



Farmers Expanding Southern Ontario's Fruit and Vegetable Sector



Possibility grows here.

Goss Gilroy Inc.

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Farmers Expanding Southern Ontario's Fruit and Vegetable Sector

Prepared by Goss Gilroy Inc.

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Possibility grows here.

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Introduction

Fruit and vegetable farmers in Ontario grow 125 different fruits and vegetables on 245,000 acres of land, providing us with an abundance of diverse, nutritious, and delicious produce during the harvest months and, increasingly, year-round. The fruit and vegetable sector is also an economic powerhouse: it generates more than \$4.2 billion in economic activity annually, and employs 30,000 people directly on-farm and another 66,000 people indirectly.¹

While Ontario still imports much of its fruits and vegetables, there is (literally) room to grow. *Plant the Seeds: Opportunities to Grow Southern Ontario's Fruit and Vegetable Sector* identified how we can grow more fruits and vegetables in southern Ontario, as well as the constraints to expanding production. Based on an analysis of market conditions, existing supply, and limitations and enablers to expansion, it was identified that strawberries, sweet potatoes, apples, and garlic, in addition to fresh grapes, pears, eggplant, cabbage, and snap beans, have production expansion opportunities.

This report features the stories of four fruit and vegetable farms in southern Ontario that successfully expanded the production of their crops:

- Nature's Bounty, located in Port Perry, grows a wide variety of apples on their 25-acre orchard.
- Fenwick Berry Farm, located in Pelham, grows many types of berries, including strawberries, and other fruits.
- Berlo's Best Sweet Potatoes is a large sweet potato farm based out of Simcoe.
- Van Raay Farms, located in Dashwood, initially focused only on pigs, but has since expanded to produce other crops, including garlic.

Farmers provided the history of their farming efforts and accomplishments, and what expanding their operations has looked like. Their stories were unique to their farm and crop(s) grown, as well as their individual goals and objectives. The farmers explained the challenges they have faced in expanding their operations and shared what they have done to overcome obstacles. Additionally, farmers highlighted supports that would still be helpful.

¹ Ontario Fruit & Vegetable Growers, *Sector Overview*. <https://www.ofvga.org/overview>

These farmers shared many of the challenges they had and continue to experience, including complying with a variety of regulations (such as those related to pesticides, zoning requirements, and building permits), the availability of technologies, and the impacts of climate change on agriculture. Despite these challenges, however, all farmers featured in these case studies have seen success. While they specialized in different crops and used a variety of methods to expand operations, there was consensus on which promising practices and factors have led to their success: being well connected with the consumer, developing relationships with other growers and marketing associations, and increasing production based on demand.

The stories in this report are a glimpse into how hard farmers in southern Ontario are working to get more fresh fruits and vegetables on our plates.

Fenwick Berry Farm

DAVID KLYN-HESSELINK

Introduction

Fenwick Berry Farm has been in the business of berries since 1998. Located in Pelham within the Niagara Region, the farm grows a wide variety of crops, including apples, peaches, garlic, peas, and many varieties of berries, including strawberries. David, the owner of Fenwick Berry Farm, is a first-generation farmer who has been involved in agriculture for the last 25 years. His farming career began by working for other farmers while tending to his own crops in the evenings. As it became increasingly difficult to do both and the demand for his own products increased, he transitioned to develop what is now Fenwick Berry Farm.



Strawberries at Fenwick Berry Farm. Photo courtesy of Christine Klyn-Hesselink

Expanding Operations

Fenwick Berry Farm began as a small operation. Initially, David planted strawberries, and then purchased an apple orchard. Balancing his own farm and working on another farm, he struggled with finding reliable local help. He describes spending late nights out in the orchard, as those who he had hired to pick during the days were not able to keep up with demand.

As Fenwick Berry Farm expanded their acreage and diversified their crops, David participated in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and continued to hire locally. David notes that the bulk of his employees are seasonal. There are usually a couple of year-round staff, but the farm has between 35 to 50 staff on the farm at any point between June and September. The farm started with ten acres of June bearing strawberries, and as of 2020, has expanded to include 20 acres of both June bearing and ever-bearing strawberries, extending the harvest from late May to late October. Other berry crops include 10 acres of raspberries, blueberries, and blackberries. In addition, the farm cultivates 10 acres of apples, six acres of peaches, and 30 acres of sweet corn and sweet peas. Recently, they have expanded to grow 25 acres of garlic.

Expansion is influenced by local demand, and “as long as we continue to see the demand, we will continue to expand ... in order to maintain market share, we have had to grow.” David describes his current role as both the farm’s “orchestra conductor” as well as the “back-up for everything,” with tasks varying day by day, depending on what is needed.

Challenges

While the farm employs many workers in the summer months, labour is still a challenge for David. The Temporary Foreign Worker Program has helped tremendously with providing manual labourers (he notes that “[he] would not be farming without them”) but there is still a need to fill supervisory roles. While it may not be an option available to him now, he notes that the farm is always looking to “promote from within [and give] more responsibility to people in-house” and would also like to attract local talent interested in horticulture.

