

GEYERS' SPECIALTY IS MARKETING SMALL FRUITS

Thornless blackberries have become a profitable item for the Geyers of Virginia

When it comes to successfully marketing fresh berries and fruit, Anne and Charles Geyer say there is no substitute for hard work, careful planning and research. The Geyers rely on these three elements to keep Westmoreland Berry Farm and Orchard operating profitably.

The Geyers have managed Westmoreland Berry Farm since 1983. That's when Alan Voorhees hired them to establish a berry operation and orchard on his 1,600-acre farm near Oak Grove, Virginia. The farm's 200 tillable acres were previously planted in corn and small grain. Voorhees decided to change the makeup of the farm after he noticed that berries were a popular and profitable crop at farmers' markets.

The Geyers had the production expertise to establish a productive berry farm and orchard, but they had no marketing experience. They overcame this obstacle with careful planning. Before they planted the first 20 acres of strawberries, raspberries or blackberries, they contacted wholesale buyers in the Washington, D.C. and Richmond areas, and they visited local farmers' markets to learn which crops had the greatest economic return.

Photos: Tim McCabe, USDA



Charles and Anne Geyer manage Westmoreland Berry Farm and Orchard, Oak Grove, Virginia. One of their most profitable berries is a thornless blackberry developed by USDA researchers at Beltsville, Maryland.

By the end of 1986, the Geyers had gradually expanded Westmoreland's berry and fruit line to include strawberries, blackberries, red and black raspberries, tayberries, blueberries, pumpkins, peaches, apricots, tart cherries, plums, table and wine grapes, and apples.

Westmoreland's success hinges on a five point marketing plan that includes wholesale, U-pick, municipal farmers' markets,

an on-farm retail market, and a mail order business.

Although direct marketing was a cornerstone of their marketing plan, the Geyers' first step was to contact wholesale buyers. Anne says buyers gave them helpful hints on packaging, pricing and quality standards.



Charles and Anne Geyer sell preserves at their on-farm market and through their mail order business, which was started in 1986.

“When we first organized the farm, we planted a wide variety of each berry to cover the early and late seasons,” Anne says. “We believe that diversifying our crops and extending the season from May to September is one of the reasons we got off to a good start. One year after we planted our first berries, we had some cash flow that allowed us to expand into other fruits.”

In 1984, Anne and Charles planted six acres each of peaches and grapes, and they expanded the berry crops with new varieties that increased production early and late in the season. They also planted apple trees in 1985 that will bear fruit in 1988.

Currently, about 30% of the 350,000 pounds of berries and fruit produced at Westmoreland Farms is sold to wholesale buyers. Anne says another 30% is sold at their U-pick operation and on-farm

market, and 35% is marketed at municipal farmers' markets. The remaining 5% is marketed as preserves through Westmoreland's mail order business.

Direct Marketing

Westmoreland's mail order business is the most recent addition to their marketing plan. This aspect of the business was started in 1986.

“We started making jams in 1985, and they were well received at the farmers' markets in Washington, D.C. and Richmond, Virginia and at our on-farm market,” Anne says. “Once we were satisfied with the quality of the blackberry, raspberry and tayberry preserves, we ordered pint and quart harvest baskets with an early American stain. We include an attractive card with our logo, which makes an excellent gift.”

The Geyers designed a one-page mail order form that customers can pick up at the farm. The mailer is also sent to people who have visited the farm and left their addresses or who have left names of relatives or friends as referrals. They did not consider buying a mailing list. They developed their own list exclusively from contacts made at the farm and their farmers' market outlets.

The mailer advertises six different varieties of preserves packaged in several containers. Prices range from \$2.50 for a six-ounce jar up to \$14.25 for a wooden harvest basket that contains three 11-ounce jars.

“We could expand the mail order business if we allocate more fruit and berries to preserves, and if we advertised,” Anne says. “But we are not pressing the mail order business because we want to concentrate on the farm market first. We are expanding the on-farm market and building a new jam kitchen in the hope of doing more business with products such as shortcakes, ice cream sundaes and other fresh berry or peach toppings.”

The Westmoreland Berry Farm is located in a historical region in Virginia near the Rappahannock River. George Washington's birthplace and Robert E. Lee's home are within twenty miles of the farm. This region attracts people from several metropolitan regions. Many visitors who stop for the U-pick berries also buy other Virginia farm products at Westmorelands' on-farm market.

In addition to selling their own berries, fruits and preserves at the farm market, the Geyers sell melons, a wide variety of vegetables and peanuts that are produced locally. They also sell Virginia honey and cider products.

Research Pays Off

Anne says marketing research helped them start the business and point them in the right direction. They also pay close attention to new berry and fruit research taking place at USDA and land grant colleges. New varieties are helping them extend their marketing season and expand their preserve line.

Anne says that improved varieties of blackberries and strawberries developed by USDA's agricultural research service (ARS) plant geneticist Dr. Gene Galletta are good examples of how they have improved the operation with new plant material. The Geyers got acquainted with Galletta and his research several years ago when they were working for the University of Maryland on a cooperative project with ARS in Beltsville, Maryland.

They now have four acres of blackberries that were developed by Galletta and 15 acres of strawberries that include three ARS varieties.

"Dr. Galletta's Chester and Hull thornless blackberry varieties are two of the highest profit items on the farm," Anne says. "The varieties are very similar in shape and taste so customers can't tell the difference. But the Hull variety matures much later in the season, and we needed this kind of variety to extend our marketing season.

"The outcome is that we have a greater selection of berries during the season, and the new varieties are more productive. That adds up to greater profits. We harvested between five and seven tons per acre of these varieties in 1987."

Editor's note: For more information, you can contact Anne and Charles Geyer, Westmoreland Berry Farm and Orchard, Rt. 637 Box 1121, Oak Grove, VA 22413 or call (804) 224-9171. You can contact Gene Galletta at USDA-ARS, Fruit Laboratory, Bldg. 004, Room 111, Beltsville Agricultural Research Center, Beltsville, MD 20705.



The thornless blackberries used in their preserves were developed by Dr. Gene Galletta at USDA's Beltsville, Maryland research facility.

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