

Sheppard Family Hosts Holstein Convention Tour

Progressive N.J. Vegetable Growers Build On Three Centuries Of Family Farming

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Lancaster Farming Staff

CEDARVILLE, N.J. — Brothers David, Erwin, and Tom Sheppard have inherited a long tradition of farming in southern New Jersey.



"We have a three-day jump on California." Tom Sheppard shows off head of fresh iceberg lettuce.

Their great-grandfather, Timothy, bought the family's first farm near Cedarville beside the salty tidal marshes of the Delaware Bay in the early 1800s. But the English family had left its

farms in Ireland and migrated to southern New Jersey more than a century before that.

"Sheppards have been farming in Cumberland County since 1682," said Tom Sheppard, youngest of the three brothers who manage the 1,500 acres of vegetable fields and packing facilities near Cedarville.

The Sheppard's hosted a group of National Holstein Convention-goers Tuesday as part of a tour schedule that spotlighted the diverse agriculture of New Jersey.

While for many people New Jersey may evoke images of urban sprawl, this part of the state is remarkably open and sparse. In fact, the area around Sheppard Farms has seen its population shrink in the last half-century, as small farming operations gave way to larger farms.

"There are not half as many houses on this street as when I was a kid," Tom said.

"New Jersey is the highest populated state in the union per square mile — except for here."

The Sheppards own about 1,000 of the 1,500 acres they farm here, producing bell peppers, cucumbers, zucchini squash, asparagus, and various types of lettuce for wholesale buyers up and down the east coast, Canada, and as far west as Texas.

According to Tom, each of the



Crew plants peppers with waterwheel planter on Sheppard Farms.

brothers applies his own natural expertise to growing and selling the produce. David is the agronomist, Erwin the engineer, and Tom the marketer.

Their grandfather, Gilbert Sheppard, was the first in the family to focus on vegetable farming, introducing Boston and iceberg lettuce to the area. In the 1920s, he bought the family's first "tractor," a steam engine that was used mainly to power and to steam-sterilize greenhouse beds on the farm.

Being located beside the Delaware Bay offers both pros and cons to growing vegetables. While the large body of saltwater helps moderate temperatures and reduce the risk of frost, high tides can also bring an influx of salty water into nearby fields. To prevent the salinity from harming crops and to aid drainage, the Sheppards have constructed a series of gated channels along fields bordering the bay. These gates automatically close during high tide, but open to let any water in the fields flow out to the bay during low tide.

The sandy soils in the Shep-

pards' fields offer good drainage for the crops but are low in organic matter — between .5 and 1 percent.

"The soil around here doesn't naturally have much organic matter," Tom said. One of the techniques the Sheppards are using to increase organic matter is growing cover crops such as sorghum, Sudangrass, and crimson clover to plow down between vegetable crops. Wheat and other small grains are also rotated with the vegetables.

Irrigation is a mainstay on Sheppard Farms.

"Every acre of ours has underground line," Tom said. Both drip and spray irrigation are used, depending on the type of crop.

The vegetables are planted, picked, and packed with the help of modern machinery and about 160 seasonal workers, many of them Hispanic. Some of the workers are employed year-around and have been able to bring their wife and children to live in the area, Tom said.

Vegetables plants are started in 19 LP-gas-heated greenhouses on

"Anything we transplant we start ourselves," Tom said.

Deer, geese, and wild turkey are a threat to new crops in the field, causing an estimated \$10,000 to \$20,000 of damage each year, according to Tom.

Another challenge to the thriving vegetable business is volatile markets. While wholesale lettuce prices soared to a "historic high" in February and March, it "hit the skids" at Easter, Tom said.

One way to manage the risk of fluctuating markets is by contracting some produce to buyers. This year, for example, the Sheppards have contracted their crop of Romaine lettuce to a company that distributes ready-made and packed salads to retail outlets.

While producers from warmer areas such as California and Florida have certain advantages — such as longer growing seasons — Tom pointed out that New Jersey's proximity to eastern cities allows Sheppard Farms' produce to reach major outlets in much less time. For produce such as lettuce with a short shelf life, the difference in freshness can be significant.

"We have three-day jump on California," Tom said.

One innovation that helps maximize freshness of product

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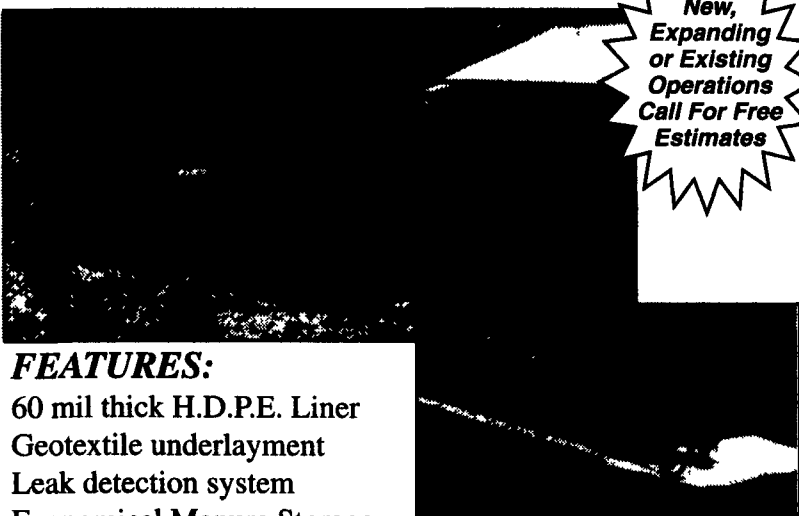


Ramon Vera, left, and Javier Almanza harvest Romaine lettuce on Sheppard Farms. The lettuce is contracted to a ready-made salad distributor.

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