

Mitchell creates agritourism business, impacts family farm



By Kaitlyn Byrne
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COLLINS – When Jo Lynn Mitchell started an agritourism business to add income to the family farm, she had no idea she would end up proving that people can still farm for a living.

Mitchell fell in love with farming as a way of life after marrying her husband Don, and she wanted to introduce farm life to children and adults. In 2006, she planted pumpkins and invited schools and churches to visit for an educational experience on how crops grow. The children each received a pumpkin to carry home as a reminder of what they learned at the farm.

“We didn’t really have anything like our farm within a 60-mile radius of us, so it was a great experience for the children to see a farm up close,” Mitchell said. “I have learned most of the kids that come out here -- and the adults, too -- are amazed people still farm for a living. It’s opened a whole new world for them, which shocked me.”

Don’s entire family is involved in running the 1,600-acre row-crop and pine farm. Jo Lynn said she wanted to be part of that but knew she needed to find a way to generate additional income if she were to make the farm her full-time job.

“I thought, ‘Wow, we have such a beautiful farm, and I really think people would love to come here,’” Mitchell said. “Around that time, agritourism really started taking off in Mississippi, so I traveled across the state to see how other farmers were bringing tourism to their farms.”

Since 2006, Mitchell has expanded the farm’s agritourism component to include seasonal events, corn mazes, birthday parties, corporate events and weddings, in addition to scheduled school tours and open weekends for the public to visit.

“We’ve added something new to the farm every year,” Mitchell said. “We’ve added numerous buildings and playgrounds to transform the farm into an entertainment and education facility for kids to have hands-on experiences with farming.”

As president of the Mississippi Agritourism Association, Mitchell travels to events throughout the state to share her experiences bringing agritourism to Mitchell Farms.

“One thing I tell people when I speak is to build on what you already have,” she said. “Farmers need to understand we are not really in competition with one another. We help each other to reach people the best we can. People like the personal experience. They feel like they’re part of the family, and that feeling of family carries over to all operations.”

Carolyn Conger, Covington County Extension agent, has known Mitchell for years and has seen her agritourism vision flourish.

“Jo Lynn is very creative and extremely dedicated to making agritourism a success,” Conger said. “She has offered to help many others who are interested in pursuing a similar venture. She is always coming up with new ideas for the farm. I don’t believe there is another woman like her.”

Rachael Carter, an Extension instructor of enterprise and community resource development, said agritourism helps farmers add value to their businesses while keeping Mississippi communities involved with agriculture.



Jo Lynn Mitchell stops near the construction of Tiny Town, an addition to the agritourism venture at Mitchell Farms in Collins, Miss., on April 17, 2014. (Photo by MSU Ag Communications/Kat Lawrence)

“Jo Lynn is on the cutting edge of the industry, and she is an excellent role model for Mississippi agritourism,” Carter said. “She combines creativity with strong business practices, and she has seen great success with agritourism because of it.”

Mitchell Farms hosts more than 4,000 visitors each year for the Mississippi Peanut Festival the first weekend in October. The festival is open to the public, and about 100 vendors are expected to set up booths with arts, crafts and antiques for sale.

For more information about Mitchell Farms or the Mississippi Peanut Festival, contact Mitchell at 601-765-8609.

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