

Dwarf apple trees challenge Stamer

BY SALLY BAIR

Myles E. Stamer is an inventor, an innovator and a philosopher, though not necessarily in that order. A small fruit grower in an age when bigness often seems to be better, Stamer successfully operates a 34-acre apple orchard north of Bendersville at Aspers R1 in the heart of Adams County's fruit region.

Up until three years ago, Stamer owned just 23 acres of land. Stamer is proud of the fact that his is a family operation, with the exception of hiring some additional pickers during the height of the season, which for Stamer begins in August and concludes in November. His pickers are all local, either retirees or others who may have jobs which allow them a few hours of work at Stamer's. Saturdays are very busy days at Fruit Haven, but there is no work done on Sunday.

Stamer says, "We have good pickers, but we pick the majority of fresh apples ourselves." His wife Dot adds, "We guarantee no bruises on our fresh apples."

This year Stamer estimates that 25 percent of his crop will be sold as fresh apples to Sandoes Packing in Biglerville. He said, "Fresh apples are a lot more work and a lot more expense. They must be a certain color and a certain ripeness." The remainder of his crop will be factory apples which he markets through Knouse foods. The drops and other damaged apples will become cider.

Stamer is quick to point out that he has no ambitions to become anything but a small fruit grower. He said, "I always felt I wasn't going to take anything with me. All I want is a decent living for myself. If you raise a family and train them what more do you want?"

He pointed out that his enterprise has always been a family one, with the children working alongside. "In a large orchard the children would be lost. Here they do everything we do. Our children know how to work."

Two of the Stamer children have moved into professions of their own. Arla, 24, is a nurse and Laura, 23, is a medical assistant and married. Neil, 19, helps fulltime in the orchards. Brenda, 21, is married but lives close by and also works in the orchards. Joyce, 17, is a senior in High School. Stamer said, "They all picked in the evenings after school."

Arla was selected Adams County's Apple Blossom Queen in 1974 and went on to win the Pennsylvania Apple Queen title in 1975. Brenda was selected as Pennsylvania's Cherry Queen in 1977. Stamer says that she's one of his best pickers - on a recent Saturday she picked 6 bins, holding 25 bushels each, of apples.

Stamer's current delight lies in his dwarf apple trees which are trellised to wires. Eight years ago, Stamer decided to begin planting dwarf trees because, as he puts it, "I felt it would be a challenge. The challenge had gone out of growing regular apples and I have to live on a challenge. I thought there had to be a better way to grow apples and I had to see if it could be done."

Well, it can be done, and quite successfully, if Stamer's orchards are any example. Since it takes three years for dwarf trees to come into production, he is already harvesting the benefits of the dwarf trees in many ways.

Stamer began by taking out the standard trees and semi-dwarfs he had planted in the 1950's as their production started to go down and training and pruning them became more difficult. Stamer pointed out that it takes a standard tree from seven to ten years to go into full production and most fruit growers will use the same set of trees throughout their lifetime.

One of the most obvious advantages of the dwarf tree is ease of harvest. Stamer says, "Anybody can help." In fact, he feels that people who pick apples will one day dictate what kind of trees are planted.

Indeed, picking apples from a dwarf tree couldn't be easier. Seven feet tall is the maximum height, and trees are trained to trellises, with the limbs fastened in place with plastic ties. "Each tree looks like a fan," Dot points out, and all the fruit is within easy picking range.

But Stamer is always looking for a better way of doing things, and now that his dwarf trees are coming into

production, he has invented a "picking aide" which allows a driver to sit close to the ground on a slow moving vehicle and pick the low apples comfortably. Other pickers can follow the rig and nick the remaining apples, all of which are within an arm's reach.

For his un-named invention, Stamer put a nine horsepower engine (out of his pruning rig "which had worn out twice") onto a truck bed, placed a low seat and steering wheel on one side. He positioned one bin for putting apples into and arranged to have three bins carried on the top of the vehicle. When the low bin is full, it is dropped off and another bin is lowered into place. This

Homestead Notes

arrangement keeps the machine moving and the pickers busy.

The rig moves at a snail's pace, so Dot and other pickers can keep up to it as it moves closely along the row of trees. The driver, as his bucket is filled, simply sets it on the ground and one of the pickers who is walking empties it into the bin. There is a place for several picking buckets, so when one is full the driver reaches for another without moving. The whole operation is a smooth one, and gives everybody a comfortable position for picking. Dot pointed out that she never stoops. There is an extra bag attached to the bin for drops or damaged apples, but on the trellised trees, they are amazingly scarce.

There are differences in working with dwarf trees and Stamer credits Dr. Loren Tukey of Penn State with giving him many of the answers he needed to go into dwarf production. "Everything I learned about dwarfs I learned from him," Stamer acknowledges. Tukey does research on dwarf trees at Penn State along with his teaching duties. Stamer also spends about two hours daily reading periodicals and other publications.

Noting that dwarf trees are "strictly European in concept," Stamer said, "I think its going to take time before they catch on. Most fruit growers want to be big. Dwarf trees are so much more concentrated and per acre there is more work. One person can handle 16 acres of dwarf trees," Stamer the philosopher says, "Trees are like people. They don't grow the same. Some are short. Some are tall."

Pruning on a dwarf tree begins in June, and Stamer says he just completed his 16 acres. "You want a small tree and pruning in summer will give a dwarf effect." As they work on the trees throughout the summer, going through the rows at least twice, they also take off poor quality apples. Stamer said, "You get almost 100 percent quality apples on dwarf trees."