David usually hires students each summer. They were especially helpful during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic this past spring. While schools were delivering remote learning, many of the summer student crew were able to do schoolwork until midday then come and work at Fenwick Berry Farm in the afternoons. In general, he feels that they are usually able to keep these seasonal teenage workers for a couple of years while they are still in high school, but “once they get their driver’s licenses or finish high school, it’s greener pastures for them.” He understands that many do not wish to pursue a career in agriculture but notes that perhaps the education system could do more to inform kids about the possibilities of careers in agriculture, an area which is “very vast” with “lots of opportunity to develop a niche.”



Raspberry cuttings to be grown for long cane production



As long as we continue to see the demand, we will continue to expand ... in order to maintain market share, we have had to grow.

— David Klyn-Hesselink

The shelf-life of berries is another challenge that David frequently deals with. “Strawberries especially are very perishable, and you can’t store them for a few days like you would be able to with a tomato or a pepper.” Ensuring that product is delivered in a timely manner is very important. To do this, balancing production with demand is critical.

Actions Taken

David stresses the importance of adopting new growing techniques to continually find ways to be more efficient. He has started to use a substrate growing media, a common technique practiced in Europe that improves the composition of the growing medium, reducing incidences of soil-borne disease and increasing plant growth and yield. He has also adopted the use of protected culture production (growing crops in a controlled environment, such as row covers and greenhouses) to protect crops from the elements, increasing yield and quality.



Winter storage of raspberry plants at the farm

At the beginning, Fenwick Berry Farm sold their strawberries through wholesale to a distribution centre and a limited number of stores. As they continued to expand and think of ways to reach a broader market, the Farm realized that they “were dependent on the efforts of others to sell [their] berries, and [they] saw the farmers’ market as a great opportunity to sell directly to customers.” At the farmers’ market level, David says: “not only do they want good quality, but they want to hear your story. We have four daughters and they’ve seen them at the market with us and love watching them grow up.” Today, the farm sells its products through three different pathways within the food retail industry: farmer’s markets, chain grocery stores, and wholesale. David feels that all these pathways contribute to a strong level of commitment to purchasing locally grown product.

Additionally, David notes how the Berry Grower’s Association has been very helpful to him: “They are a great board with great industry reps and lobbyists in government. They do a great job of keeping us up to date on programs, especially through COVID-19.” Being a part of the Association has also helped collaboration and connection between other farmers and has been “great for idea-sharing.”

Supports Still Needed

David highlighted several areas where local farms need further support from food retailers, consumers, as well as both local and provincial governments.

Consistent and ongoing local marketing is one of the main concerns that comes to mind for David: “We’ve struggled. . . the strawberry crop starts June 10th, and then there is an ad for U.S. strawberries on sale at the supermarket: two for five [dollars]. That gets you down before you even start.” Sales on imported produce sold below his cost of production cut into potential sales. However, he wonders if there is more that can be done by growers themselves, too: “we need to do a better job at supplying consistently to retail partners. . . [the retailers] have California berries guaranteed to arrive at a certain time each week, but sometimes, things like rain damage can impact our ability to deliver on time. If I was a retailer, would I want consistency over local product? Maybe.” Additionally, surplus from other provinces, specifically from Quebec, is flooding the berry market in places like Toronto, “hurting the local market.”

David insists that there is a need for a “more level playing field” between local producers and import competitors. He notes that other countries are able to produce a product using pesticides and other substances that are banned in Canada. “Our competitors are still allowed to use those cheaper, banned products, putting us at a disadvantage right off the bat.” Canada requires independent studies and comprehensive data for all pesticides used; however, goods imported from the United States, for instance, are still allowed to be sold in Canada even if they have been used in crop production. David feels that “if it is to be banned in Canada, it shouldn’t be allowed here at all, in any way.”

Another difficult challenge to overcome is “bureaucratic red tape.” This includes municipal processes to obtain building and development permits and can be “expensive and really time consuming.” He notes that having multiple departments take part in the approval process can be time-consuming, confusing, and oftentimes very drawn out. The process could be more efficient if municipalities provided farmers with assistance and support, by both streamlining these services (and ensuring that the process is more direct), and by walking farmers through the process.

Into the Future

Over the next two years, Fenwick Berry Farm is planning to ramp up their production through initiatives such as the Raspberry Long Cane Program, modelled after the European style of raspberry production. This method allows David to grow varieties that usually cannot withstand cold Canadian winters. The raspberry canes are stored over the winter months until the spring growing season. David plants the canes in staggered production blocks (every three weeks), yielding a consistent supply. He notes that this method is great for preventing soil-borne diseases and allows him to have greater production control and improved yield. David shared that customer feedback on the raspberries produced through this method has been excellent, and that the farm is very excited to see where the program will continue to take them. Additionally, for their strawberry crops, the plan is to increase protected culture production, enabling them to supply their various market streams with more consistent, high-quality strawberries.

David says that he is currently looking into longer-term options for the farm, including the opportunity for him to mentor someone who is looking to get into agriculture: “I had a great mentor, and would love to give that opportunity to someone else.” He feels that there is a need for creative succession planning for the future of the farm to ensure that it is a viable business for the next generation.

