understaffed state program. About the same time, the federal government was drafting its own organic certification rules, and Missouri eventually dropped its certification program.

EYEING ELDERBERRY

Durham continued to grow and sell organic produce through various channels, including a new regional farmers’ market in the capital city of Columbia, Missouri. Always on the lookout for new products to help increase farm sales, Durham turned to the wild elderberry shrubs growing on his property. The dark, tart-sweet berries were prized by his mother and grandmother, who made delicious jelly from them every summer. He enjoyed the berries so much he decided to gather and sell them by the pint at his local farmers’ market.

It didn’t take long for him to realize that a lot of people also had fond memories of the luscious berries, and he always sold out before the market was over. It was around this time in
1997 that Durham began experimenting with the cultivation of wild elderberries on his farm. Having productive plants close at hand reduced the work of harvesting during the summer months and gave him a chance to closely observe the plants and better understand how to grow them as a crop.

Not long after he planted his first wild elderberries, Durham met researcher Andy Thomas and regional horticulture specialist Pat Byers from the University of Missouri. The pair had just begun work on a newly funded Missouri Elderberry Improvement Project, which included John Avery, director of Missouri State University’s State Fruit Experiment Station in Mountain Grove, Missouri, and several members of the University of Missouri Center for Agroforestry. The project’s primary goal was to trial promising wild varietals of native elderberry plants to develop stable and productive commercial strains.

Because Durham had already been cultivating wild elderberries and working toward a similar goal on his own farm, he was able to provide the project with insights from a producer’s perspective, as well as two of the project’s first wild elderberry specimens. In addition to knowing a thing or two about elderberries, Durham’s vast knowledge and experience with organizing and organic agriculture impressed the researchers and he became an integral, if not official, part of the research team. Over time, the project trialed 62 wild elderberry varieties. Of those, 10 were selected for further development. Some of the named varieties from the experiment station include ‘Bob Gordon,’ ‘Wyldewood,’ ‘Marge,’ ‘Ozark’ and ‘Eridu,’ one of Durham’s original specimens. Throughout the years, Durham continued to work closely with Byers, helping Dr. John Brewer and his sister, Merry Bauman, of Wyldewood Cellars, develop additional elderberry cultivars specifically for the growing wine industry in Missouri.

Throughout the following years, Durham passionately continued his own work with elderberries, focusing on the health benefits of the nutrient-dense juice. In 2000, he ended his 11-year career as an organic vegetable farmer to devote himself entirely to the cultivation and processing of elderberries. He spent the first two years working with his wild-cultivated elderberries and preparing the ground at Eridu Farm for deep permaculture. In 2005 he planted a handful of the most promising new cultivars into three 300-foot rows. In the meantime, Durham had to figure out how to sell a product that had no established market in the United States and almost no growers to support one. The truth was that all of the elderberries and elderberry products sold in the United States came from Europe, where the elderberry industry is roughly the same size as the U.S. blueberry market.

**RIVER HILLS HARVEST**

With a commitment to developing a new industry from the ground up, Durham founded River Hills Elderberry Producers, the first dedicated grower-supported elderberry collective in the country. RHEP would be instrumental in recruiting, educating and developing new independent growers and co-ops across the country. In turn, these new growers would not only increase U.S. production, but also develop new elderberry products that would ultimately drive overall demand. “After all, if there is no production, there is no market,” said Durham. Generating an entirely new commodity and developing a market for it is a long and bumpy road.

In the end, RHEP didn’t have the support it needed to fulfill many of its goals, so in 2008 Durham abandoned the cooperative and launched his own company, River Hills Harvest. Although the co-op didn’t work out, he would be instrumental in starting many more that did, and Durham was determined to ensure that all new growers had a firm buyer for their crop and a continuing source of help, inspiration and education to help make their new ventures a success. When I spoke to Durham about this part of his business, he mentioned that his company offers a set price for clean, destemmed flash-frozen berries at $2 per pound. Durham points out that they pay a good price, but that they want to help producers make as much money as possible for their crop, even if that means selling, to someone else.

“The more product we make, the more people want to know about elderberries,” he said, “And that’s good for everyone.”

In addition to support and education, River Hills Harvest also offers custom installations in the Midwest through a network of farmers that build elderberry orchards to fit specific site requirements through consultations, soil work, irrigation and on-site planting. They also provide plants and cuttings and help farmers work with NRCS for fed-
As an elderberry grower, Durham knew that two of the biggest drawbacks to growing elderberries as a cash crop are the tedious tasks of harvesting and destemming. Since there were no such machines, he set out to design and build one from scratch.

As an example of the profits that can be made with this new and rapidly growing crop, Durham told of one farmer he helped with an installation. They planted cuttings on 1 irrigated acre and the farmer harvested 600 pounds of berries in the first year. After the first annual pruning, the resulting cuttings were used to plant another 5 irrigated acres. The third year, the farmer made $73,000 — more than enough to pay for expenses, including the specialized irrigation system, and put a profitable amount in his books as well. Another farmer Durham consulted with planted just under 2 acres of berries and using the recommended irrigation and fertilizer schedule, harvested and shipped 10,000 pounds of certified organic elderberries to a Canadian company for $3.50 per pound.

