

down on the farm a bountiful harvest

God-given pumpkin patch in the north Georgia hills

BY BETTY TERRY / PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIMBERLY FINKEL DAVIS AND KAMIN HOYLE



BRADLEY WEAVER OF DAWSON COUNTY, GEORGIA, IS LIKE any other farmer in these foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Twelve years of farming have taught him that there are always chores to do. There are acres of hay to cut and grass to mow. He worries about irrigating his crops, and he's grateful when the good Lord steps in and does it for him. He tries to be a good steward of the land. But first, he has to finish his homework.

Brad is 17 years old, and each fall since he was 5, he has managed his own pumpkin patch just outside Dawsonville.

The whole idea started years ago when Brad was just 4. The youngest child of Karen and Tony Weaver, Brad overheard his parents talking about how they had worked their way through college. He'd have to do the same someday, they told him. Most parents hope their children pay attention when it comes to lessons about managing money, but the Weavers didn't realize how much their young son had taken their words to heart.

"Six months later, he announced, 'I'm going to have a pumpkin patch,'" his mom recalls. The Weavers, who are devout Christians, didn't celebrate Halloween, and in the beginning, Karen was dead-set against the idea. "So we did what we always do in our family," she says. "We prayed about it."

And it took Brad a whole year to convince his mother. "He kept telling me that this is what the Lord wanted him to do," Karen explains. "The pumpkin patch turned out to be his ministry."

That first year, Brad grew approximately 100 pumpkins in the family garden. "We put a cardboard sign on the road," Brad remembers. "And we pretty much gave everything away that first year."

"He gave them all away his first year, actually," his mother corrects. "He has such a kind heart."

The next year, Brad was back with a better sign and more pumpkins, and he hasn't looked back.

When he was 8, the Weavers turned part of their 100-year-old barn into a gift shop for kids. Being a kid himself, Brad understood his target market. He filled the shop with the kinds of things kids like—marbles and old-fashioned wooden toys. "Not something that's made in China," Brad explains. "Something that's handmade by local Georgia craftsmen."



Everything at Bradley's is focused around kids, says Brad. That's a big part of the appeal of Bradley's. It's not the fanciest pumpkin patch around or even the biggest. "There's a peace here where you can just relax and enjoy your family," Karen explains.

You'll find no ghosts or ghoulies there. You can take a hayride out to the pumpkin patch or bring a picnic lunch to enjoy. While the kids play on swing sets or ride miniature tractors, parents can sip apple cider on the gift shop's rustic front porch, taking in the view of the north Georgia foothills in all their autumn glory. And, of course, there are pumpkins. They're arranged in stacks by price—from \$1, \$2, and \$3 for the small ones to \$15 for the biggest pumpkins.

So how is Brad's college fund doing? "I do have some money saved for college that I can't touch," he admits. "But I've been reinvesting a lot of it." Over the years, Brad's pumpkin patch business has diversified.

When he was 11, he began selling Christmas trees each December. Two years later, he discovered a patch of daffodils, buried under a layer of kudzu, on his parents' 100-acre farm. They had been growing there since the Civil War. Then, when a local daylily nursery was going out of business, he bought as much of their stock as he could afford. He now sells more than 200 varieties of registered daffodils

and daylilies. And last year, he started his own landscaping business, hiring out crews to do jobs for local landscapers.

"People joke with him and say, 'You don't do anything small, do you?'" his mother points out. "And he says, 'Why should I?'"

"My parents are very supportive," Brad adds. Karen and Tony help with the pumpkin patch each October. "If I ever need anything or have a question, I just go to them, and they'll give me a straight answer without prejudice," he says.

This fall Brad is a senior at Dawsonville County High School, where he is an A-B student, and he's already looking forward to graduation next spring. He realizes he faces an important decision: Stay at home and continue his businesses, or go to college. "The pumpkin patch will continue no matter what," he says. If he does go to college, his parents have agreed to carry on the business while he's away.

"We've just been tremendously blessed that the Lord has entrusted this child to us," Karen says. "I suspect he'll always have a pumpkin patch," she adds. He has already talked about passing it on to his own children someday. "He's not ever going to give it up because it's too much of a tradition. We have too many good memories, and we've made too many friends."

There's a peace here
where you can just relax
and enjoy your family.

—KAREN WEAVER



Bradley's Pumpkin Patch is located near Dawsonville, Georgia, approximately 60 miles north of Atlanta, at the 5-mile marker on Georgia Highway 183. It is open daily, beginning the last weekend in September through October 31. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday hours are 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.; times may vary during the week. For more information, including driving directions, call 706-265-1447 or 770-380-3632, or visit Brad's Web site at www.bradleypumpkinpatch.com.