For those looking to get into agriculture, David emphasized the “importance of knowing your market. You need to make sure the demand for product is there, before you plant a crop,” a point that continues to hold true for Fenwick Berry Farm. When asked if he would do anything differently, David answered by saying that “each mistake I made was a lesson. I learned a lot. If I didn’t have to do things more than once, it might cost me less, but I learn a lot each time I have to redo something”.



Raspberries long cane production at Fenwick Berry Farm

Berlo's Best Sweet Potatoes

NICK VANBERLO

Introduction

If you were eating sweet potatoes in the 1990s, chances are they came from a farm in South Carolina. But, chances are even better that you weren't eating them much at all. "People weren't really eating sweet potatoes in '98" says Nick VanBerlo, co-owner of Berlo's Best Sweet Potatoes in Norfolk County, which planted its first 28 acres of the crop that year.

A second-generation farmer, Nick remembers his parents' decision to transition out of tobacco and into something else. But what else? With so many farmers in the area already growing crops like zucchini and watermelon, they wanted to find an untapped market. However, they were told that the area didn't have a warm enough climate or enough days to harvest the crop for sweet potatoes to be viable. Now, with 2,000 acres and 120 staff, Berlo's Best is Canada's largest producer of the vegetable. The farm also rotates with other crops to keep the land environmentally sustainable, including rye, soybeans, tobacco, and ginseng.

The market for sweet potatoes grew in tandem with the company's own growth. Consumption of sweet potatoes has steadily increased over the years, with the processed food side of the business growing exponentially faster than the fresh product. Fresh sweet potatoes are still most popular for festive meals around the holidays, but processed product can now also be found in snacks such as chips, baby food purees, and even dog food.



People weren't really eating sweet potatoes in '98.

— Nick VanBerlo

Expanding Operations

Over time, much has been learned through trial and error, with multiple expansions along the way. It's rarely been easy. "Every time we've made an expansion it's come with headaches, heartaches, and financial aches and pains as well. You come to expect this," says Nick. The reasons for their continued expansion have come down to the opportunity presenting itself: consumption rates of sweet potatoes have climbed in concert with Berlo's Best's ability to produce them.

Their first foray into the sweet potato market was particularly challenging. After their initial experiment with sweet potato farming produced a beautiful crop and a healthy profit margin, they expanded to 100 acres the following season. The second year, however, was "a disaster." According to Nick, "the crop wasn't that successful throughout the first ten years. There were many times we were ready to throw in the towel and move onto something else." However, through each problem the family encountered, they found a way to resolve it, an enterprising style necessitated by an absence of expert advice or proper machinery for the crop at the time.

Their hard work paid off and sales climbed. In 2006, Berlo's Best built a computerized, climate controlled storage, curing and packing facility that allowed them to make the next step to being a "real player" in the industry. In 2011, they doubled the size of that building and their acreage at the same time.



Computerized, climate controlled storage



Strategic partnership with Sobeys

The company's most recent production expansion was in 2017-18, when Berlo's Best increased its marketing and sales capacity nationwide. While they already had significant market presence in Ontario and Quebec, this most recent expansion allowed them to supply potatoes across Canada, from Victoria B.C. to Debert, Nova Scotia. This growth was also aided by adding onto their storage facility, which now has about 20 million pounds of storage capacity.

Nick credits his parents' tenacity for continuing to expand production in the first place and perseverance through a decade of difficulty with the crop as having been critical. Retailer commitment has been crucial for their expansion successes in more recent years. He described having built a mutually beneficial strategic partnership with Sobeys as a key success factor to this expansion.

Sobeys leveraged Berlo's Best's scale of production, who in turn leveraged the retailer's ability to move the product nationwide. At the same time, Nick cautions that growers can't expect a retailer to support them simply because they are local; they should also be well organized, competitive, and responsive to the retailer's expectations. In meeting these expectations, farmers can also meet the industry's aspirations to support local production.

Nick emphasizes the critical importance of relationships, some of which are generational. He remarks that if you see a locally-grown crop on the shelf of a grocery store, that means there is a relationship already established between the farmer and the retailer that could be anywhere from one to 100 years old.

Challenges

Labour shortages are a persistent challenge, whether it is an expansion year or a status quo year. Berlo's Best has benefited greatly from the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, with some workers having returned from Jamaica, Trinidad, St. Lucia, and Mexico for over 30 years now. Nick notes the labour pressures extend from entry-level labour, to mid-level management, to top-level management as well. Every aspect of the business is impacted when there is not enough labour available.

Land availability is another challenge for expansion. Sweet potatoes need to be grown in a micro-climate in Southern Ontario that allows the crop to grow to maturity. This small pocket of sandy soil in Norfolk County is also suitable for growing ginseng, pumpkins, tomatoes, sweet corn and more. This means many of the growers in the area are all competing for the same land, which drives prices up and availability down. According to Nick, it's become a hyper-competitive local market for prime real estate that only larger farmers can afford.

The sweet potato crop itself does not present challenges to expansion. Nick affirms that current varieties work well, sweet potatoes can be stored and supplied year-round, and rising temperatures provide more favourable growing conditions.

