

# 'Pumpkin Town'

(Continued from Page 5)

track.

Of the top market needs for berries, customers identified blueberries and strawberries. They wanted apples and peaches for fruit crops. For vegetables, customers wanted sweet corn and tomatoes. And they wanted baked goods, too.

There was an interest in pick-your-own berries, vegetables, and pumpkins. The site was not good for orchards.

For strawberries, a real concern was frost protection. The farm had to irrigate to protect from frost on June 1 and again the first weekend of October.

The farm market serves a small clientele, about 2,102 people from the small town of Stephentown, but gets some tourist traffic from New York City.

The farm market started small, said Riggs, in 1996, using about one acre. The huge strawberries that first year "tasted wonderful," she said. In 1997, the farm harvested about 15,000 pounds per acre; in 1998, about 20,000 pounds per acre; but in 1999, because of severe weed problems, only about 7,500 pounds of strawberries per acre. Work needs to be done to ensure improved har-

vests, including some field repairs, she noted.

About 80 percent of the business is pick your own. The farm employs a strict "rules of the berry patch" for kids and others to follow. A big rule is "no running."

In 1999, the farm stand operated from Aug. 20 through Oct. 18 and was self-service until Oct. 31. The market is open from 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday.

Some simple ideas that Riggs followed for her startup farm market: use items found on the farm of interest to customers. She even provided an insect collection from college. "The butterflies captivated every kid," Riggs said.

Some pitfalls she encountered:

- The previous owners supplied the least expensive produce around. "Don't operate that way," she said. Instead, ensure them of a quality, healthy product — something worth a small premium.

- Be wary of priorities. Ensure that plants are ordered, planted, and cared for on time.

- Learn to spend time inside the stand. It was hard, Riggs noted, to spend time at the cash register, especially

as she considers herself an outdoors-type person.

- Get the signs right. Make them professional-looking and allow them to define what your market is all about.

- Run the farm, don't let the farm run you. And don't forget the vital, family recreational activities to keep the family from burning out.

The pleasures:

- Meeting a lot of really great people, she said. Homeowners told Riggs they had the "best produce ever found."

- A farm market can provide a wonderful, creative outlet.

- The market can be intellectually stimulating, she said.

- The market allows you to build your dreams and contribute to society.

And having fun is important, too. "If you're having fun doing what you are doing, your customers are going to like coming there," said Riggs.

### Roadside Marketing

Larry Yager, Penn State marketing agent, noted ways growers adopted new ideas — and made some money.

One fruit grower got rid of apples and put in a corn maze. The first year, 8,000 people toured the maze at \$5 apiece.

Another grower, un-

happy with vegetable production, took three duck ponds and stocked each of them with fish — trout in one, catfish in another, and bass in the third. His cost for the fish — \$2.75 a pound. He sold them at \$3.95 a pound. Potential sales were \$1,200-\$1,600 off an acre of water. "You can't do that with fruit and vegetable crops," said Yager.

Yager spoke about various ways in which farm markets can adapt and change to increase profitability at the Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention in Hershey.

A market is a matter of "projecting your image — lifestyle and habits and trends," Yager said.

Consumers are grazers today, he said, eating on the run. They crave fast food. They don't have the time to prepare meals. To market to their demands, farm managers must realize that marketing "is not advertising — it is location. And the consumers' first impression comes from signage."

Produce is now the focal point of most supermarkets, said the extension marketing agent. Markup is 40-45 percent and more, and is counted on to increase store profitability.

To survive, farm marketers must think more like grocery store managers. Educate the consumers with signage. Develop signature items, said Yager, items that "make you unique," he said.

Foremost, consumers are looking for taste and flavor in the produce they buy.

Susan Barton, extension specialist at the University of Delaware, suggested that growers visit Homestead Gardens in Davidsonville, Md. The signage is unique and attractive to consumers, making it an "excellent garden center."

"They make a big impact with their road frontage," she said.

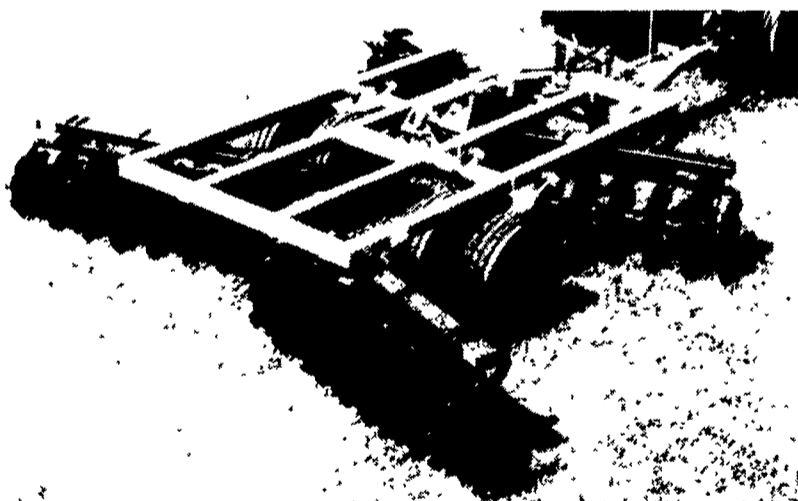
For signage, keep information on it as simple and as short as possible. Make it easy for people to see, using bright colors, plant displays, and "punchy and to the point," said Barton.

Signs should reflect the image of the market, said Barton. They could be as simple as using commodity bags hung over items to sell or more complex signs that provide some planting tips for items. Phrasing should be enticing. But the signs should be consistent and reflect the market's general personality.

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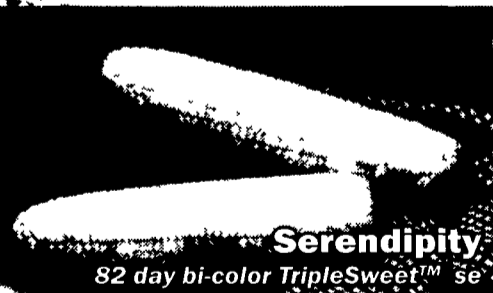
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