

Old Traditions and Fresh Fruit

AT THE BERRY BEST FARM IN LEBANON

By Robert Cook



One of the many things that makes life in Maine so special is how residents and visitors can experience the joy of picking their own blueberries, strawberries, peaches, and apples every summer and fall. There are multiple places where you can “pick your own.”

In this sense, the Berry Best Farm in Lebanon, owned by John and Chris Bozak, is one of many such farms. But one thing that sets them apart is an annual program they started eight years ago to support local food pantries. Every summer, they set aside one day during blueberry or peach season and allow people to pick a bucket for food pantries and another bucket for free. “Monetarily, we don’t worry about it,” said John, 81. “We just want to help people.”

Their annual day of “picking for the pantries” took on an even greater significance this summer as Maine and the rest of the country deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. This summer, the event was held on August 2 from 2 to 4 p.m. The couple’s daughter, Jennifer, sent out an email blast to their existing customers to let them know.

John said a total of 400 pounds of blueberries were picked this year, and 200 pounds were donated to local food pantries

such as Seeds of Fair in Rollinsford, New Hampshire, and South Berwick; Grant House in South Berwick; the North Berwick Food Pantry; the Berwick and Somersworth, New Hampshire Community Pantry; the Rochester Salvation Army; and Gerry’s Food Pantry in Rochester, New Hampshire.

Extra precautions were in place to keep everyone safe. John explained that people needed to have masks, and they were directed where to pick to ensure social distancing. They had as many as 25 cars with more than 50 people who descended on the 75-acre farm. “We had a handwashing station and plenty of hand sanitizer on hand,” John added.

Some years they will offer their peaches for their annual picking-for-the-pantries event, depending on the overall crop size. Last year, John said they had 100 bushels of peaches picked.

Berry Best Farm is not the only Maine farm that participates in such programs. According to John, the University of Maine Cooperative Extension Service in Orono has a Gleaners of the Master Gardener’s volunteer program. People who want to learn about the art and science of horticulture and agriculture will help farmers harvest their crops where a

portion of them will be donated to local food pantries. For example, the Gleaners will glean vegetables at the nearby Spiller's Farm in Wells and donate them to food pantries.

The Gleaners engage in such programs that are coordinated by the Maine Harvest for Hunger at University of Maine in Orono. The program was created in 2000 as a grassroots effort to encourage gardeners, farmers, businesses, schools, civic groups, and others to donate high-quality fruits and vegetables to citizens in need. Through county-based networks, donated produce is delivered to food pantries, soup kitchens, community meals, and individuals across the state. According to the Maine Harvest for Hunger website, more than 3 million pounds of vegetables and fruit from Maine farms has been harvested and donated to those community organizations.

John and Chris, 77, decided to begin their event because it reflected their family values. Chris's father, Herbert Colburn, who owned the farm, used to leave peaches on people's doorsteps. Her parents lived during a time when it was common for neighbors to come, visit, enjoy some fresh baked apple pie, and sit a spell. In the age of COVID-19, it is much harder for people to come together and socialize in accustomed ways. But the picking-for-the-pantries event still brought a number of people to their farm who wanted to help other families in need.

Chris explained that her parents started the farm in 1948 and built a hen house. They had 6,000 hens to lay eggs. John and Chris now have three hens, four horses, and their dog, Toby. "My father was raised with horses, and he was in the cavalry in Texas," Chris explained. "It wasn't too long before we had horses here." Herbert Colburn also participated in harness horse racing all over New England for many years. He raced his team in Bangor, Lewiston, Cumberland, and Rochester, New Hampshire, at Foxborough and Suffolk Downs in Massachusetts, and in New York State.

He decided to add blueberries to his farm after some people from Rutgers University in New Jersey stayed at a neighbors' house across the road. They took some cuttings of native blueberry plants and developed them in the Garden State. Chris said her dad recognized that the farm was perfect for blueberries and peaches because of the sloped land and the wind direction they experienced. John said Herbert started out with 200 to 300 blueberry bushes in the 1950s and eventually increased them to 3,000. The couple has about 2,500 blueberry bushes today. They also have 100 peach trees.

John and Chris were strongly rooted in their love for land and nature. They met at the University of Connecticut in the

1960s. He studied forestry and worked for the U.S. Forest Service in Oregon for a time. The couple eventually moved to New Hampshire after John took a teaching position at the University of New Hampshire in Durham in 1967. Chris studied animal science and earned a master's degree in dairy nutrition. She conducted dairy research at 4-H at UNH while John taught forestry.

"When we both retired in 2004, we used to say, 'Let's see if we can live with each other now,'" Chris laughs. They decided to relocate to the Lebanon farm where Chris grew up. "Financially, it is not a viable option for retirement, but it is a supplement." Life on the farm is also a family affair. Chris said their daughter Jennifer and the couple's two granddaughters help out on the farm. Their son, Brian, helps with the haying.

John said he is not surprised that so many people have taken a renewed interest in creating vegetable gardens in their backyards and farming in general. COVID-19 made many people think about returning to the land to create a sustainable lifestyle.

Their farm has a modest trail system they can use for cross-country skiing and snow shoeing in the winter. Chris also has a small cabin that her son built for her that is her "she shed" where she can go for some alone time. "Many times we ask ourselves how many more years are we going to do this?" Chris said.

The couple has already taken steps to make sure their farmland is conserved as open space by working with the Three Rivers Land Trust. "It can't be subdivided or developed," John said. For now, they have the daily and seasonal satisfaction of living on the farm. "It's just the pleasure of living in a place like this where you get to raise crops to help other people and for our own food, too," John said.

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