Actions Taken

As the inaugural sweet potato farmer in the region, Berlo's Best spearheaded much of the market development and production capabilities for sweet potatoes in southern Ontario, and conducted a lot of its own research and development. The inability to machine harvest sweet potatoes was initially a constraint. Nick credits the ingenuity of his father and brother (Peters Sr. and Jr.), who were able to design and build their own equipment to overcome this hurdle. The family built their own diggers, planters, and other machinery to defoliate the crop. Without these innovations, Nick feels they may have never expanded beyond 100 acres. Now, Berlo's Best holds patents on those machines that were initially built out of necessity.

Nick agrees that smaller growers have a lot to gain by partnering with larger ones, and that collaboration is essential to supply the market on a large scale aggregating their crops. This approach has been key to Berlo's Best most recent expansion: they collaborated with smaller farms to help meet the demand that the company cannot fulfill on its own. Nick acknowledges that with continued growth in the marketplace, any farm is going to get to a limit where they need to add further production capabilities to continue to grow.



Family built harvesters

Incorporating product from smaller farms into the business will continue to be a cornerstone of their expansion plans into the future, with Berlo's Best able to handle the marketing and other aspects of running a large business that can be challenging for smaller growers. According to Nick: "From planting through harvest is about half of the work. The other 50% of the work is turning that harvest into money."

Nick also cautions that the first step in expansion needs to be a conversation with the downstream buyer, and advises that growers looking to expand need to work backwards in the supply chain. The commitment from retailers has inspired Berlo's Best to take chances several times over. As Nick explains: "It's scary, too, because it's just verbal – there is no contract. It's a relationship that you have made and continue to nourish – and this is what gives you the confidence to expand." He also maintains that the commitment needs to go both ways, highlighting that Sobeys and Berlo's Best have both stayed loyal when each has experienced their own challenges.

Supports Still Needed

Nick argues that the first step to supporting growers is to ask them what their challenges are in expanding production and to build a response from there. He contends that some of the research undertaken in support of farmers can be disconnected from their actual needs.

While he doesn't identify any specific regulations or policies that need to change, he says that it is paramount for farms to be flexible and adaptable on a daily basis to any and all challenges. His message to the industry players with whom he works is nothing but gratitude.

Into the Future

Berlo's Best is in the midst of a farm transition, with Nick and Peter VanBerlo taking the reins from their ageing parents. While they may continue to expand, the speed and volume of that expansion will be balanced against other priorities, such as raising a young family. Nick emphasizes that it's always important to keep planning in the short and medium term as well, noting that he's presently in discussions with partners in the supply chain for the crop two years from now.

His advice for other farmers looking to expand is to avoid producing a crop first and then trying to sell it later. Anyone wishing to disrupt an established retailer-grower relationship needs to be able to solve an existing problem, as major retailers now have the ability to bring in product from anywhere in the world with ease. "Even though we're local, we still have to be competitive on a global scale in order to penetrate that market and grow."



Raising a young family

Nick has never been more grateful to be an agricultural entrepreneur, and that the pressure to perform during uncertain times has been a humbling experience. He says, "Food is not going out of style! We can weather any storm - I can see our farm going strong for the next 50 years".

Van Raay Farms Ltd.

TERESA, MARTIN AND DEAN VAN RAAY

Introduction

Teresa and Martin Van Raay have been in the farming business for 37 years. They operate Van Raay Farms, located in Dashwood, Ontario. They have and continue to work with pigs (their primary focus), as well as grow corn, soybeans, and wheat and, more recently, garlic. For most of their farming careers, they have been “farrow to finish,” meaning they breed the sows and raise their animals to market weight. For the past 12 years they have been a wean to market operation (meaning the farm purchases weaned pigs and grows them to market weight).

Expanding Operations

In 2012, their son Phil returned home and in 2015, their son Dean also came home. Both sons wanted to be involved in the family business, which made it possible for the Van Raays to expand their operations. When thinking of new crops, garlic made the most sense, as it offers a higher value of crop per acre and uses minimal land space. “We would have had to have 400 more acres to plant more corn, or 5 more acres for garlic... the cost for seed is a lot higher, but we could work with the acreage we had.”

Originally, the Van Raays started with two acres of garlic. As of early 2021, they now have 50 acres of garlic on the farm, and they lease land from other farms as well. They are continuing to expand slowly in this fashion.

To help with operations, the Van Raays employ workers from a contract farm team. These workers live in London, Ontario full-time. The Van Raays typically employ a contract farm team of six to eight people, but a couple of times per year when they are amid garlic scaping and trimming season, they could have upwards of 30 to 40 people on hand through the contractor farm.



The Van Raays in front of their sign

Challenges

The Van Raays highlighted many challenges they have faced in expanding operations. This past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a challenge for bringing in temporary labour. Teresa noted that “our guys were in high demand because other farms couldn’t get their regular staff.” The Van Raays have also had to manage the natural susceptibility of garlic to disease. With restrictions on the use of chemicals and sprays in Canada, which aid in preventing disease and pests, it is a real challenge to maintain the same output as imported products (i.e., from the USA and China) because they are allowed seed treatments that Canada has not regulated.



A JJ Broch garlic harvester that came from Spain

Garlic also needs “timely moisture,” and the Van Raays have had to invest in an irrigation system. Not only was this costly to implement, but it also took a long time for the equipment to arrive. Since implementing their irrigation system in the spring of 2020, Teresa notes that it has been “very, very helpful.”

