



Mervin and Shirley Weaver with daughters Sherri, 8; Anne, 12; and Gwen, 14, work together to grow about 20 acres of produce to sell at their roadside stand along Route 501 north of Lititz.

Weaver Farm

Where Family And Vegetables Flourish

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Food And Family
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LITITZ (Lancaster Co.) — Location counts for a lot when selling produce at a roadside stand, but Mervin and Shirley Weaver know that to keep customers happy and returning, much more than a busy highway is required.

"Freshness," that's what customers want," Weaver said.

To offer fresh, tasty produce isn't a 8-5 job. These days the Weaver family is working from sunup to sundown picking sweet corn, beans, and a spectrum of summer produce.

"This is more labor intensive than dairying, but we enjoy it," Weaver said of the family operation. Daughters Gwen, 14; Anne, 12; and Sherri, 8, help with waiting on customers. Son Chris, 22, is employed off the farm.

Weaver's Produce is located along Route 501, about one mile north of Lititz. The 60-acre farm has been in the Weaver family since 1953, and had been operated as a dairy until the last decade. The drawback with continuing the dairy operation became apparent as traffic flow increased. The farmland is split by the highway, making it increasingly dangerous to stop traffic to allow the herd to cross from pasture to barn for milking time.

The Weavers examined their options. They realized they had a potentially great location for a produce stand. They had fertile soil, and unlike many farms, they also had a water source for irrigating. The Hammer Creek winds through their property enabling them to draw from its source during dry weather.

In 1990, Weaver sold his cows and built a permanent roadside structure. "Even though this is more labor intensive, I haven't missed the cows," he said of the switch.

The best laid plans can easily be beset by weather and customer demand.

The unseasonably cool spring that lasted extra long and then the drastic change to hot and dry weather caused some scrambling to bring forth a harvest.

Weaver is really grateful he is able to irrigate. He said, "Rain is better than irrigation, but when it is hot and dry, irrigation can save a crop."

On the other hand, weather a little on the dry side usually results in a better product. Too much rain or irrigation can cause rot and less flavor.

Although the Weavers grow a significant amount of the produce they offer, they need to fill in the gaps by purchasing some produce from other growers.

The Weavers began selling sweet corn this week. Weaver said that he has learned to pick corn two to three times daily. "If customers stop for corn in the evening, they don't want to hear it was picked in the morning," he said.

"They are super delighted to hear it was picked within the hour," Weaver said of keeping produce as fresh as possible.

Another requirement is offering a wide choice of varieties to meet demand. Yellow varieties have become increasingly popular in comparison with white varieties that previously dominated demand. "But it's more challenging to grow yellow varieties for the early market because they do not germinate as well in cold soil," Weaver said.

This year Weaver tested planting corn covered with black plastic. The cold, rainy spring did not offer much opportunity to get a crop in the ground. After Weaver sowed the seed, he covered the cold, muddy ground, suspicious that the crop might not produce anything. He was pleasantly sur-

prised. Two weeks ago the corn that had been planted beneath plastic towered more than six feet in height, while the seed that remained uncovered had only grown a few feet.

In recent years, Shirley has added more flower seedlings and cut flowers to the market. She finds lots of pleasure in growing flowers.

The roadside stand is open from mid-May through Thanksgiving, from 8:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. or 8 p.m. during the corn season.

From the beginning, the Weavers never had a scarcity of customers and have made it a priority to always have someone at the stand. In addition to customer service this has discouraged trouble with theft.

The three girls enjoy waiting on customers, but having some one watching the stand requires eating in shifts. The parents also allow the girls to have a few hours break daily to swim and relax. During that time, the parents gladly take over stand responsibilities.

"We know many of our customers by name, and have met people from all over the world," Shirley said.

The whole family works together at weeding. They rely a little on herbicide spraying. Their response to customers who are concerned about spraying is "We eat it, too."

The Weavers also raise 130 layer hens for the brown egg market and goats for meat, which is sold primarily to the ethnic market.

Two neighbors prepared baked goods and some canned goods for the market stand.

"We are ready for a break by November," Shirley said.

Even then, there is plenty to do to get ready for the growing months. Weaver also has a sawmill lumber cutting business to work on during winter months.

Winter months also allows time for them to attend several vegetable grower meetings.

Shirley homeschools the girls until they reach the fourth grade.

"It's a crunch in September

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Shirley works hard to keep the display stocked orderly with the freshest produce.



Operating the cash register, bagging the produce, and offering service with a smile are Sherri, Anne, and Gwen.



Planting corn beneath black plastic for an early harvest makes a huge difference as this photo shows. Merv said that the corn beside of him was planted beneath plastic while the short rows in front of him were not. The corn was more than six-feet in height two weeks ago, and promised to be ready for harvest by July 2.

