



Overseeing the J & S Orchard roadside stand are Stella Richards and Dutchess. At this time of year, the Richards sell several varieties of apples from their orchard in addition to pumpkins and some of Stella's homemade jams and jellies.

## Apples Galore At J & S Orchard



Stella serves Apple Streusel Coffee Cake, which appears as the featured recipe on this week's Home on the Range page B6.

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PRICETOWN (Berks Co.) — Three acres with 500 apple trees might not sound like much compared to some orchards. But what J & S Fruit Farm lacks in size, it makes up in quality.

Elsewhere, it would be difficult to find as many baskets of blemish-free apples as those sold at the roadside stand located along the winding Pricetown Road.

Jim and Stella Richards operate the orchard begun by Jim's parents in the 1950s. Peaches, nectarines, and black and red raspberries are also harvested on the farm.

From the beginning, it has been a do-it-yourself operation. Jim's parents lived in a shed on the 20-acre property while they built their house. For many years, the shed was used for hay and equipment storage. Since then, the shed has been added to and revamped to accommodate the apple business. The changes were made not by professionals but by the Richards themselves.

At almost every turn in the warehouse, words describing the operation is sprinkled with phrases such as "Jim devised this" or "we built this walk-in cooler ourselves."

The operation is proof that one doesn't need to invest in expensive equipment to run a successful business. The Richards do not wax the apples, but the apples are put through a brushing machine that gives them a glossy shine. The same machine is also used to defuzz peaches during the peach season.

While the Richards' setup is not as mechanized as many other orchards, it's been an opportunity to develop creative improvisations instead of investing in expensive machinery.

A prime example of this improvisation is seen as Stella sorts apples that run along the conveyor belt. She deftly rolls the seconds down a chute, which in previous years was the children's sliding board.

Much of the challenges that the Richards deal with is not notice-

able to onlookers.

"I've always been a private person who likes my space," Stella said.

In the beginning, meeting people who stopped to buy at the roadside stand was a big enough intrusion on her privacy. But, demanding much more fortitude was the need to market the apples to retailers.

"Growers need to develop their own markets," Stella said of coming to terms with accepting what she considered an unpleasant aspect of the orchard business.

"When the children were small, I packed them up with baskets of apples and we hit all the grocery stores in the Reading area. I remember the children hanging out the car windows when I returned and being disappointed if a store did not buy any," Stella said.

Few small grocery stores remain. The Richards are pleased to have established some markets with the larger stores so that intensive marketing is no longer required.

Jim has always had an off-farm job in addition to farming. About 15 years ago, the Richards stopped raising steers, turkeys, pigs and crops to concentrate on the apple business.

It's a full-time job for Stella, which doesn't end with the apple harvest. The Richards have apples to sell until the end of December, but that doesn't mean work in the orchard ceases. In January, she is out in the snow and cold, pruning the trees. The average tree lasts about 25 years, after that, the apples start to deteriorate, she said.

Growers must wait four to five years for young trees to bear fruit and eight to nine years to become profitable.

In June and July, Stella works at thinning the crop by hand picking off clumps of apples.

"If too many apples are left on a tree, the fruit is smaller and spray doesn't reach all the apples," Stella said of the need to thin the crop.

The crop is sprayed periodically to prevent mite problems and other diseases by insects. Scab is spread from mold spores present on leaves on the ground. Fruit can develop bruises, blemishes and other defects from poor growth or rough handling.

Red and Gold Delicious are the biggest apple varieties for the Richards because many people still think Red Delicious apples are the best. Other varieties include Jonathan, Jonagolds, Winesap, Old Stayman, MacIntosh, Granny Smith, and Arkansas Blacks.

Apple trees require pollination. Previously, the Richards had a beekeeper bring in bees during the

blossoming season, but now they have four hives set up on the property.

"Having our own bees results in a much better crop. And it's been a real education," Stella said.

Now, the couple need to deal with the mite problems that attack bee hives, which is a frustrating concern for beekeepers. Dandelion and pussy willow blossoms compete for the bees' attraction to apple blossoms.

In extracting honey, the couple have ended up with bee stings but have learned to take it all in stride.

Recently, Stella has become intrigued with making beeswax candles and ornaments. She uses candy molds to form the melted wax.

Stella is a board member of the Penn State Cooperative Extension of Berks County and also on its Family Living Committee for the past six years. She is also treasurer of the women's group at her church.

Jim is purchasing agent for a heating and plumbing company. He is also the pump authority for Reading. Every February, he teaches pump school at the vo-tech center.

This year, the Richards took some time off to participate in a Farm and Ranch Tour in Oregon. They were fascinated with the different types of farming done in Oregon.

The Richards have three adult daughters and three grandchildren. Because two of the grandchildren live in Las Vegas, they visit their grandparents for one month during the summer.



The Richards are grateful for the advice the county agent for Penn State Extension gave them to operate a successful orchard. Because Stella believes in the extension services, she has been an extension board member for about six years.

# HOMESTEAD NOTES