Another challenge is the harvesting season. They mainly use a machine harvester, which has helped tremendously with productivity. However, there are still a few tasks that are very labour intensive. Every plant needs to be trimmed and cleaned by hand. The Van Raays are slowly working on investing in technologies that could reduce the need for manual labour, as the high cost (and sometimes lack of availability) of this labour “justifies the investment” in technological inputs. Additionally, most of these efficient harvesting tools come from “across the pond,” specifically Spain and France, and therefore can take a while to arrive to Canada and are expensive to buy and ship.

Accessing buyers is another challenge that the Van Raays have faced: “Up until now, we’ve worked with one company that has bought and sold all of our garlic to grocery stores.” It is unfortunate the larger grocery stores might not understand where garlic grows, and thus might not promote local garlic to buyers.



The Van Raays garlic harvester

Actions Taken

Technology has significantly helped the Van Raays deal with the challenges they face. Machine harvesters have helped to cut down manual labour requirements and a new harvester and planter have “helped tremendously with our productivity to harvest.”

Another action taken by the Van Raays to offset challenges was the development of their processing plant. It enables them to dry the garlic for the curing process, and later use as a cold storage to increase the length of time their garlic can be stored after harvest and before sale. They continue to experiment with ideal temperature and humidity levels. The Van Raays also hope that the processing plant will help them expand their season into the early winter months to keep local garlic available to consumers longer.

Down the line, the Van Raays plan to consider newer technologies that could aid in their production and expansion, such as an optical sorter, which could handle a high volume of garlic to sort and pick out the high quality pieces of garlic.

Teresa pointed out that in some ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a bit of a silver lining for them: it has heightened consumers' concern for what they are eating and where their food is coming from. "People in general want to know where their food is grown, so the Ontario garlic reception has been positive." Consumers are asking for Ontario-grown garlic. The pandemic has helped the public understand the vulnerabilities in our food supply chain, putting focus on Ontario agriculture and making sure they do not "stay on the backburner as a second thought." She also feels that politicians have realized the importance of agriculture and how it can help rebound from the economic setbacks experienced during the pandemic: "Once everything is settled with COVID-19, agriculture is still recognized as a massive economic factor to drive the Canadian economy."

The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) has been one of the most important resources for Van Raay Farms. They work with a Vegetable Crop Specialist who has done considerable research on disease and planting rates. OMAFRA has also partnered with the Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA) to work on getting some pesticides and seed treatments that are used in other countries approved for garlic

production in Canada. The Van Raays have received support from the Garlic Growers Association of Ontario. They have bought Clean Seed (from the Clean Seed Program, coming from the New Liskeard Research Station in Ontario). The Clean Seed program entails the use of garlic plants that are cut in such a way to prevent virus growth, then used for planting. This method should enable the Van Raays to grow higher quality, larger and more consistent garlic.

Van Raay Farms has also been able to collaborate with Fanshawe College in London to improve labour efficiency and safety at the farm. Education on proper lifting methods, ways to avoid over-reaching, and other considerations have been addressed to ensure that workers can maintain good physical form and avoid long-term injury. Teresa notes that the farm enjoys participating in research projects, which helps to create community cohesion. Further to this, they have supplied land to OMAFRA for test plots; as a result, they reap the benefits of having improved soil on their farm, which is a "win-win."

Supports Still Needed

The Van Raays feel that knowing and learning about local production is very important; it is up to everyone (including producers, sellers, and consumers) to educate themselves on where their food comes from, how their food is produced and what influence this has on their communities and the people within them. Trying to "support local" whenever possible not only improves community dynamics and togetherness, but helps people make more conscious choices about what they consume and why.

Support is still needed from governments "to be able to have products regulated for our garlic [and] to have a level playing field by gaining the ability to use safe pesticides and fertilizer, similar to other countries that import." Other regions have different regulations and access to products that are not regulated in Canada, and it is important to have a level playing field with the imports, ensuring Canadian consumers have access to Canadian-grown products.



People in general want to know where their food is grown, so the Ontario garlic reception has been positive.
— Teresa Van Raay

Additionally, Teresa feels that in order to compete with product from other jurisdictions, “our utilities, such as hydro, gas and water, as well as our tax rates, need to be competitive.” Hydro and gas are very expensive in Ontario, as is the Federal carbon tax. Municipal governments could perhaps provide more support to farmers in this regard. Teresa also notes that land prices are increasing and farmers are paying higher taxes, but not receiving additional services.

Into the Future

When asked about short terms plans and goals, Teresa said their main objective is to increase quality and quantity of production, including the ramp up of the Clean Seed Program within the next couple of years. The Program enables the Van Raays to grow higher quality plants, which will help increase sales of Ontario-grown garlic, and work with other sellers to do this. They are only in their second year of the Program, so their garlic plants are still in greenhouses.



They also hope to improve efficiency as they advance. “It’s the little things we learn as we go... it’s not a cookie-cutter set-up, so there’s lots of learning step-by-step”.

