

# The People's Farm

Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

*Deep Spring Farm invites guests to experience the farm their way*

When Leela and Michael Robinson bought the land for their farm three years ago, they didn't just want to grow crops. They wanted to create a peaceful place, somewhere where people from the community could come and enjoy the land too.

From fishing to yoga classes to learning about agriculture, the options of activities are endless at Deep Spring Farm.

"It's like a people's farm," Leela said.

## Your Own Private Farm

Deep Spring Farm is a hidden oasis tucked off a back country road in Alachua. This organic farm is a place where you can have your own personalized farm experience.

"Anything's possible," Leela said. "We're open to whatever people want. If people want to host a family reunion

here, great, we'll work with that. If people want to have a picnic, if they want to go fishing with their children, they want to have a date night, all those things."

The 10-acre farm is full of opportunity. Its gem is the 1-acre wide, 35-foot deep, spring-fed pond. It's surrounded by plants and shady trees, and has a small deck for sitting and relaxing. They've even hosted a wedding there before. The pond is available for fishing and paddle boarding.

There's also a large canopy covering a wooden platform near the pond's waterfront. This is where Leela, a certified yoga instructor and licensed massage therapist, offers yoga sessions, massages and bodywork sessions. There is space for event setups, such as weddings and parties, and they have a commercial-style indoor kitchen where they'll be offering seasonal farm-to-table meals and refreshments. They also host events featuring food and live music that are open to the community in addition to offering the space for private rentals.

However, what they mainly offer is a chance for people to come out and experience what it's like to be surrounded by nature on



**RIGHT:** Deep Spring Farm owner Leela Robinson clips flowers from the farm's flower garden. Deep Spring offers u-pick flowers, where guests can come and choose their own arrangements.

**LEFT:** Some of the crops that the Robinsons have planted on Deep Spring Farm include blueberries, muscadine grapes, sweet potatoes, okra and peppers, along with flowers and herbs. Everything they grow on the farms is organic.

## MORE ABOUT DEEP SPRING

Deep Spring Farm is located midway between Gainesville and Lake City at 16419 W CR 1491, just 10 miles north of Alachua.

Prices for various activities are available online, and custom quotes for private events are also available.

For more information on Deep Spring Farm or to schedule a time to come out and visit, go to [www.deepspringfarm.com](http://www.deepspringfarm.com) or send an email [mail@deepspringfarm.com](mailto:mail@deepspringfarm.com).

farmland. Visitors can come to have a picnic, take a tour of the grounds, see the farm's abundance of crops, or just relax in nature.

"So many people would tell us, 'It's my dream to have a farm' or 'I'd love

to live in the country,'" Leela said. "Well, we don't all get to do that, but we can all know somebody who owns a farm and be a part of it. There's no reason anybody can't be a part of this."

However, while Leela and Michael always welcome visitors, they require people come by RSVP, by either texting or emailing them to let them know what it is they're most interested in doing at Deep Spring Farms.

"We're trying to create a place where people feel safe," Leela said. "Yes, we are open to the public, but it's by RSVP. That way we always know who's here, we know your name, we get to know whoever comes to the property so it's a relationship between the visitors and the farmers."

Something Deep Spring Farm offers during the year is u-pick blueberries, a popular activity in North Florida during the spring and early summer months. However, while most u-pick blueberry farms are open to the masses, Deep Spring Farm specifies their u-pick days and hours online, and asks that visitors email or text them telling them which day they would love to come out and pick. This is because Leela and Michael not only want to keep the farm a safe space, but also because they want to make sure that when visitors come to pick blueberries, there are plenty for them to take home.

"It's more of a one-to-one, person-to-person kind of thing," Michael



said. “I don’t know how to get the across very well, but we’re different. We try to be different in a good way.

### **Creating A Farm**

As soon as Leela and Michael bought the land to start their farm, they knew they wanted it to be open to the public.

