

Burgeoning Berry Business Blossoms With 'Berry' Tasty Bounty

BY SALLY BAIR

Lancaster Co. Correspondent
MANHEIM — June means strawberries, and for many Lancaster County residents strawberries mean a trip to Myers Pick Your Own Strawberry farm on Auction Road, near Landisville.

For 10 years, the Myers family has been offering delicious strawberries for customers who like to pick their own produce. The fields are free from weeds, the berries are plentiful, and the welcome is gracious.

Gloria Myers operates the business, which includes one and two-thirds acres of strawberries, with her husband Phil and 14-year-old daughter Janice. It is Gloria, however, who is usually on hand to greet customers, direct them to the proper location and collect the money.

A few years ago the business invested in a used golfing cart, and now the "Berrymobile" is used to transport customers and berries from the shaded wagon which serves as "headquarters" to the fields. If customers pick more berries than they can easily carry, the "Berrymobile" is always available for transporting berries.

Gloria recalls that her family decided to enter the business when "another farmer went out of it," leaving a void in the strawberry business in the Landisville area. She said, "We rented the land from my father, and thought we might

as well do something."

At the time they also had a Vietnamese girl living with them who liked strawberries, and she suggested that growing strawberries might be a good idea. Gloria says, "We decided to give it a try based on those two factors."

Eventually they acquired the 30 acres of their own, and have farmers planting most of the land. However, it gives them plenty of space for switching fields for the strawberry crop.

The strawberry picking season is relatively brief, usually lasting just over four weeks. The length of the season is very dependent on the weather, and Gloria recalls that last year, it was an extremely short season due to dry weather.

Despite the fact that work is very intense during those four weeks, that is not the only time required for hard work in the strawberry fields. Gloria notes, "It is a lot of work in the summer. We weed three or four times in the summer and fall, up until October." She notes that she also weeds once or twice in the spring before customers even step foot in the fields. The hard work pays off, because several customers commented that they enjoyed picking in the weed-free environment, with the straw between the rows.

The berry patch is covered with straw in the winter, "very thickly," usually by the first of

December. Since they like to wait until the ground is frozen, the straw did not go on until January this past winter. It is a job her husband Phil does, and she notes, "It is a dirty job." They purchase the straw or grow it themselves, and rent a straw mulcher to help with the distribution. "It takes two to three people about five hours to do it," Gloria says.

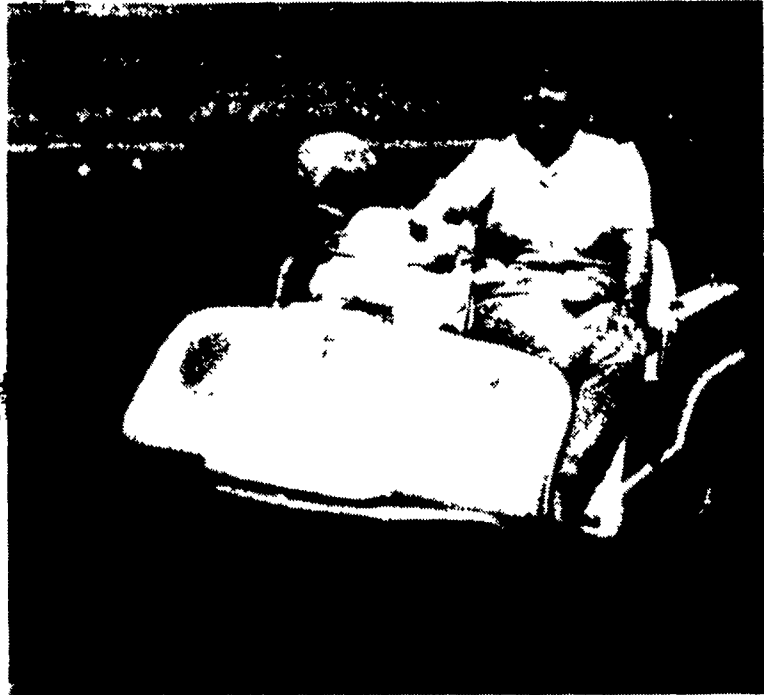
In the spring the berries grow up through the straw, but Gloria notes, "Before I weed in the spring I rake the straw off."

They also fertilize twice a year, and they plant new fields every other year, getting their plants from Salisbury, Md. When it is planting time, they borrow a tobacco planter, and spend six hours putting the 10,000 plants in the ground.

Gloria says, "We worry about frost in early May. Sometimes we get out fans to blow the air over them. This year we were very fortunate."

She said when there is a potential for frost, they take turns checking the temperature, beginning at 2 a.m. "When it is 34 to 45 degrees at the kitchen window, we need to do something. It is a pain."