Long-term, Van Raay Farms plan to continue to produce high-quality garlic. As the market has grown, farmers are more willing to share with one another what they have used and have had success with when talking about expansion. When asked about whether they would have done anything differently, the Van Raays feel that perhaps they could have gotten good at one thing before moving on to another and taking on all aspects of production, including planting, growing, picking, and packaging.

As a key takeaway, the Van Raays emphasize the importance of working with your community. They feel there are many resources available: “It just might take some digging to find the right groups.” OMAFRA and the Garlic Growers Association of Ontario have been very helpful for them, and they encourage other farmers to seek assistance in order to continue to grow the industry.



Van Raay garlic

Nature's Bounty

CATHY MCKAY AND MARVIN STEVENSON

Introduction

If Thanksgiving weekend is warm and sunny this year, you can bet there are some very happy apple farmers in the Greenbelt. Among them will be Cathy McKay and Marvin Stevenson of Nature's Bounty near Port Perry, whose farm critically depends upon a Pick Your Own business in the fall. With a marketing window of about eight weeks a year, "a rainy Thanksgiving weekend can have a big impact on our income."

Cathy and Marvin are first generation farmers, whose dream to own their own farm began in graduate school, where Marvin was studying animal nutrition and Cathy was studying plant pathology. This dream was realized shortly thereafter, when a year following graduation, they bought their current property. "It was a very run-down place at the time," Cathy says of the farm in 1979, which they spent years cleaning up. "And because of that, a 26- and 27-year-old were able to buy it".

Forty years later, Nature's Bounty is a cherished farm, thriving business, and active member of the local agricultural community. Getting there required much dedication and hard work, while simultaneously holding off-farm jobs throughout their careers.



The early days of Nature's Bounty

Expanding Operations

According to Cathy and Marvin, moving to a farming model that emphasizes interactions with consumers has been a key way to survive and thrive as farmers in the Greenbelt. The original plan had always been to expand about five acres of apples a year, and for the most part, this was what they did while establishing the orchard. However, given the time it takes for the trees to bear fruit, it was more than a decade before they were able to generate an income from them. Cathy and Marvin's story is about taking a new marketing approach and increasing orchard density.



Pick Your Own operation

Farming apples has been challenging at times. Cathy and Marvin seriously reflected upon their options in 1993, when the apple industry was in a low cycle in terms of pricing, and the returns were not healthy. The decision to shift their business was based on comparative advantage. "We're on a world market with apples. We had to ask ourselves, 'What do we have that Chile or Washington doesn't have?' We determined that while those regions have cheaper labour, we have proximity to the consumer." This proximity led them to expand by establishing a Pick Your Own operation.

Cathy and Marvin note that getting into value-added agriculture, such as apple picking, is a form of expansion that is outside of production-oriented operations. With the Pick Your Own business, the angle is about knowing where your food comes from. "And that's a way to expand – not land, but activity based," Marvin explains. On getting started, Cathy recalls, "I'd sit in the car and the odd person would come along. We advertised, made brochures. Gradually it grew."

One aspect that really helped raise the profile of the farm was hosting school tours. "We see kindergarten children bringing their family back later for a tour, and they would show them around with pride. It's really cute." Nature's Bounty also grows pumpkin, squash, and fall vegetables, geared towards the Pick Your Own customer who will buy these additional items while already on site.



School tour

Intensification has been Cathy and Marvin's other major expansion endeavour, and they have reduced their acreage at the same time as improving efficiency of production. When starting out, high-intensity apple orchards were not the norm. A lot of the dwarfing root stocks that were available in the early 80s were really semi-dwarfing, and therefore much bigger than what would be planted now. These larger trees produced apples fit for juice, which is a lower-value crop in a market that has been in decline for years now. Furthermore, Cathy and Marvin found that selling to a major packer meant continually getting squeezed on price, with really no opportunity to grow the business except to improve cost of production through intensification.

A major milestone along this road was the shift to the trellis systems, which they began in 2010 after Cathy and Marvin toured other regions (such as New York and New Zealand) that were using this method to produce more and higher quality apples. Today, almost all of the original trees at Nature's Bounty have been replaced with smaller trees that can produce more favourable varieties and in the higher intensity trellis system. This means that there are more trees to the acre, but less acreage overall.

Challenges

Cathy and Marvin continue to add products, activities, and events to their farm's offerings, which are all meant to draw in the local consumer. However, there are bureaucratic constraints to expanding this side of the business, which have caused more than a few headaches in recent years.

To undertake new business activities (such as opening a café) or hosting events (such as dinner in the orchard featuring local food and chefs), Nature's Bounty must potentially contend with four levels of government whose policies don't always align. In particular, they note that while the provincial policy allows for value-added agriculture, this does not always play out in practice at the municipal level, where permissions for new ventures are not easily granted. Frustration and continued advocacy are also a part of Cathy and Marvin's story.



Trellis system – Blondee apples



Dinner in the orchard event

In addition, apples are very vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. On the one hand, rising temperatures produce some sweeter and more marketable apples. But if there is a particularly mild winter and a warm March, the trees can have early blossoms and then frost on blooms. Drought and severe storms can also ruin an apple crop. In response, apples farmers have had to adapt with irrigations systems, hail netting, and frost fans.