“We started with the idea for u-pick,” Leela said. “We knew we wanted to create a place where people wanted to visit. That was my feeling. If we’re going to go through the effort of creating a place in the country where we want to be, we want to make it open.”

After falling in love with the natural springs in the area and the proximity to the beach, Leela and Michael moved to Alachua from Tennessee in 2014 and bought their 10-acre plot of land. However, the land they bought was nowhere near ready for farming, and it took a couple years of working full time to get it to the point where it was ready for crops.

“I guess you could say we reclaimed it,” Michael said.

“Reclaiming is a good word because it was just neglected,” Leela said. “When you start a farm, you buy some ground and think, ‘I’m going to start farming.’ Well, unless somebody was farming there already, maybe you can start farming. If it wasn’t a farm it’s going to take it a while to get ready. That’s been our major effort over the past couple years is just getting it ready to farm.

The overgrown land with an algae-covered pond has been transformed into the picturesque farm it is now. Deep Spring Farm just completed its

second season of u-pick blueberries, and Leela and Michael have been focusing on a few other crops that are important to them, like tomatoes, ginger and u-pick muscadine grapes. They’re also establishing peaches, thornless blackberries and persimmons.

“What our focus is on is plants that can be grown organically, reasonably easily,” Leela said. “We’re not focused on crops that are difficult.”

Besides blueberries, the other main crop Leela and Michael are focusing on is organic flowers. Their flower garden is abundant with beautiful flowers ranging from annuals like zinnias to native Florida wildflowers. Visitors can create their own bouquets out of whichever flowers are blooming.

Leela and Michael are planting wildflowers all over the property, focusing on native plants that are not only safe for wildlife but also eye appealing.

“We’re trying to find a balance between what’s good for the people and what’s good for wildlife, and there is a balance,” Leela said.

Michael also grows hydroponic lettuce in a greenhouse on the property, and he offers hydroponic workshops and consultations. You can often find Michael selling some of the Deep Spring Farm crops at the Alachua County 441 Farmers Market on Saturday mornings.

### **Welcoming Visitors**

Leela and Michael have tapped into the market of agritourism, which is agriculturally-based activities that bring visitors to a farm. They hope to create a relationship with the community to show people that they are true to their word about creating organic produce.

“I think it’s about developing trust,” Leela said. “We’re organic farmers and people need to be able to trust that we’re doing what we say that we do. We wouldn’t want anyone to go home and think, ‘I wonder if they really are organic or if they’re using chemicals to control weeds.’ Well, come to the farm and see that we’re out here pulling weeds and that there are no chemicals.”

The couple also welcomes volunteers, especially people who are interested in getting closer to nature and learning about how things grow.

“We have volunteers who come out just to be on the farm,” Michael said. “We had a welcome day where people came out and we planted a lot of flowers. We’ve had people come back and you can really feel how they feel a connection because they helped plant this crop and they can now see it in bloom.”



They hope that by opening the farm to the public, people will realize just how important organic farms are to the community.

“I think that people have to come to the farm and see how much work and how much effort it takes to create a farm for them to realize, ‘Wow that’s really valuable to have organic farms,’” Leela said. “Because if we don’t have organic farms, where do people get organic food? It’s a really valuable thing, but it also needs community support to make it happen.”

“Organic food is a movement and it’s gaining steam but it’s still a minority,” Michael added.

By creating a sustainable farm, Michael and Leela are getting what they need from their business while visitors are getting what they need: organic food, and, most importantly, a peaceful place.

“The experience in nature is the most important thing,” Leela said. “You can go to a state park, but how many places can you go where you can just be?”



**LEFT:** The focal point of Deep Spring Farm is a large, picturesque pond located in the front of the property. The pond takes up one acre of the property and is 35 feet deep. **ABOVE:** Deep Spring Farm owners Leela and Michael Robinson bought their land in 2014 and since then have turned it into an organic farm that welcomes visitors to enjoy and utilize the space. **RIGHT:** With their industrial kitchen on the property, the Robinsons will offer seasonal farm-to-table meals and refreshments.



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