

A Berry Fun Time

Blueberry Festival at Bill's Berry Farm draws a crowd

By Audra Hoefer

More than 1,200 people participated in the first-ever Blueberry Daze Festival/Antiques on the Farm last July hosted by Bill's Berry Farm three miles off Interstate 82 in Grandview.

The festive family atmosphere was the fruit of the Michener family's labors. The event attracted four times what the Micheners projected. Within two hours of its start, they had sold out of blueberries.

"We were blown away by the tremendous turn-out," says Julie Michener. "We had planned for about 300 people."

Luckily, she had received calls from people living up to 200 miles away the week prior to the festival and decided to buy organic blueberries from a fellow farmer to supplement their supply.

"Our event grew faster than our blueberries," Julie says, laughing.

The family is prepared for the 2011 event scheduled on the Fourth of July weekend, projecting the berry's tonnage at four times last year's harvest.

Farmers Bill and Julie Michener, along with their eight children, have busily transformed their 70-acre farm of apples, cherries and blueberries from dependence on commercial markets to direct retail markets.

"We didn't have the money to add



more acreage, but knew we could add more revenue per acre if we made some changes," says Julie. "The commercial market is so volatile and very tough with just 70 acres. It's definitely becoming a bigger player industry."

When the couple bought the farm in 1994, neither dreamed they would take the farm in anything but a commercial direction, says Julie. But during an 18-month wait for blueberry plants and,

in light of market changes, the family talked about shifting the farm's focus.

"We spent one and a half years as a family traveling to U-pick farms, taking notes on what we liked, what we didn't like, taking thousands of pictures and deciding what image we wanted to portray," says Julie.

The family decided to become more tourist-oriented. The first year family members sat at a card table underneath

a blue canopy with people picking their own fruit in “an ugly field,” says Julie.

The second year, more of a festival atmosphere was offered in their backyard, with a hayride and other activities supplementing U-pick produce.

“Luckily, we moved out of the backyard and developed some of our land for the festival the third year,” says Julie. “We didn’t have any idea we’d grow that fast or expand that quickly.”

Besides the Blueberry Daze Festival/Antiques on the Farm, there are an Apple and Pumpkin Festival and a Cherry Festival—all of which showcase U-pick produce grown on the farm and include free entrance and myriad activities.

One of the catalysts that sparked growth was free advertising offered by television stations, newspapers, blogs and the farm’s website.

“People have been finding us through ‘U-pick produce’ searches online and while looking for free family events,” says Julie. “People are so into technology that we continue to find outlets for marketing. We found that u-pick farms in Spokane and Seattle do well because of their large populations, but have realized that living in a rural area hasn’t been a factor. People will drive several hours to attend our events and stop by for the U-pick fruit.

“We always want to be a working farm



for people to see how a real farm operates. We want people to be able to walk through the orchards. The apple trees are 49 years old and a part of history. We don’t want to become a carnival.”

The expansion continues “a little every year,” says Julie. “It’s a gradual change, a few acres or rows here and there.”

The main goal is to make the entire farm environment conducive to an inexpensive family adventure.

To festivalgoers, the changes may seem surprising in such a short time. At this year’s festivals they will notice 20 acres of Golden Delicious apples have been removed. In their place is a 2-acre parking area, a 4-acre pumpkin patch, a corn maze and alfalfa.

Young children will be thankful for the tube slide added to the already-cool tree fort, along with a petting zoo. Older kids will appreciate the expanded playground area complete with large swings and a hay-climb. The popular “barnyard train,”

pony rides and hayride will continue.

“We want to have free, wholesome events for families,” Julie says. “People can choose what they’d like to pay to do while here.”

Each of the 10 family members works on daily farm chores, special events and marketing throughout the year.

“My oldest daughter works hard to keep the blog and website current,” says Julie. “Jase and Brian are also integral parts of the farm.”

The family planted peach trees this year, with a possible future peach festival in mind. They also grafted apple trees into six more varieties, which will ultimately give U-pick customers 12 to 15 varieties to choose from.

Each of this year’s festivals will feature freshly made doughnuts from the farm’s produce.

Besides the festivals, the Michener farm schedules educational tours and hosts birthday parties in June and July, and again in September and October.

The services have become popular. “We do lots of birthday parties,” says Julie. “One goal is to get into spring tours with schools and tie into Washington state’s curriculum. We’ll teach about bees and pollination and the growth of fruit from pollination onward.

“The word’s getting out. It’s a little scary, but it’s exciting. We’ll keep our farm viable and sustainable, being good stewards and turning enough profit to stay here. People really want to know their farmers and where their food is coming from.” ■

Mark your calendar for 2011 events at Bill’s Berry Farm, which include the all-new Cherry Festival on June 25; Blueberry Daze Festival/Antiques on the Farm, July 2, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.; and Apple and Pumpkin Festival on Saturdays from September 17 through October 22. Call (509) 882-3200 or visit www.billsberryfarm.com for more information.



People line up with buckets for a U-pick outing during last year’s Blueberry Daze Festival at the Michener farm near Grandview last July. The family farm is hosting more festivals this year that should draw many people.

Opposite page, Javier Rodriguez Sr. lifts daughter Natalia so she can reach just-ripe cherries in the orchards at Bill’s Berry Farm.