Cathy and Martin note that the cost of land is prohibitively high for new entrants looking to start out. They have a friend who has leased 25 acres from a neighbour to plant an orchard, and see long-term leases such as this one as a good option, noting this practice is also in place in New Zealand. Long-term leases are essential for fruit trees like apples, as they take years to establish and then last for decades – a short-term lease (10-20) years would not enable a farmer to invest in fruit tree production.

Apples are also not yet able to be machine harvested, and while robotics technology is being developed, it is not yet accurate or cost effective enough for use on the average farm. Marvin explains, “Every apple in the world right now is picked by hand.”



Every apple in the world right now is picked by hand.
— Marvin Stevenson

This leads to labour shortages, which have increased in more recent years due to depopulation of rural areas and more young people going to university. “If you’re a Canadian, you’re probably not looking for a seasonal job.” In response to these continued labour pressures, Nature’s Bounty turned to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Nature’s Bounty now employs five workers from Mexico each year, who return every fall for about six weeks to harvest the apples.

And their final challenge to running a modern agricultural business? “Rural internet!” exclaims Cathy, irritated by the lower bandwidth that slows down work and causes frequent dropped video calls.

Actions Taken

Cathy is the Chair of the Ontario Apples Growers, and she and Marvin are also very connected with other organizations that bring producers together to advance their common interests. “You learn a lot from other growers about how the industry works. And if you bring the right attitude, it can be a very sharing group.”

One organization that Cathy and Marvin helped launch was the Durham Farm Fresh Marketing Association. This collaborative effort between growers strives to help local producers, and others committed to local food, market their products to the local community. This association helped raise the profile of Nature’s Bounty and others through efforts such as publishing a farm map for Durham Region, which was distributed through newspapers.

Marvin emphasizes the need for collaboration between all aspects of the agricultural economy to keep farming viable. “In order to keep agriculture in the GTA, you’ve got to have a critical mass. Otherwise, people say, I could go there, but there are no services supporting agriculture, and it’s a pain because of the traffic.”

Nature’s Bounty also has a close relationship with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), collaborating on a number of experiments in the orchard such as pest management approaches. The Pest Management Regulatory Agency’s Minor Use Program has been really helpful to Nature’s Bounty over the years by providing access to pesticides that have had major positive impacts on their ability to produce their apple crop.

Supports Still Needed

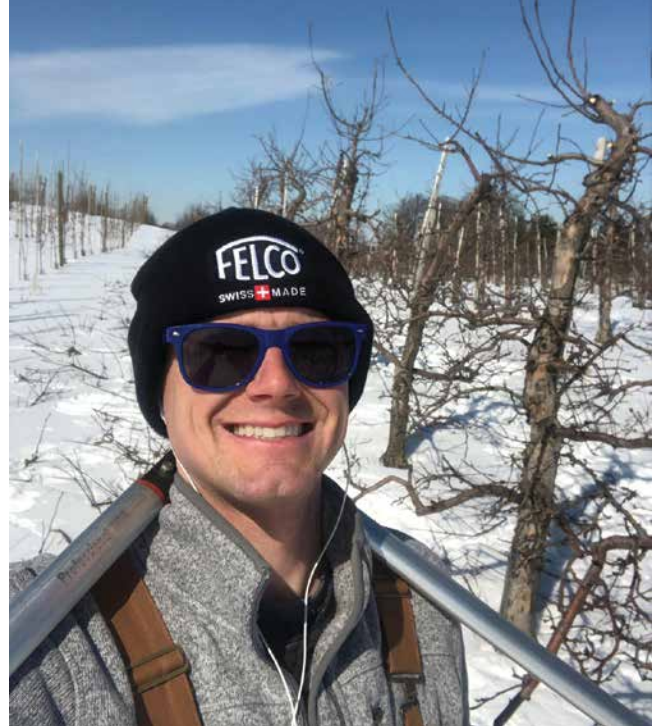
Cathy and Marvin lament the fact that while other provinces offer transition funding for apple farmers, Ontario does not. While they replaced their trees at their own expense, this is out of reach for many local apple farms that continue to grow varieties like Macintosh that are falling out of favour. Cathy and Marvin continue to support the industry’s advocacy for a replanting funding program.

They also would like to see enhancements to the AgriStability program, which is intended to protect Canadian producers against large declines in farming income for reasons such as production loss, increased costs, and market conditions.

Into the Future

When speaking of succession planning, Cathy and Marvin wryly note that their only son has a career as a criminal lawyer in Ottawa. As such, they have had to look elsewhere to plan for the future of their farm. "I turned 64 and was tired of doing everything", recalls Cathy, who decided it was time to hire a Farm Manager. They turned to FarmLINK, where they posted Nature's Bounty as a place where an enterprising new entrant to farming might make a career. Rob Alexander, originally from Saint John in New Brunswick, now manages the farm. This allows Nature's Bounty to extend its life in the short term, buying more time to think about future options.

Cathy and Marvin's advice for other farmers looking to expand their production? "You have got to make sure you're going to grow something that is high value enough to merit buying land in the Greenbelt."



Rob Alexander, Farm Manager



Learning from Success and Ongoing Challenges

The farmers profiled in this report have demonstrated resilience in their efforts to continue embracing the opportunities that Ontario's fruit and vegetable sector can afford. They have some similar experiences, even though their operations are unique.

