

2022 Grown in Washington Bib Lettuce/Red Leaf Lettuce

Tucked away in downtown Sumner, behind a windmill and adjacent to a popular flower shop, you'll find an expanding family-run agriculture operation whose mission is to bring local, real food to people in Pierce County.

DeGoede Farms was established in 2016 by the DeGoede family. Inside their 6,000 square foot greenhouse, they grow three to four thousand heads of **bib lettuce** each week using sustainable hydroponic farming methods that allow for year-round food production.

When the family ventured into hydroponic farming, they had already established themselves as a respected local horticulture business specializing in flowers, producing roughly 9,000 hanging flower baskets and tens of thousands of starter annuals and perennials each year, all grown and sold on-site. The inspiration to diversify stemmed from a desire to do more for the community and the environment. "We want to help our local food system," says co-owner Ben DeGoede. "We want to keep it local - from production to consumption." His goal is to see even more of their product in local grocery stores, schools and even food banks.

When you first step into their greenhouse, which is kept at a comfortable 60-64 degrees Fahrenheit, you notice rows and rows of **bib** and **red leaf lettuce** at various stages of maturity resting on tables and bathed in violet light that promotes growth. Upon closer inspection, you recognize that the lettuce is not sitting in soil, but rather inside holes drilled into rows of gutters. This is a demonstration of a hydroponic farming method known as nutrient film technique (NFT). With this method, a very shallow stream of water containing all the dissolved nutrients required for plant growth flows through the gutters and past the bare roots of plants so they can absorb what they need to reach maturity - and your plate.

In the warm comfort of the greenhouse, plants are allowed to thrive with minimal human interaction and are only touched when transplanted from their starter home into the gutter and upon harvest. The controlled greenhouse environment also means that fewer pesticides are needed to keep the plants healthy.

Up next for DeGoede Farms is a relocation and expansion to a nearby and newly-constructed 40,000 foot greenhouse that will allow the family to produce four to five times more bib lettuce and add other leafy greens to their mix. "We believe the demand for local product supports expansion," Ben says, "and we're ready for it." At the new location, they'll also implement a new hydroponic farming method - the raft system. In this method, a raft floats on top of the water, and plants on the raft dangle their roots into the solution below.