

# Along the Methow River, a garden for the ages

## Dana Visalli's Tryin'ta Farm embraces 'regenerative ag'

BY JOANNA BASTIAN

Dana Visalli's Tryin'ta Farm is a flourishing work in progress, one that he wants to leave in better shape when he dies than it was when he was born.

With the energy of the sun and his own two hands, Visalli produces fruits, vegetables and grains along the shores of the Methow River. His small commercial garden is an example of high-yield sustainability with low energy consumption.

A play on words, Tryin'ta Farm is a living example of Visalli "trying to farm" using regenerative agriculture methods.

"Regenerative agriculture" is a farming practice used to restore soil biodiversity. The practice reverses climate change by capturing carbon dioxide in the soil and improving the water cycle through reduced erosion and the elimi-

nation of harmful chemicals.

"This garden is an effort to create a productive small farm that builds soil over time, uses a minimum of fossil fuels, is sustainable over the long term, and is in better shape ecologically when we die than when we were born," Visalli said.

### A seed is planted

Visalli was first introduced to farming by Mennonite farmers. "The Amish would not take me," he laughed. In the early 1970s, people yearned to grow their own food and take care of the land through the Back to the Land movement. Visalli came to Methow Valley and soon realized he was always fixing the tractor instead of spending his time farming.

Visalli found modern-day farming to be unsustainable with the popular use of non-renewable energy, chemicals, and practices that damaged the soil, water and surrounding land. He ditched the tractor and looked for sustainable ways to nurture the soil without damaging the ecosystem and biosphere and without using fossil fuels.

"I always grew things — this

was meaningful to me," he said, "I wanted farm on a small scale, using less energy."

Visalli started by clearing stone cobbles from the soil by hand. "Ninety-five percent of the work here is done by hand," he said, "very little fossil fuels are used."

Two large compost bins are steadily filled with the addition of organic material. The humus is watered, turned and covered to encourage active composting. "It's like taking care of a baby," Visalli said.

The compost pile is tended to with the same care and attention given to growing plants. The composted humus is routinely fed to the garden beds, building healthy soil and feeding nutrients to crops. "We do not use any chemical fertilizers nor any insecticides, even organic ones," Visalli said. Occasionally, soapy water is used on plants to control aphids.

### Solar energy

Irrigation water is sent to the garden by the energy of the sun. An off-grid solar system uses 12-volt solar panels and a 12-volt pump.

A 20-by-50 foot greenhouse, heated only by the rays of the sun, extends the growing season from early spring into the winter months. On Feb. 27 of this year, Visalli skied to the greenhouse towing a sled filled with chicken manure to feed the soil. He and his co-worker, Chase Vanderyacht, planted seeds in the greenhouse on the first day of March when there was still a foot of snow on the ground.

Vanderyacht watered the seeds and seedlings with buckets of snow that melted immediately in the warm greenhouse. The water line to the greenhouse remained frozen until early April. Until then, buckets of soft melting snow kept the seedlings moist.

The greenhouse receives a third round of plantings in mid-July. This late planting will grow to full size by the end of September. The plants stop growing in October as the soil cools and the



Photo by Joanna Bastian

In his greenhouse, Dana Visalli pointed out the second planting of crops that were maturing in early June.



Photo by Joanna Bastian

Rows of multi-hued lettuce are watered by solar-powered irrigation, and fed nutrient-rich compost from the organic compost bin located at the edge of the garden beds.

sun treks low across the winter sky. The crops that can handle freezing temperatures are fresh through December, yielding fresh lettuce, arugula, spinach, chard, kale, carrots, beets and more in early winter. This technique is called winter gardening.

"Most vegetables are nutrient-rich but not energy-rich," Visalli said. To ensure his garden produces a wholesome variety of fruit, greens, root vegetables and protein, Visalli also plants hard red spring wheat. He harvests the wheat by hand with a scythe. From this energy-rich grain from the garden, Visalli makes lasagna noodles, cookies and bread to accompany all the fresh fruits and vegetables.

### A living process

Visalli's Tryin'ta Farm is a liv-

ing process to showcase the biological cycle of using the sun's energy to fuel the body. Solar panels provide power to keep water flowing to plants. Plants are fed organic compost that holds the energy of the sun deep within hydrocarbon bonds.

When the plant matter decomposes and is added to the soil, those energy and nutrients are fed back into the living plants. Plant roots absorb nutrients and energy from the soil, the stems and leaves reach up to the sky. Through photosynthesis, plants eat sunshine, converting the sun's energy to sugar.

These plants, using the energy of the sun, grow into a food source to sustain other living creatures. Plants breathe in carbon dioxide, storing the

excess within their root system and trapping the carbon dioxide in the soil. In exchange, plants breathe out oxygen, a key component of human health and survival.

