# Grant Incentive Recipient: Bella Vita Farm

Amy Falcone grew up in Somerset, Ohio, on her family's farm, and for most of her life working as a nurse. It was only after a vacation in Utah that she was inspired to start her own farm, an aquaponics operation producing microgreens.

In 2017, Falcone and her family were on a back roads tour of Zion Canyons, when they were taken to a restaurant with amazingly fresh vegetables, fish and chicken. At the end of the meal, the chef came out and revealed that all the food they had eaten had been grown there.

"He had an aquaponics greenhouse out back which supplied all the food for their meals," said Falcone, recalling the trip. Once the vacation was over, Falcone returned home, where she kept driving by a farm that was for sale. Within two months of that vacation, Falcone had purchased the 103-acre farm located in Brookeville, Maryland and had named it Bella Vita Farm. The name "Bella Vita" means beautiful life in Italian, and it holds significance to Falcone because of her Sicilian husband, and the beautiful life they have made together.

Falcone's vision for the farm included establishing her own greenhouse aquaponics operation. To create her vision, she used several resources, including hiring consultants from Colorado and applying for a MARBIDCO incentive grant. Falcone first heard about MARBIDCO from her local University of Maryland extension office. She received a Maryland Value Added Producer Grant (Capital Assets Option) in 2019. Using these matching funds, she was able to invest in a solar system and acquire fish tanks for her aquaponics system.

"Our whole goal was to be local and sustainable because I don't want everything on my plate to be from 1,500 miles away," said Falcone about the operation. The farm has an aquaponics system, and axe throwing activities and has been the site of multiple weddings. The acres not used by Falcone for her aquaponics operation are conventionally farmed and managed by the neighboring farm. However, the greenhouse on the property is managed by Falcone and Farm Manager Jeff Dowling.

In the greenhouse, there are four 500-gallon fish tanks, each of which can hold approximately 110 or more koi fish. Koi fish are good at producing nutrients consistently, which is important for aquaponics operations. In the future, Falcone plans to incorporate tilapia into the aquaponics system, which then could also be sold. To compensate for the nutrients the fish do not produce, Falcone and Dowling add organic nutrients to the water. This water is then circulated to the plants, which include micro greens, and ten different varieties of lettuce and basil, among others. Each week, Falcone and Dowling plant between 800 and 1,000 plants.

The building houses automated fans to regulate the temperature, and shade cloth to decrease the sunlight entering the building. Screens on the side of the building are also in place to keep insects away from the plants.

As farm manager, Dowling monitors the water chemistry. Each day one person typically spends four hours managing the daily tasks of the greenhouse. Both Falcone and Dowling can supervise the aquaponics system from their phones. The only waste from the Bella Vita operation is water that evaporates, according to Falcone. And on harvest days, both Falcone and Dowling work to harvest the plants, prepare shipments and deliver them to local restaurants. Falcone also said that whatever the farm does not sell is donated to those in need.

To learn more about Bella Vita Farms, check out their website at www.bellavitafarm.com.