



# Area couple serves up "Darn Good Tomatoes" in front yard with honesty, integrity

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**GODFREY - Bob and Gayle Rawson** of rural Godfrey may be two of the most trusting and caring people who reside in the area and their love is spread through a small family tomato business.

The couple uses an honor system to sell their tomatoes with a stand in their front yard close to Illinois Route 3 just down from Clifton Terrace.

The tomato stand has a basic, but captivating sign and name: **“Darn Good Tomatoes.”**

Bob Rawson, the “tomato man” starts the growing season each spring with about 200 tomato plants and what the family doesn’t eat, he places in his stand alongside the road. He has price ranges for his tomatoes, and in good faith, he trusts people will use the honor system in the process.

“A lot of people like the humor my husband has in his signs for prices and the honor system,” Gayle Rawson said.

For Bob, growing tomatoes has become his hobby when he isn’t working in the winter for Illinois Department of Transportation or in other months with an excavating

company. Bob started small with a handful of plants, but gradually tomatoes have taken over much of his back yard of his nearly 3-acre yard in back.

“I love it,” Bob said of growing tomatoes for himself, friends and strangers. “I love the taste of tomatoes. I didn’t intend on this becoming a hobby like it has, but over the years it has become bigger and bigger.”

In the fall, Bob and Gayle sell pumpkins, also with the honor system, in their front yard. They don’t keep any of those proceeds, but give them back to a person who grows pumpkins. Families enjoy stopping by and getting a pumpkin. Bob sometimes talks with customers if he is outside and he enjoys getting to meet new people that way.

Bob said there has never been tossed tomatoes or broken pumpkins found in their front yard and he feels he gets the respect he gives to customers with his honor system.

Bob describes tomatoes as “good brain food,” and a fruit he thinks everyone should try. He said he didn’t like tomatoes as a kid, but over the years he grew a taste for them, which was his original reason for growing tomatoes, that he liked to eat them.

Bob is a natural grower and uses no pesticides or herbicides in the process.

“I set up a little table and a sign the first year and people started stopping by and it grew from there,” he said. “The first time I grew tomatoes I didn’t want to throw them away and there wasn’t enough to can and I sat them on the little table. It grew from there. I planted about 50 tomato plants the first year and it has grown to about 200. It’s kind of a challenge for me.”

Bob enjoys planting Celebrity and Early Girl Tomatoes most.

Bob and Gayle aren’t aware of anyone not paying for tomatoes or hurting the merchandise at their stand, so for them, the honor system still works. Bob said if someone needed tomatoes and couldn’t pay, he would understand, he would want them to have them.

“I started the honor system because I couldn’t sit out there, but it is now something I believe in doing,” Bob said.

Bob said the key to growing top-notch tomatoes often depends on the weather. He said when it is especially hot a few days in a row in the summer or early fall, the tomatoes seem to thrive. He said this past year there has been a lot of rain and his garden has an abundance of weeds, but is still producing good tomatoes.



Snowbirds come and grab tomatoes each year, so his product ultimately ends up in several states and impacts a lot of people.

A few years ago, a gentleman stopped several times to get tomatoes and Bob started talking with him. The man lost his wife a couple weeks before he started visiting the stand and stopped on the way to visit her grave.

The man spent several minutes talking to Bob about the love of his life and in the end, Bob said he shed a tear with the man about his wife's death.

"I have had some moments like I did with the man that I didn't plan on," Bob said. "Those mean a lot to me. I have had people tell me they had relatives visit from California and take tomatoes back with them, so I have had some of the tomatoes in California."

As far as the stand name, "Darn Good Tomatoes," Bob said he used that so it would have impact, but being a strong Catholic, he didn't want to use profanity.

"I think the name has become kind of a landmark, he said, although there are a few others that use it," Bob said. "Some will start to use the curse word, but then change it to no, they are really darn good."



