

Robertson Family Farm

Adventures in Blueberry Farming

Who are we?



- James and Sandy purchased the property in February 2013.
- Matthew and Samantha moved to the farm in June of 2013, and we began our season the next day.

Backstory

- Purchased established farm from Howard Thompson
- First planting: 2003
Final planting: 2010
- Varieties: Earliblue, Duke, Bluejay, Legacy
- Boo-berries: they're a mystery



How the Farm is Situated



What we jumped into

- 26 acres
- 2100 blueberry bushes
- 30 peach trees
- Small patch of asparagus
- A need for bees
- Some buckets and a notebook



Year One: Green Acres (We're Farmers)

- Matt moves to Missouri
- House renovations--x2
- Went to Blueberry School
- Massive pruning session with Master Growers Association



Year One: Green Acres (We're Farmers)

- Removed debris and poured chat on drive
- Built shaded lean-to for sales barn
- Joined Webb City Farmers Market and Joplin Farmers Market
- Put out some 2x2 foot signs
- Started picking



Year One: Recap

Hours:

Open	Sunday – Saturday	7am – 7pm
Time Off	None	



- Charged \$2.75 a pound
- Paid pickers \$1.25 a pound
- Accepted share-picking at 1/3 them to 3/5 us
- Pounds picked: ~4757 pounds

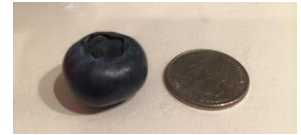
Year One Lessons

- Living there would have made all the difference
- A standard refrigerator is not enough space
- A porta-potty is a necessity
- Once you put out the SWD traps, you have to check them



Year One Lessons

- No one carries cash or they overpick what they brought
- Come to terms with strangers at your home for six weeks a year
- Latch the gate
- You need some time off



Year One Lessons

- It takes about 80 hours a week to mow and weed-whip
- Stray cats and their kittens will be left in your well house
- People don't like to walk from the parking area to the barn
- Thank goodness the peaches didn't produce



Year Two: We've Got to Get a Handle on This

- Mulched and pruned all fall and winter
- Repaired and re-ran irrigation lines
- Put up new fencing to define the property and the parking area



Year Two: We've Got to Get a Handle on This

- Moved production area to milk barn and installed a walk-in refrigerator
- Ordered twice as many sorting trays--no more turkey roaster pans
- Installed a three bay sink with sprayer for berries and honey



Year One Aerial Shot



Year Two

- Moved the sales barn to the well house in the middle of the field
- Purchased a credit card reader, hand-washing station, and water cooler
- Rearranged lawn furniture in appropriate places for rest
- Poured a pad for the porta-potty
- Purchased smaller buckets for smaller hands



Year Two: We've Got to Get a Handle on This

- Began making chutney and syrup from the Grade-B berries
- Closed during the afternoon, Sunday evening and Mondays
- Began scheduling share-picking and pick for pay times



Year Two: We've Got to Get a Handle on This

- Dropped Joplin Farmers Market and added Springfield Farmers Market
- Thinned the peach trees
- Created a Facebook page and farm blog
- Purchased new BIG banners for the road and parking areas



Year Two Lessons

- Pruning is a slow-going, never-ending task, especially if you have disease
- Even if you think you are killing the bush, keep cutting. It comes back.
- It doesn't matter you fixed the irrigation lines, there will always be a leak



Year Two Lessons

- Less "perceived" walking made people happy
- Customers cheerfully paid with credit cards
- Free cold water is a much appreciated gesture
- Suggesting "great rows for picking" is better than "assigning" rows
- Treat every customer like it's their first time picking, but remember faces



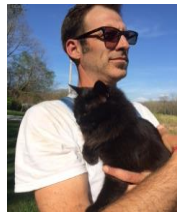
Year Two Lessons

- Marketing at the Farmers Market increased our u-pick sales
- Facebook is huge
- Began freezing berries when we had more than we could sell
- There is a good market for frozen berries during the holidays
- Customers run out of their freezer stock mid-winter
- Mowing is a full-time job



Year Two Lessons

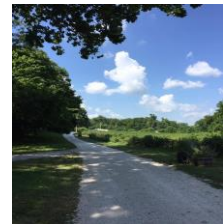
- We can't be everywhere at once-- even if it means losing money
- We need down-time too
- We are bad peach farmers
- Once you keep the stray cats, more show up
- Be sure the First Responders know how to find the farm



Year Two Recap

Closed	Mondays	-----
Open	Tues-Friday	7am - noon 4pm - 7pm
Open	Saturday	7am - 7pm
Open	Sunday	7am - noon

- Charged \$2.75 a pound.
- Accepted share picking and pay picking (\$1.25 pound)
- Sales: increased 28%
- Pounds picked: ~8850



Year Three: I Think I Get It Now

- Mulched and pruned all fall and winter. Less disease. Lots of new growth.
- Invested in great shears and headphones. Subscribed to podcasts.
- Gave up on the peaches. Pretended like they didn't exist.



Year Three: I Think I Get It Now

- Scheduled meet and greet times with people interested in picking for pay, discussed expectations, pay and times to pick
- Ran full-page ad in the Joplin Globe for opening weekend
- Committed to Webb City Farmers Market only
- Continued marketing with Facebook-- over 2,000 followers



Facebook

- Facebook is our primary mode of communication with customers
- Easy to use and quickly distributes messages
- You have to constantly check it
- Customers like immediate feedback to questions and reviews
- Standardize some responses: hours and directions were the most common questions



Year Three Recap

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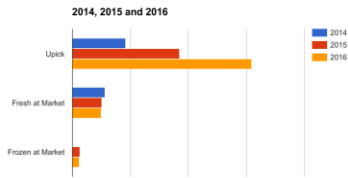
Accepted share picking and pay picking (\$1.25 pound)

Sales: increased 68% (114% overall)

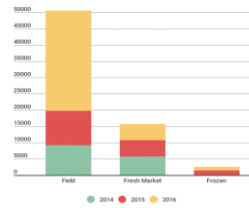
Pounds picked: ~12,263



Three-year Overview of Progress



Three-Year Overview



Future Plans

- Dedicated phone line for the farm
- Daily voicemail updates
- Recruit child labor (our own)
- Less stress about farmers market
- More seating and trash cans throughout the property



Future Plans

- Work on GPS/ping issue
- More pictures of families that visit us on Facebook with their comments
- Expand social media (Instagram? Twitter? Snapchat?)
- Be more diligent on farm blog



Future Plans

- Put up more frozen berries (increase from 300-900 quarts)
- Finish berry barn kitchen for jams and syrup
- Pay our returning pickers more per pound
- Streamline our pre-pick ordering process
- Continue to assess our open hours