The Many Forms of Expansion

There are a variety of ways to expand a farm business.

For Cathy and Marvin, expanding their apple production at Nature's Bounty has been about switching to smaller trees that can grow on a high-intensity trellis system. In this case, expansion was achieved through intensifying production, so that there are more trees to the acre. For the Van Raay family, garlic offered a higher value crop per acre, and increasing the volume and efficiency of production is their main goal in the short term. Similarly, David from Fenwick Berry Farm increased his yields by adopting new growing techniques that allowed him to be a more efficient producer.

Identifying different ways to increase and diversify production is especially valuable in places like southern Ontario, where land prices are high for many farmers and new entrants. Although the case studies also highlighted opportunities for leasing lands, more acreage need not be the only way to expand.

Connecting to the Consumer

Fruit and vegetable farmers in southern Ontario often face stiff competition from global markets; but, they can offer value by connecting to the consumer. The case studies have highlighted a number of ways in which interest in local food has been leveraged to expand production.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the vulnerabilities of our food supply, and as a result, increased the public's interest to know where their food is grown and increased resolution to buy local. This has raised the value of Ontario-grown labeling and packaging in the eyes of consumers, such as those who buy the Van Raay's garlic. Nature's Bounty also identified proximity to the consumer as their comparative advantage in a global market for apples, leading them to a profitable Pick Your Own business each Fall.

At the same time, Nick from Berlo's Best Sweet Potatoes cautions that being local is not enough, and that farmers should not depend upon that designation to expand their business. To compete on a global market, fruit and vegetables also need to be able to respond to retailer's expectations, as Nick and his family have always strived to do.

Relationships with the Local Community and Sector

When speaking about their successes and growth, all of the farmers interviewed referenced their partnerships with others in their communities and in the agri-food sector as essential.

Mechanisms to collaborate with other growers - such as the Garlic Growers Association of Ontario, the Berry Growers Association, and Ontario Apple Growers - have been vital for sharing ideas and working together to address common challenges. Marketing organizations have also been beneficial to raising the profile of local agriculture, as Cathy and Marvin have found through helping to launch and participate in the Durham Farm Fresh Marketing Association.

Lastly, OMAFRA has been an important resource for several farmers, such as Van Raay Farms and Nature's Bounty, both of whom host research projects on their farm.

Increasing Production in Response to Demand

These farmers' advice to others looking to expand production was to ensure that similar endeavours be based on evidence of demand. David from Fenwick Berry Farm emphasized the importance of knowing the market, and making sure the demand for product is there before a crop is planted. Fenwick Berry Farm has expanded based on local demands for their crop. Nick from Berlo's Best echoed these sentiments, noting that the first step in expansion should be making sure there is a willing buyer for the product.

Enabling Environment

Many of the ongoing challenges that the interviewed farmers continue to struggle with are the policies and regulations that impact their potential expansions. Building on the strength of having a close proximity to the local consumer, Nature's Bounty would like to embark on even more value-added agriculture activities. However, these aspirations have been dampened by having been told by their municipality that opening a café, hosting a wedding, or even using their storage facility as a picnic area, is not permitted on their farm. David from Fenwick Berry Farm also feels municipalities could take a more positive approach to supporting farmers looking to expand, given the time consuming and expensive processes he has found himself in to obtain building and development permits. Similarly, the Van Raay family lament sudden increases in property taxes and mandatory expensive irrigation studies.

Stringent laws around pesticides were raised as an issue, as well. The Van Raay family argue that some countries can produce greater amounts of garlic at a lower cost using pesticides that are banned in Ontario. David similarly feels the situation is unfair, contending that berries grown overseas with pesticides that are banned here should not be permitted in Canada. Meanwhile, Nature's Bounty has benefited greatly from the Pest Management Regulatory Agency's Minor Use Program, which has improved production of apples by accessing effective pesticides.

Adopting New Technologies

As with any sector that faces persistent labour shortages, the role of technology in potentially automating some of the work is attractive. In many cases, however, these advancements are still out of reach for the time being.

Cathy and Marvin look forward to the day when robots can pick a ripe apple, and when drones are used in pest management. However, these emerging technologies are currently underdeveloped or prohibitively expensive and are anticipated to remain extremely expensive for a long time to come. The same goes for technologies that could reduce the need to harvest garlic manually, although the Van Raays are working to invest in innovations. When Berlo's Best began growing sweet potatoes, effective machine harvesters did not yet exist for their crop – so they built their own, and now hold patents on these inventions.

Adapting to the Impacts of Climate Change

Rising global temperatures produce more favourable growing conditions for sweet potatoes, which thrive in warmer temperatures. Heat waves also produce sweeter – and therefore more marketable – apples. However, unpredictable weather patterns and the increasing frequency and intensity of storms mean that these same farms are also feeling the most destructive impacts of climate change. Rain damage can delay a strawberry crop enough that retailers look to other producers, and early blossoms on apple trees increase the risk of a damaging frost.

In light of the impacts of a changing climate, tools such as hail netting, frost fans, and irrigation systems have become critical tools for adaptation. Practices to respond to the impacts of climate change will become an even greater necessity moving forward.

