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GILL POWER

Local entrepreneurs using greenhouses to raise tilapia

By Don Wilkins Messenger-Inquirer 9 hrs ago



When it comes to backyard greenhouses, vegetables, flowers and other plants are what most people grow in the controlled environment.

That's half true for Eric Thomas and his father, Rick.

In one of their two greenhouses, plants and vegetables are being grown and cared for by Rick Thomas.

But in the adjacent greenhouse, Eric Thomas has been raising commercial tilapia that he sells locally at Owensboro Regional Farmers' Market.

Eric Thomas said it was about 2016 that he and his father decided to pursue their passions together. They created Thomas Aquafarms on their west Daviess County farm.

"My dad was kicking around the idea of retiring," Eric Thomas said. "... So, he said, 'I want to grow some plants.' I said 'Well, if we're going to grow plants, let's grow fish and plants together.' "

Both greenhouses are equipped with an elaborate aquaponic system built by Eric Thomas.

The tilapia are kept in nine 1,200-gallon tanks. The tanks are separated by some that hold the stockfish that will be sold for consumption while others contain the parent fish used for breeding purposes.

A 300-foot-deep well provides the water that's recycled and filtered through 160-watt UV lights to kill any potential waterborne pathogens.

It also allows the fish water to be reused as a natural fertilizer for the plants and vegetables being grown next-door. Vegetables such as lettuce are being grown on floating beds that have a constant source of water.

Eric Thomas said he was drawn to the health benefits of raising his own commercial fish.

"There are no chemicals, no hormones, no antibiotics in the fish," he said. "That really appealed to us because we want to know what's going into our bodies."

Three years later, Rick Thomas has yet to retire as owner and operator of Unique Granite and Marble that caters to residential needs. He also has Blackbird Manufacturing, which is the commercial side of the stone business.

Around the time he thought about retiring, Rick Thomas said he saw an opportunity to expand his granite business, delaying his ability to be more involved with the Aquafarms venture.

"I do have some freedom to where I can get away quite often to help Eric with the fish, the plants and the system," Rick Thomas said. "I do enjoy it so it's not like it's a job."

Eric Thomas found his calling at an early age.

Along with Aquafarms, the 22-year-old entrepreneur owns Aquatic Resource Center -- a business that centers around koi ponds, water features and aquaponic systems.

"I'm a fish guy," Eric Thomas said. "I've been doing fish since I was 12 years old."

Thomas has combined his love of fish with a degree from Western Kentucky University's entrepreneurship program, which led him into building the aquatic businesses.

Currently, the Thomases are only raising Blue Nile tilapia but have been granted permits for rainbow trout, largemouth bass and saltwater shrimp that will be added in the future.

Locally, the Thomases have only been selling whole tilapia, which can weigh up to 2 pounds. And currently, they only have a permit that limits processing the fish without a commercial kitchen.

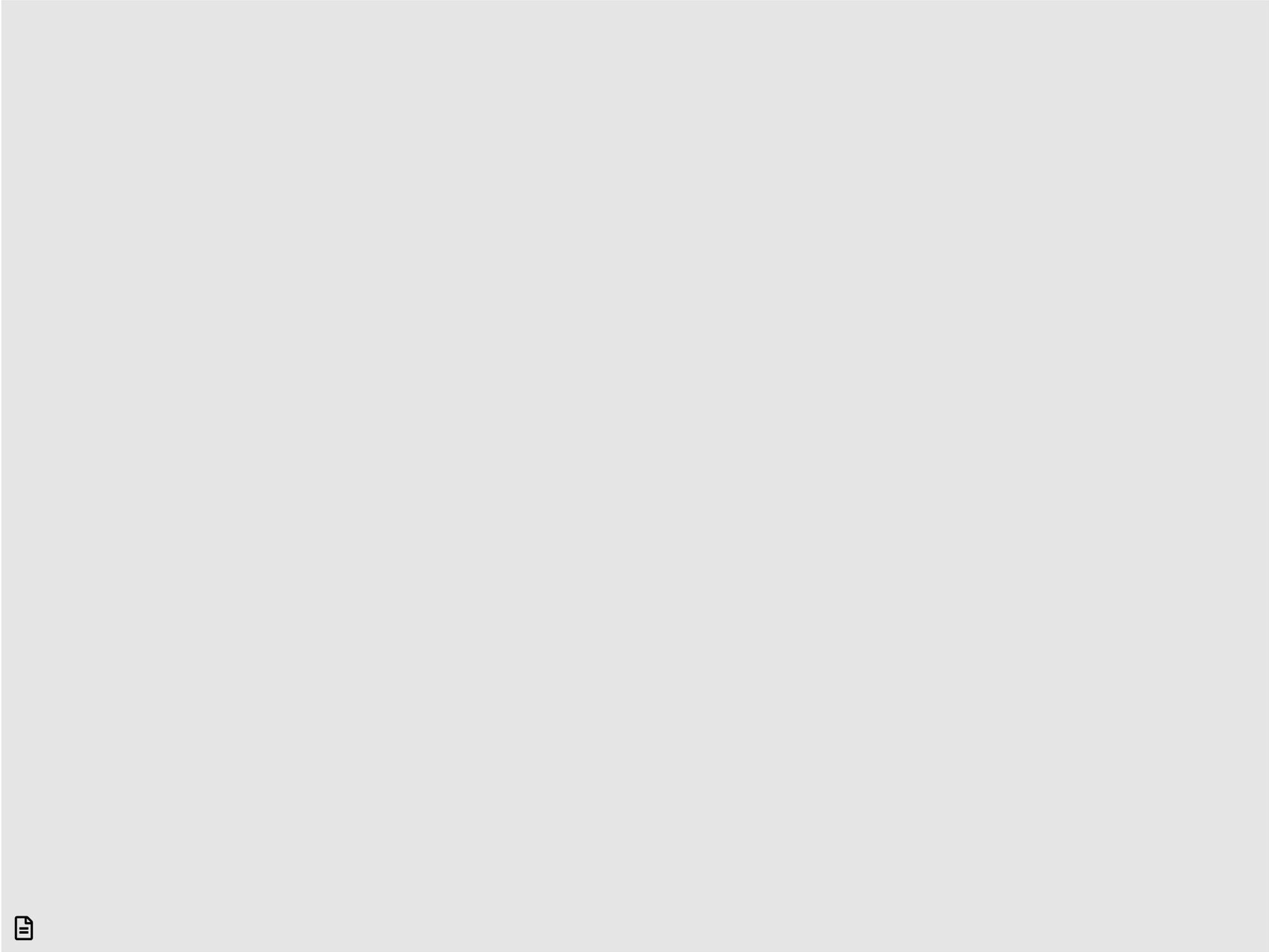
"We cannot cut them; we cannot clean them; we cannot fillet them; we cannot do anything to them right now," Eric Thomas said. "But we're working on the permits to be able to do that because I believe, when we do that, we'll open up another whole market, especially at the farmers market."

Rick Thomas, however, said he is looking forward to when he can spend more time with his plants.

"If his fish (business) keeps growing and growing, he'll squeeze me more over into a corner," Rick Thomas said. "But that will be OK as long as I have some place to keep growing things."

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