

# 'Pumpkin Town'

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ries. The Masons increased strawberry and melon production and constructed bigger farm stands.

All along, the farm market continued to advertise its existence. "You have to have your name in the public all the time, so they know who you are," said Mason.

Additional changes were made, including the addition of a greenhouse. People still love to visit a greenhouse, Mason noted. The Masons added an ice cream stand at the market and other items.

Mason soon realized he wasn't in the business of selling produce, but entertainment. They began to host school groups, including kindergarten classes. Now they host about 5,000-6,000 school kids a year.

Eventually, the permanent farm market was constructed about eight years ago on Peninsula Drive, about six miles from downtown Erie, near a previous location once leased. The other smaller market is about 14 miles from the center of Erie.

The Masons manage about 100 acres of grapes, including 50-80 acres of custom-pick grapes. They purchase produce, when possible, from other farms.

Mason spoke about some pitfalls in managing a permanent farm market site.

First, he said, don't build a market in the middle of summer, at the height of the season when you are already too busy, he noted. Don't use

a bare cement floor. "Cover it with a nice industrial tile," he said, which doesn't create dust and can be easily cleaned.

And work closely with other enterprises in the area to promote food and farming. Mason Farms works closely with the McDonald's Restaurant next door and hosts Easter egg hunts and other events.

"Display flowers everywhere in the spring," Mason said. Display plenty of hanging baskets. Get involved in landscaping displays at various home shows to display farm market name. Host various farm market commodity festivals, including strawberry and pumpkin events. Hosts special events and contests. Mason even conducts a watermelon seed-spitting contest. Educate and entertain the young, he noted. They will be with you the rest of their lives.

During October's Pumpkin Town USA celebration, not only are there dressed-up pumpkins, but the farm market hosts a petting zoo, climbing wall, concession stand with lots of apple cider sipper cups, and lots of other entertainment for the family.

At Christmastime, the farm market sells wreaths and Christmas trees. "We display our trees on pegs, with more than 300 trees standing all at one time," Mason said.

The farm sells Fraser firs as high as 16 feet for \$160 a piece. The farm pays about \$80-\$100 a piece for the large



Mason Farms has a variety of ways to dress pumpkins, adopting ideas from films, cartoons, fairy tales, and other sources.

trees.

As an added benefit, Mason Farms is involved in many public service announcements to promote caring for children, improved nutrition at home, spring planting, and hints on year-long planting. The announcements include tips on soil tests, proper planting techniques, and flower gardening information. "Allow employees to do what they do best," he said.

Mason said, "You have to think like a businessman rather than a farmer."

#### Startup Markets

"We're not in the business of entertainment farming, not us," said Dale Riggs of Stone Wall Hill Farm, LLC, Stephentown, N.Y.

Riggs, who operates a small farm market with her husband Don Miles, spoke

about her startup experiences at the Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention in Hershey.

At The Berry Patch of Stone Wall Hill Farm, Riggs put together a distinct mission statement. That statement clearly defines the market's purpose: to provide quality products for health living for the community. "Candy canes, fudge — they are not part of our value system," she said.

"If it's not grown locally, you won't find it here," she said.

Riggs, who also operates a consulting business, D. Riggs Consulting, specializes in production and management issues for berry and vegetable producers. She served as an area vegetable specialist for Cornell for more than nine years.

Riggs purchased an existing farm with a small farm market stand in 1995. The 91-acre farm, located 33 miles east of Albany, N.Y., includes about 18-20 acres of tillable acreage. The good gravelly loam soil was ideal for strawberries and other crops, with some additional changes.

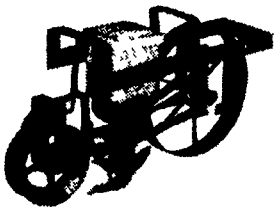
"Don't even think about (producing vegetables) without irrigation," she said. The Riggs use a one-third acre farm pond about 11 feet deep for irrigation.

Riggs felt confident about growing and marketing strawberries, including a small pick-your-own, because it was her speciality for 24-25 years. But before she began the farm business, she conducted a customer survey to ensure their plans were on

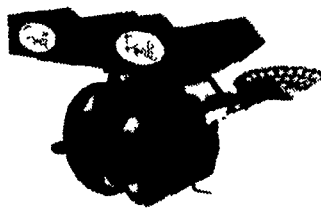
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## Quality Vegetable Implements

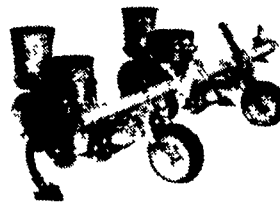
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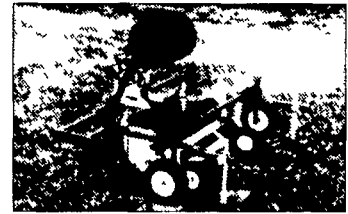
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