

June is berry busy at Bodendale Farm

BY SALLY BAIR
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As June draws near strawberry lovers await that first red berry with great anticipation. The time is almost here, and a few early ones have probably been consumed, but the fields full of red berries are yet to come.

Glenn P. and Brenda Book, 655 Strasburg Pike, Lancaster, are awaiting this season with special interest because it will mark their second season in the pick-your-own business. They are looking forward to this year because as Brenda puts it, "Experience taught us a lot. The opening will depend upon the weather, but it looks like a good year."

Bodendale Farms, the home of the Books and their three daughters, is also the home of a milking herd of 38 Registered Holsteins. A few years ago the family discussed the need for a cash crop. Tobacco had provided that crop in earlier years but they wanted something different.

Glenn states, "We didn't feel we had the acreage to go really big into dairying. Strawberries fit into our dairy program." The Books own about 40 acres and rent an additional 60 acres.

Strawberries, they reasoned, did not require as much work as tobacco, which is almost a year-round proposition, and they did not require a lot of additional equipment. So three years ago they used their tobacco planter to plant their first two acres of strawberries. They did some research by contacting area growers, and though they were hoping to find "the perfect plant," they quickly learned that everyone has his favorite variety.

This year they have four acres in production, and two acres with new plants. They have experimented with eight varieties, but this year planted just four. Their eight varieties included Red Glow, Midway, Raritan, Guardian, Sparkle, Early Glo, Darrow and Red Chief.

Another factor in their decision was the absence of any local strawberry pick-your-own businesses and their location. They said there are about 20 apartment houses within four miles, so Glenn adds, "We figured we'd have enough customers."

Brenda is in charge of the pick-your-own part of the business and Glenn takes care of the spray program. Immediate family and two teenaged neighbors assist during the season, and, occasionally, with the big task of hoeing.

Homestead Notes

Although things get pretty hectic during the pick-your-own season, Brenda points out that it lasts just three weeks. During the busy season, she says, "There's always something to be done. I only get the meals and get the wash done." And despite the abundance of those lovely red berries, she says, "I don't get a chance to put up as many as I like. In the very beginning I freeze some and make some jam."

The Books feel their pick-your-own business was successful last year. Glenn notes, "Generally the public is pretty good. We didn't have any bad experiences. We were lucky." Brenda adds, "You need a sense of humor."

For the pickers, the Books provide a tray, at no cost, which holds about ten pounds of berries. "We prefer they take the berries home in the tray," Brenda says, "It's just one customer service."

The trays, which are flat for the name imprint, are assembled by the Books three daughters, making it a true family operation. Their daughters are Lori 6, Susan 7, and Tracy 11. Tracy also pitches in at the cash register and with the telephone answering as necessary.

As the customers arrive, they can park in a meadow reserved for the purpose and then they are assigned places in the field. Sticks are used to mark the place where they finish picking. This year the Books feel their



Six-year-old Lori is an important part of the business at Bodendale Farm. Here she demonstrates her skill at assembling the trays which customers use to hold their luscious berries.

Strawberry season brings the Book family together literally as they conduct their pick-your-own strawberry business. Here Glenn and Brenda assemble trays as daughter Lori looks on.



organization will be better because they have two fields open and can alternate fields to allow the berries to ripen.

Brenda says, "We get all ages, from six up. We get a lot of retired people and they really know how to pick. In the evening we get a lot of men." She said they discourage very young children from being in the fields because of the damage they can do.

She added, "Some people don't know how to pick, but we'd rather have them ask questions than just pick without knowing what to look for. Sometime people come with berries with white tips, and we want satisfied customers so we prefer that they ask first."

One of their more amusing customers was a man who topped all his berries in the field before bringing them to be weighed so he wouldn't have to pay the extra weight for the tops. The Books lamented that the berries were crushed before they left the property.

While some customers pick just a quart, many pick in large quantities for freezing. Brenda points out that after ten pounds the price goes down. She said they also have many repeat customers during the course of the season.

They get some interesting requests, like the customers who would like to have the Books save a spot in the field which would be theirs for the season.

Last year Brenda recalls that they began the season when the children were still in school so Brenda waited on all the customers. "I did a lot of good walking and lost ten pounds," she recalls with a laugh.

They learned last year that their rows were too wide for easy picking, so this year the rows are narrower. Straw is put between the rows for comfort while picking.

The pick-your-own business is open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. six days a week. Some customers arrive at 7 a.m., but Brenda doesn't open the field until 8. Each customer is given a paper which states the rules for picking, and it clearly states that cows and equipment are off limits for visitors.

Glenn admits that his milk production fell during strawberry season last year although he does try to continue with his regular work as much as possible. He acknowledges that customers have been respectful of the heifers and do not try to enter their barn or pasture.

Brenda operates the weigh station and the cash register from their garage, and this year a phone will be installed to save a few steps when it rings and someone wants to



Brenda Book, Strasburg Pike, inspects her strawberry blossoms. At this point she feels the harvest will be a good one if the weather cooperates.

know if the picking is good. Brenda said they can regulate to some degree the number of customers by advising that they wait a day or two for optimum opportunity to pick.

Glenn noted that they try to discourage picking in the rain, but a few hardy folks are adamant and go barefooted through the fields.

Another problem, according to Brenda, is cutting off customers at the end of the season. She explained that some people want to pick even when the berries are past their prime, but the Books do not want unsatisfied customers and feel they must make a stopping date.

Although Brenda hails from the village of Willow Street, she is certainly a full-fledged farmer's wife and enjoys her contribution to the family farm operation. "I've learned a lot," she says.

Of course, as any good dairy farm wife, she likes to do canning and freezing of her own. Obviously when berries are ripe, there is no time for gardening. She says, "I get my garden in late and hopefully no vegetables come in during strawberry season."

Although there are no plans for expansion, the Books say they have considered planting sweet corn for their new-found customers.

The Books point out that there is an investment long before there is a return, but they feel the strawberry crop will provide a good cash crop program for them. Glenn says, "Brenda and the girls can handle it very well."

He also noted that when an acreage is finished he can plow it up and plant late corn after strawberry season. "We can make good use of the land," he states. They use "a little fertilizer and manure" in their strawberry fields. For the past two years they have mulched with straw, but this year they are going to experiment with seeding spring oats in the fields.

Brenda explained that although the rows are made for cultivation with a tractor, the weeds must still be hoed by hand. She said, "We attack the field and anybody who has spare time hoes. It's pretty clean now."

In addition to dairying and selling strawberries, the Books are active in their community. Glenn is general manager of the West Lampeter Community Fair. While it is obviously a big assignment, he says modestly, "I just

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Bodendale Farms

655 STRASBURG PK.



PICK YOUR OWN...

STRAWBERRIES

THE GLENN BOOK FAMILY

This attractive sign makes it easy for customers to find the Books' pick-your-own strawberry business.