Moisture is another concern, and Gloria says that sometimes the berries suffer from lack of moisture and they are not aware of it. They irrigated once this year, from the nearby Little Chickies Creek. She noted that if irrigation



Gloria Myers uses this "Berrymobile" to transport people and berries around her pick-your-own fields in Landisville. After 10 years of business, she still enjoys the interaction with customers during strawberry season.

is done during the blossom stage, it "puts some size on them."

The Myers have mostly Early Glow strawberries with just a few rows of All Star. Gloria explains, "Early Glow are the sweetest, and are a good freezing berry. I like the flavor the best. All Star are bigger, but they are not quite as sweet."

She said they experimented with many varieties before settling on Early Glow.

Her customers come from all over the area, and many of them are repeat. However, to insure a steady stream of customers, she advertises with a classified ad

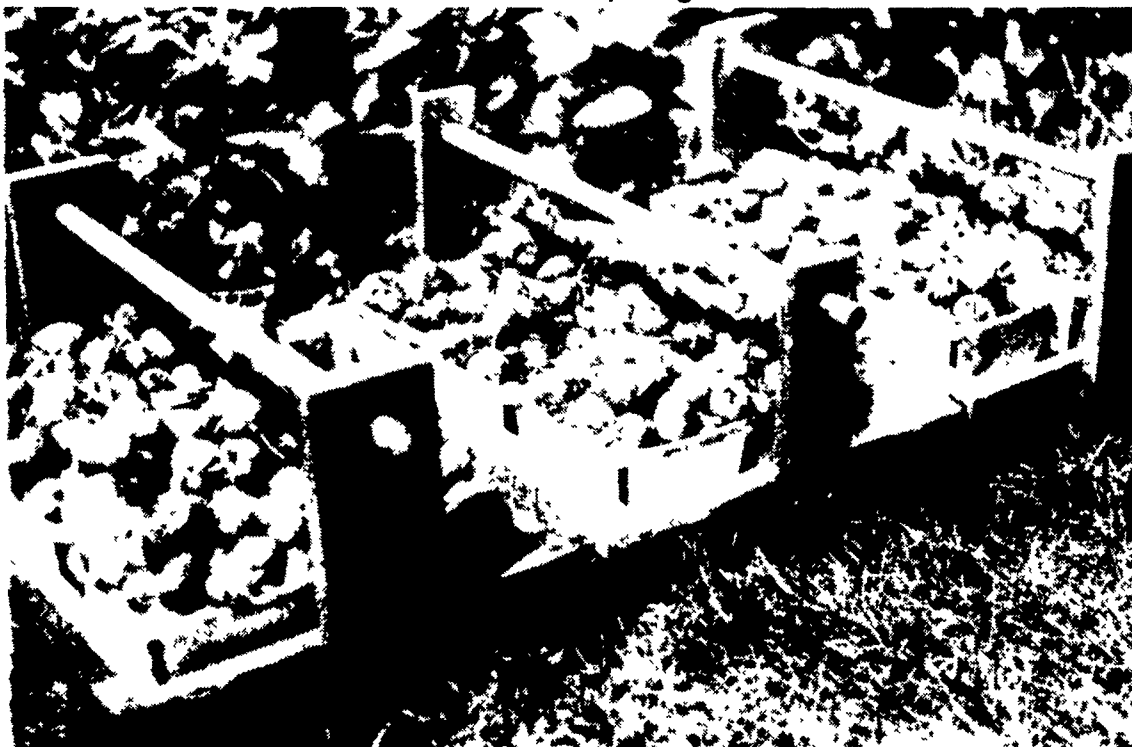
under "food" throughout the season. She also puts ads in the local weekly merchandiser, and occasionally puts a display ad in the daily paper to catch people's attention.

She has had visitors from State College, mostly Penn State University personnel who visit the Penn State Research Farm at Landisville just across the road. Many people stop on their way to the weekly Manheim Auto Auction, and take berries to their homes in Maryland and the Washington area.

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Marilyn Hasler, Landisville, is picking for her family with the help of Stacy Georgelis (center) and her daughter, Anthea. Marilyn says she comes back year after year because of the nice quality of the berries and the ease of picking.



Here are just a few of the boxes and boxes of strawberries which are picked from Myers' fields during the four-week harvest. On one record day this year, there were 1,336 quarts picked by hungry, appreciative customers.



Landisville resident John Ruhl shows off some of the strawberries he picked at the Myers' farm. He visits many times throughout the season and he has a tendency to pick large amounts because the berries are plentiful and delicious.

Homestead Notes