Stamer pointed out that the cost of putting in dwarf trees is much higher per acre than in standard trees. "There are fixed costs that go into raising dwarf trees. You plant five times the number of trees per acre and you need posts and wire. But they also get into production years earlier. For me as a small grower I wish I didn't have anything that isn't on wire."

In a normal year, Stamer expects to get about 800 bushels per acre on his dwarf trees. The total harvest is about the same as with standard trees because of the close concentration of trees.

In training the trees, Stamer said one limb is allowed to grow per wire, and the ends are never nipped. He added,

"You never let a branch go straight up." You grow it, beat it and cut it off. Only the main limbs remain permanent. The limbs are trained to the wire with tomato staples and plastic ties.

"We put a guard on every tree we plant," Stamer said, adding that deer and rabbits are a constant problem. "We've tried every crazy thing that's ever been suggested. A lot of things work for a short period."

Stamer buys root stock "wherever it is available. You have to know what you want to plant two years ahead. Most of ours is bought locally."

As is the case almost everywhere in this part of the state, the weather has played havoc with fruit. Stamer said, "The weather has been so dry there will be quite a few drops we won't be able to pick at all. They are all dried up. It has been too dry and the apples are dropping. The stems are drying on the tree."

This year the total crop will be small because apples are about 30 percent smaller than usual. "This will cut way back on the harvest," Stamer notes. "In this area everybody is the same."

Stamer said he doesn't think apples will be much more expensive to the consumer because the estimate for a total harvest is about the same as last year. Nevertheless, Dot points out that estimates on production levels were reported before the prolonged dry spell was underway.

In the area where Stamer's Fruit Haven is located, there had been less than two inches of rainfall from May 29 to the second week of September. There were only light sprinkles during those 111 days. Stamer said the last time rain was so scarce in that part of Adams County was in 1966. But he said realistically, "This is one business you can't get in and out." He also feels his dwarf trees came through the drought better than his standards.

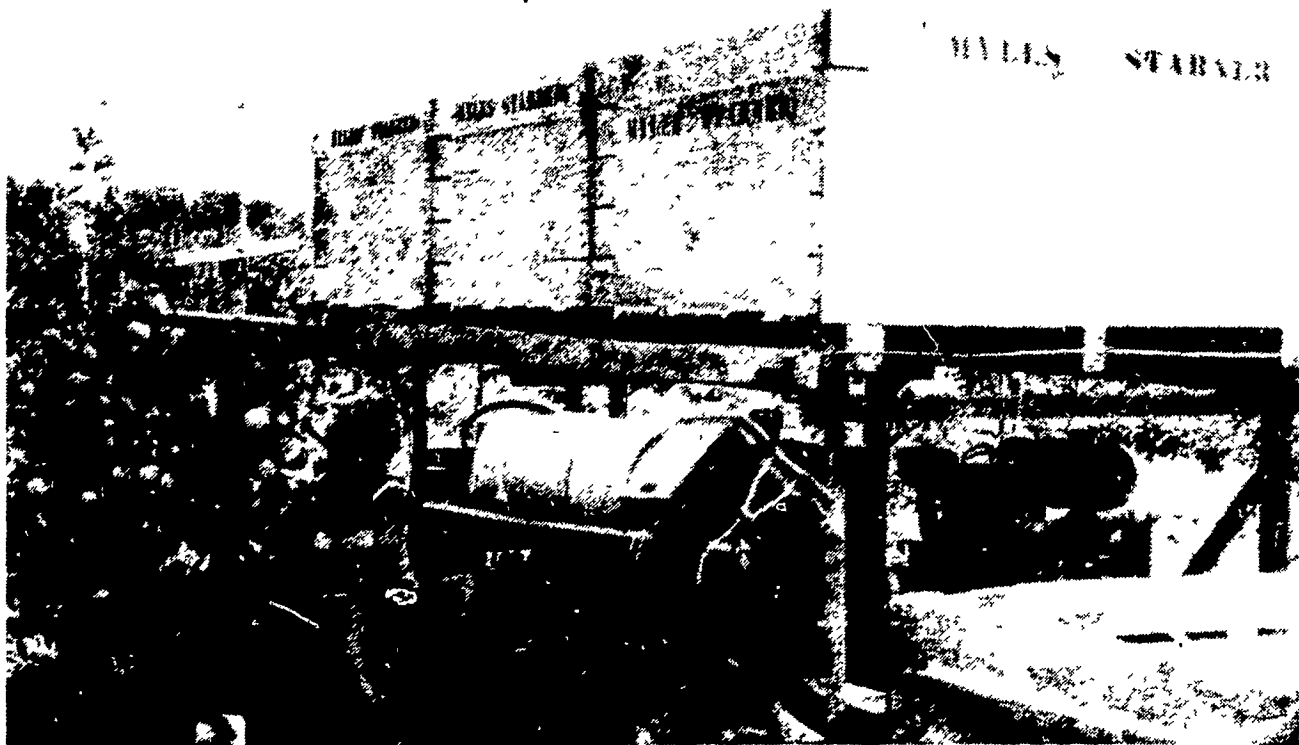
(Turn to Page C7)



Stamer stands by one of the dwarf apple trees. It is easy to see the fan-like appearance of the trained trees, which are pruned and trained to wires. The small tree is easy to harvest and allows many more trees per acre than standard trees.



A view from the front end of the picking aide. The driver is actually seated with his back to the direction the aide is moving, but it's extremely slow movement still allows easy steering as needed. Brenda is picking from the lower portion of the tree and Dot is following behind the machine picking the remainder of the apples, all of which are within arm's reach.



Stamer's daughter Brenda steers the "dwarf apple picking aide" into position very close to the row of trees. Since the trees are trained to wires,

the machine can be close enough for easy picking for the driver, who merely picks the low apples within reach.