

Raymond and Anna Charles have produced friendships at their stand This couple picked roadside marketing

BY SALLY BAIR
Staff Correspondent

For people who like garden fresh produce but who don't have the time, space or inclination to grow their own, roadside markets offer the perfect solution. There's also the bonus of a friendly greeting and a word of advice on the preparation, if requested.

H. Raymond and Anna Lois Charles, 3493 Marietta Pike, Lancaster, operate a small vegetable and flower stand out of a converted barn on their property, well-known among the local residents who are frequent customers.

Charles explained that the stand evolved slowly since they went into the business about twelve years ago. Originally, the Charleses sold sweet corn to a neighbor who had a buy and sell stand operation. When he closed his business, the Charleses decided to market the sweet corn themselves. From there, the line of vegetables expanded until today there is a "limited variety," including whatever is in season.

The emphasis is placed on pick-your-own vegetables, including hull peas, green beans, tomatoes and lima beans. About six years ago hull peas were offered as pick-your-own, and as Charles puts it, "We gradually worked into other things." When the hull peas are ready, they advertise in the newspaper. With the other vegetables, however, customers call for an appointment. "That makes less people coming at a time so we can enjoy it. When customers come for peas they often leave their name and number and we give them a picking choice," Charles explains.

There is no one typical customer for their pick-your-own produce. Charles says, "We seem to get a cross section. We have retired people who drive out from Lancaster. They are willing to come if they know they can get their vegetables fresh."

When the pickers arrive, they register at the stand and then are directed to the fields. But Charles notes, "There are some who don't quite know how, so I kind of watch and can offer suggestions."

A common sight at the Charles farm is Raymond driving through the fields with his small garden tractor and cart. He often carries loaded baskets back to the end of the rows for the pick-your-own customers.

Of course, there are questions about preserving the bounty, and Mrs. Charles says there are frequent questions about preparing items purchased at the stand. "I notice that among young people just starting to cook. I once had a customer who was ready to buy a recipe. They ask about all the squash." The Charleses grow golden and green zucchini, acorn, butternut, hubbard and pattypan squash.

Mrs. Charles notes, "Most of the people who pick by the basket know what they are doing, unless they are younger or have moved from the city." Charles adds, "They want to know how many quarts they'll get from what they picked."

Charles explains that he and his wife enjoy working together and both work at making the stand a success. He said, "I do the planting and cultivating and a lot of the picking. She gathers the flowers and dresses up the stands - I don't have the knack." He also pointed out that they don't have any outside help. "We don't hire any help. We only pick to sell over the stand what we have time for. We don't buy and sell because then we would feel a responsibility to keep the stand open. It's just a family thing."

Their son Dwayne, newly married, lives on an adjacent



Mrs. Charles waits on the customers as they come to look over the flowers and vegetables. She enjoys meeting them and has gotten to know many of them well over the years.

lot and helps with the lawn work and is there to pitch in if Mr. and Mrs. Charles go away for a day.

Mrs. Charles takes the primary responsibility of taking care of customers, something which she cheerfully enjoys. Charles says, "Her parents went to market and she inherited the interest. She enjoys selling." He, on the other hand, prefers to stay in the background. But when they're both in the house and a customer comes, he says, "I do my share."

Mrs. Charles is also responsible for two of the stand's specialties: flowers and blueberries. Three years after they were married, 35 years ago, the Charles planted 175 blueberry plants. The plants are old and productive, yielding delicious fruit. The blueberries are not offered on a pick-your-own basis, because as Charles points out, "A blueberry isn't ripe when it's blue. Picking blueberries is a real art and she (Anna Lois) has the secret." Mrs. Charles notes, "The demand for blueberries is very good."

A visit to the plants leads to a lesson in how to pick the luscious berries. After they turn blue the butt end gets flat and the blueberries get really plump. Mrs. Charles, explains, "They just keep on getting bigger." Of course, there's one big problem with waiting long enough for them to get big and plump - the birds know a good thing when they see it. To combat the bird problem, the Charleses have employed several methods over the years, but currently have an intermittent alarm which is to sound

like a bird in distress. Charles says it works for everything but robins who seem undaunted by it. As a backup system they also have two wires strung closely together above the plants. One is electrified and birds don't linger there.

Mrs. Charles said they once used netting, but it got very expensive and one winter a sleet storm took down the netting and its supports. Since then they've relied on the bird alarm. If the birds can be kept away Charles says they'll have blueberries until frost.

Picking blueberries from 175 plants is no small task, but Mrs. Charles said it is her goal to get completely around the plants once a week. This means picking a portion of them every morning. The only spray used on the plants is for beetles.

Charles points out, "We farm organically. We haven't used any acid fertilizer for years. But we don't advertise as such."

Cut flowers are also the province of Mrs. Charles. Charles remarks, "There is quite a demand for cut flowers at farmers' prices." Mrs. Charles specializes in gladiolias, zinnias and snapdragons. She also has some astors and this year will have cockscombs. She arranges the bouquets, usually with a dozen flowers in each container. She has also taken orders for church altars and has provided bouquets for wedding receptions. The whole community benefits from her green thumb, because the gardens surrounding her house are filled with a beautiful variety of flowers.

There are a few potted plants on the stand, taken from cuttings of her own flowers, and since her son married, his wife is supplying fresh homemade bread on weekends.

There is a lot of work involved and when the stand is open, the Charleses stay close by so they can hear the bell if there are customers. If they are both picking produce, the stand is open with a note for customers to help themselves and leave the money. "If no one is around they help themselves. We've never had a theft. We have good

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Fresh cut flowers are a speciality of the stand, and Mrs. Charles cuts and arranges a few bouquets daily and as demand requires.

Homestead Notes



An attractively arranged stand helps bring in customers. Mrs. Charles prepares the vegetables and decides what will be displayed.



Picking blueberries from 175 plants is a large job, which Mrs. Charles tackles every day. She says her goal is to get around them all once every week.