"It is a living process, a community," Visalli said. Once a person realizes the constant biological cycle of soil, water and sun, "it becomes exciting to be a participant," he said.

Visalli's Tryin'ta Farm has the first produce available in the spring at Glover Street Market, and the latest fresh produce in the valley in early winter. People can order directly from Visalli, or schedule a time to pick their own produce at [www.methownaturalist.com](http://www.methownaturalist.com), Visalli's online journal and website. Email [dana@methownet.com](mailto:dana@methownet.com) for more information.

# Karen Dahl's sewing and mending business keeps her in stitches

## Nimble Thimble Needle Nook moves to a new space

BY ASHLEY LODATO

If we're lucky, we discover a passion in high school. For Karen Dahl, owner of the Nimble Thimble Needle Nook, that passion was uncovered in home economics class when she learned to sew.

She was inspired, she said, "Because I wanted clothes."

"This was in the 1950s," Dahl said. "Sewing is a life skill. Lots of girls sewed. If you wanted a bigger wardrobe and you couldn't buy everything you saw in magazines, you learned how to sew it yourself."

Dahl has been sewing ever since, although she didn't do it professionally until about five years ago, when she opened a "fixing, mending, repairing and restoring" sewing studio in Twisp, located first in the Cascade Center and relocated in early June to the Gloversville Addition building, behind the 3rd Avenue Salon.

The move affords Dahl more



Karen Dahl started sewing when she was in high school, but didn't turn it into a profession until about five years ago when she opened a sewing studio in Twisp.

space, giving her both a place to greet customers and make

repairs, as well as a fitting room and storage area in an adjacent room. "It's a treat to be here," Dahl said of her new studio. "With more space, it's easier to keep track of what comes in and what goes out."

### Repairing and restoring

What comes in is an array of textiles needing repair, adjustment or restoration. While the bulk of Dahl's work is shortening pants ("I think they make all pants the same length regardless of size," she said), she also provides almost any apparel alteration or repair one could need, from tailoring sundresses to altering shirts to removing stays from formal gowns to adding buttons.

Apparel repairs are Dahl's bread and butter, but repairing and restoring heirloom quilts

is what really feeds her. Pains-taking work, restoring quilts requires both a nimble touch and an eye for replacing fabrics that may be generations old. Handmade quilts adorn the walls of the Nimble Thimble Needle Nook, a testament to Dahl's passion for this traditional art form — a love she inherited from her mother, who did all her quilting by hand.

Since those high school home ec classes, Dahl has been self-taught, and it has been a bit of an evolution. "I learned I don't like to work with upholstery fabric," she said. "I subcontract that out to a friend."

But to meet demand from local recreationalists who wanted her to repair fleece pull-overs, rain jackets and other outdoor apparel, Dahl learned to work with the unique fab-

rics those items are constructed from: nylon, recycled plastics and other synthetics.

"Those pieces of clothing are expensive," she said. "People are invested in repairing them, rather than replacing them. Fixing these pieces has also given me a chance to get to know some of the younger generation in this valley."

Another learning experience came when a customer sought Dahl's help with a down feather collection. "We got the ticking and made three dozen pillows and two comforters out of all that down," she said.

### Finding the answer

Raised in Redmond, Washington ("back when it was 'the country,'" she said), Dahl spent summers in the Methow Valley, "rich with family." She has

lived in the valley since 1958 and spent 30 years cleaning houses, which provided a solid income but was very solitary work.

"I knew I wanted to move away from cleaning," Dahl said, "but I'm too old to learn new tricks. I thought, 'What do I already know how to do?'" Sewing was the answer and it anchored Dahl's emerging livelihood.

More recently, the Small Business Development Center (which is co-sponsored by the Economic Alliance of Okanogan County, among others) offers Dahl free consultation as her business evolves. Although she has no plans to grow her business any further, Dahl remains open to the potential to expand. But for now, she plans to continue doing what she loves: sewing and mending to help meet the needs of the community.

In addition to exhibiting quilts, Dahl also appoints her studio with sewing-related items of interest, including a small collection of antique pincushions and a functioning Franklin treadle sewing machine.

She also displays artwork created by friends and artists she knows, and invites them to come work in her space. "I wanted to share my place with friends and artists," she said. A current exhibit features the Western artwork of Charlene Monger, who lives south of Twisp.

When she first opened her sewing business after three decades cleaning houses alone, Dahl said "I learned that I'm a very social person. I like interacting with people. I'm always meeting new people with this job, and I enjoy talking to them."

The psychological transition from cleaning houses to mending clothing has been, one might say, seamless.

For contact information and directions to the Nimble Thimble Needle Nook, visit <https://twispwa.com/listing/nimble-thimble-needle-nook>.



Photo by Ashley Lodato

A thimble collection, and an assortment of threads, are on display in Karen Dahl's new shop.