River Hills Harvest buys elderberries directly from co-ops and independent growers and turns them into their specialty “cool-processed” elderberry products, including Pure Premium 100% Elderberry Juice, which is also the base for their delicious Elderberry Jelly and the versatile and tasty Elderberry Throat Coat & Herbal Cordial. Currently, the company has several other products in the works, including elderberry lemonade and elderberry shrubs. The key to producing pure, nutrient-dense elderberry juice, Durham says, is the temperature at which the berries are processed. After being washed, sanitized and destemmed, the berries are crushed and processed at a temperature low enough to preserve the bioavailability of nutrients, but high enough to neutralize trace amounts of cyanogenic glycoside, a naturally occurring alkaloid that is potentially toxic if ingested in very large quantities. Cherries and apples also contain this and other potentially toxic alkaloids. RHH also sells six varieties of elderberry nursery stock in the form of unrooted stem cuttings for gardeners and farmers.

True to Durham’s vision of a thriving elderberry market in the United States, RHH is plowing the way. According to Durham, business is growing with web sales peaking during the winter months. The company currently ships stock to seven warehouses in six states, from which numerous distributors transport RHH products to hundreds of retail accounts in 30
states. Chris Patton heads up RHH’s national marketing sector, which includes shipping, wholesale accounts, product sampling and market development.

“It’s a big job because you have to make the connections, pitch the product and wait a year or two before you can get your product into big retailers like Fresh Thyme, which only select products to stock on their shelves once a year,” said Durham.

As an elderberry grower, Durham knew that two of the biggest drawbacks to growing elderberries as a cash crop are the tedious tasks of harvesting and destemming. Since there were no such machines, he set out to design and build one from scratch. With some engineering and manufacturing help from his brother, Darrell, and four years of building and trialing prototypes, Durham finally finished his masterpiece; the one and only destemming machine designed exclusively for elderberries.

Available only through RHH, Terry’s Elderberry Destemmer (T.E.D.) is “a revolutionary design formatted for the small farmer ... low cost and portable ... capable of [destemming] several hundred pounds per hour ... and doubling the value of the crop.”

Durham says, “Once we got a prototype that worked the way we wanted it to, we worked with a manufacturing company to build them to our specifications.” Now Durham is working on an elderberry harvesting machine, but it is not yet ready for market. “No harvester for elderberries exists at this time. Some claim their harvesters can do the job, but trust me, they can’t. Hand-harvesting is the only way to go for now.”

There is also a growing market for elderflowers.

Learning Opportunities

If you’d like to meet Durham in person, he gives roughly 25 presentations and workshops every year and attends many of the annual farm conferences across the country. He is scheduled to speak in North Carolina in April, Vermont in June and Pennsylvania in September 2017. You can find out more details about these and other events by contacting Durham via River Hills Harvest at riverhillsharvest.com or connect with him on Facebook at facebook.com/RiverHillsHarvest.

Also, make plans to attend the 2017 Comprehensive Elderberry Workshop & Field Tour slated for June 1-2 in Columbia, Missouri.
The only other drawback for growers who aren’t selling, fermenting, or processing fresh berries into a finished product is the lack of access to an Individual Quick Freeze Processing Facility (IQF). Too expensive for individual growers, IQFs are used to flash freeze berries to preserve quality and nutrients during shipping and storage. Oftentimes, cooperatives work to bring these facilities to central locations for many types of farmers. To find an IQF nearest you, contact your local extension agent.

As we spoke, Durham kept coming back to the grower cooperatives that River Hills Harvest often buys from and how important they are to both the present needs of growers and the future of the U.S. elderberry market. “There is no competition for elderberry producers, and growers are desperately needed to fill the rising demand for elderberry products,” he said. Durham also encourages those interested in growing elderberries to contact one of the existing co-ops in states like Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin and Vermont. He urges checking out the Midwest Elderberry Cooperative (midwest-elderberry.coop) based in Minnesota, another organization that he helped kick-start. “They are a large and active group that strongly supports River Hills Harvest, and their website is home to many educational and scientific papers that I cannot post on my website due to federal restrictions relating to my business.”

Durham stressed that even if you don’t live in the Midwest, MEC is the place to go to for elderberry information and to find out about regional and national events, workshops and gatherings for current and potential growers.

Jill Henderson is an artist, author and organic gardener. She is editor of Show Me Oz (showmeoz.wordpress.com), a weekly blog featuring articles on gardening, seed saving, nature ecology, wild edible and medicinal plants and culinary herbs. She has written three books: The Healing Power of Kitchen Herbs, A Journey of Seasons: A Year in the Ozarks High Country and The Garden Seed Saving Guide.