

Trellised trees

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liked it so well that he chose to make fruit growing his career. "I learned a lot by trial and error," he said, "but I have not regrets."

Today, Rinker Orchards has an annual production potential of 125,000 bushels of apples, a majority of which are sold for processing.

The orchard also has a pick-your-own marketing program. "We move only a small percentage of our apples through pick-your-own, but it's a good public relations tool," Dudley said.

Many times the pick-your-own customers leave Rinker Orchards with more than just apples. "We try to educate the people that it's taste and not eye appeal they should be buying," Dudley said. "I think they're starting to realize there's more to an apple than its looks."

Apple varieties offered for picking include Ida Red, Golden Delicious, Grimes, Red Delicious and Stayman. Other varieties grown are York, Nittany, Rambos and Greenings.

"People are often surprised at the costs and time involved to bring a block of trees into

production," Dudley said. "The first five years, we're concerned with raising trees, not apples. Each tree has to develop a good root system and a good top."

To help with pruning, spraying and cultivating around the trees, Dudley has two full-time employees. During the off-season months from May through September, he uses an innovative four-day work week. "I've found it works well for us," he explained. "By working four 10-hour days each week, the men can take Friday off and enjoy a long weekend."

Dudley, who attends business classes at Lord Fairfax Community College, has also seen the advantages of allowing his apple pickers some free time. "I usually hire about 40 pickers each season," he said. "We used to work seven days a week, but near the middle of the season you could see picking averages dropping."

Now the pickers work only five days a week during the September-November season.

In addition to apples, the Rinkers raise about five acres of Damson plums. "They used to be good

money-makers for us, but our market went bankrupt," Dudley said. "We haven't been able to crack another market, so a lot fall on the ground now."

The damson, a very tart plum, is used mainly in making jams and jellies. "They also make a decent wine, but the wine market only

buys about five of the 30 tons we grow each year," he said. "Depending on the 1984 market, I may push out the plums and plant apple trees."

A computer will no doubt have a hand in that decision when the time

comes. The Rinkers use their home computer to keep detailed cost and production records on the orchard. "Mother still keeps a set of books by hand," Dudley laughed. "She doesn't trust electronics yet, but I think I'm swaying her over."



Unusual trellised apple trees, left, have been successful at Rinker Orchards.



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