

Pick Your Own Produce

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NEW PARIS (Bedford Co.) —

They come by the carload, ages infants to octogenarians, for a day's outing of picking strawberries in the country.

They arrive at the 30-acre Cuppett farm located on a hillside which overlooks picturesque Bedford County farmland. Strawberries are ripe and rows of growing plants whet the appetite for more picking as the summer progresses.

A "pick-your-own produce," idea originated with fourth generation Cecil Cuppett when he found his dad, Charles, now deceased, struggling with cabbage worms about 20 years ago.

A research biologist, Cecil offered to help combat the problems of raising produce, found the answers and helped with the planting.

"We still use all the antique farm equipment the farm has used for generations," Cecil says. "We added a sprayer, bush hog, and a few other pieces of modern equipment, but basically we are planting the way it has always been done."

Cuppets' season begins with six acres of strawberries to which 7,000 new plants are added each year. "This hasn't been the best of strawberry seasons," Cecil admits. "Spring was a little too cool, and there was too much rain when June arrived. Hot, humid weather deterred some pickers and the weeds have been a constant battle.

"But, overall we'll come out OK. It could be worse."

Other produce grown on the Cuppett farm includes raspberries, potatoes, cabbage, broccoli, on-

ions, peas, squash, pumpkins, gourds, sweet corn, lima beans, yellow and wax green beans, cucumbers, watermelon, cantaloupe, and this year, a row of peanuts.

"I've found that we have a sand bank here very similar to the ground in Georgia," Cecil says. "The peanuts are an experiment and I'm anxious to see how they do."

The strawberries, peas, beans, cucumbers, sweet corn, and tomatoes are all open to picking by outsiders. Other produce is sold at a small market near the farm. Cecil's wife, Sandy, also oversees a craft shop in conjunction with the produce. This year, the Cuppets added kites to their business.

Living on a hillside, free of power lines, kite flying was a natural for this family which includes three daughters, one in college, and two in elementary school. "So, we added a line of kites to our shop and have had good response," says Cecil.

The Cuppett family farm was first owned by William Washington Cuppett who passed it on to John. He was the father of six sons, three of which got into the huckstering business traveling over the mountain to Johnstown with their produce on a weekly basis.

One of these brothers was Charles, Cecil's father, who started the present business.

"It used to be the freezers and canners who came to pick our produce," says Cecil. "Over the years, this has evolved to become more of a summer outing. Most of our pickers now just want the taste of fresh grown fruits or vegetables. They want to make one pie like mom used to make, or a raspberry cobbler, or strawberry shortcake, or know what corn tastes like if it is picked and cooked an hour or two later.

"Consequently, we now have more pickers but each takes home less."

Marketing is done by newspaper ads in both the local area and surrounding towns such as Cumberland, Somerset, and Johnstown. "Word of mouth is probably our very best advertisement," he says.

One Monday morning, Cecil counted 130 cars in the parking lot, all with two or three pickers. "An average is 100 to 200 people per day," he says.

They are a variety of people like Eileen Senkey of Windber who has baby daughter, Regina, in a baby carrier. Regina, wearing a



Katle and Kimberly Cuppett pick berries for their mother.



Mark and Tara Wilkerson of Cincinnati, Ohio, join their cousin, Alena Fo'tin of New Paris, in picking berries.



Eileen Senkey and baby Regina pick berries.

strawberry print bonnet, sleeps peacefully as mom picks. Two older sisters have their own baskets. "It sounded like a fun thing to do," says Eileen. "And, when we go home, we'll clean them and have a dish of strawberries and ice cream."

Elizabeth Wilkerson of Cincinnati, Ohio, brings her two children to spend several weeks of vacation each year with her parents in New Paris. "We time our vacation

around strawberry and raspberry season," she says. "Then, we come back for beans and corn. It's just something we look forward to each year."

On one recent evening, Cecil and Sandy met a group of teenagers picking strawberries for an evening snack. Also on the hillside that evening, were a group of senior citizens aged 78 to 89, all picking happily together. "They picked for hours," Sandy remembers.

A successful produce farm doesn't happen by accident. "You have to know when to put what in the ground and do it on that exact day," Cecil, a research chemist at a nearby hospital, explains. "Fortunately, I have a job where I can take my vacation when I see I'm going to have that kind of a day.

"Other times, I have to start early in the morning before going to

the hospital, or work late into the night. I do have to burn the candle at both ends."

Cecil is assisted by Donnie Miller, a neighbor who grew up on a farm and by his elementary school teacher wife. It's his daughter, Kimberly, a first grader, who seems to have the most fifth-generation interest in farming.

Over the past five years, government regulations have not made his job easier. "It's the paper work that can bog you down," Cecil says. "Although I have always kept good records, as any farmer should, which helps to ease the problem." Most of the regulations are aimed at those who work in the fields and, as a chemist, they aren't telling Cecil anything he didn't already know.

The Cuppett farm is located just off Route 96.



Donnie Miller Jr., (right) works the cash stand accepting payment from a customer.

HOMESTEAD NOTES