

Ohio News Watch

Trudels face specialty challenges



AWARD WINNER: Allison Trudel shows off the Good Food Awards T-shirt that features products from her family's farm.

By **GAIL C. KECK**

FOR specialty crop producers trying to build a business, having products win national awards can be a great morale boost. But while publicity from those awards whets the appetites of potential customers, it doesn't ward off the bad weather, weeds and insects that can limit crop production.

That's the challenge facing Dan and Ann Trudel of Knox County. They won two 2011 Good Food Awards from Seedling Projects, a national organization committed to promoting food that both tastes good and is responsibly produced. The Trudels were recognized for their jalapeno-raspberry jam and their brussels sprout relish. The relish was also honored as a Central Ohio Signature Food by the Center for Innovative Food Technology, the Ohio Department of Development and the Central Ohio Restaurant Association.

The awards have brought them tremendous market opportunities, Dan says. "Unfortunately, we cannot produce enough to meet the demand," he notes.

Last year flea beetles and aphids chomped on their brussels sprouts. This spring 1,500 newly planted raspberry plants drowned during the extended wet weather, and this summer spider mites invaded the raspberries in the farm's new hoop house, hurting early-season yields. And keeping up with weeding is an ongoing problem, even with the use of black plastic, mulch and straw as weed barriers.

"It just never ends," says Dan. Even so, the Trudels are not willing to buy produce from other sources to make their popular jams and relishes. Instead, they'd rather grow the business more slowly, using whatever produce they can raise themselves, so they can maintain the high-quality standards they've set.

The response they get from customers has convinced them there is a market for their fresh raspberries and brussels sprouts, as well as their line of gourmet relishes and jams. "I'm determined and confident that it can be done," says Dan.

Processed option

The Trudels moved to their 5-acre farm near Fredericktown in 2004 without any specific plan for a farm-based business, Dan says. "There was no grand vision. Slowly, it just turned out to be that way."

Neither he nor Ann had any experience



BERRY HOOPS: Ann and Dan Trudel grow raspberries in a hoop house to supply both early- and late-season markets.

Key Points

- Knox County specialty crop producers receive national recognition.
- Demand is high for their gourmet jams and relishes.
- Production problems make meeting demand a challenge.

farming, but Ann had been making jam for more than 20 years and wanted to grow her own berries. They decided to grow brussels sprouts simply because they like them, explains Dan.

When they raised bumper crops the first few years, they began selling the fresh berries and sprouts at farmers markets, and also began making jams and relishes to sell. The processed products let them make good use of fresh produce that is high in quality but has cosmetic flaws that make it difficult to sell, Ann points out. About 60% of their sales is processed foods, and they now sell at six farmers markets in the Columbus area with the help of their 12-year-old daughter, Allison.

In addition to selling at farmers markets, the Trudels open their farm for pick-your-own raspberry customers from August through October. From Monday through Thursday, customers can either buy the berries or pick on halves.

"They get berries for free, and we get what we need for jam," Ann explains. The Trudels have found that having customers keep the ripe berries picked helps reduce insect problems. "We don't have any rot-



GOURMET GOODS: Ann, Allison and Dan Trudel market more than half of the produce grown on Ann's Raspberry Farm as gourmet jams and relishes.

ting fruit out there to attract bugs."

The farm is closed on Fridays so the family can pick fresh fruit for the next day's markets. It's open on weekends for pick-your-own customers, but not for picking on halves to avoid crowding and to encourage customers to come throughout the week to keep berries picked, Ann explains.

Certified natural

The Trudels' farm is not certified as organic through the USDA program, but they

use organic production practices and participate in the Certified Naturally Grown program, which has similar standards with simplified paperwork. The absence of chemicals is an important selling point for some of their customers.

"Being chemical-free is important to nine out of 10 customers in Clintonville," Dan notes. "But at Mount Vernon, nine out of 10 don't give a lick about it."

The farm has been a financial success to the extent that profits have allowed the Trudels to expand production every year, notes Dan. They have not borrowed money to grow the business and don't intend to, he adds. "We work on a cash-flow basis only."

Both Dan and Ann put a full-time effort into the farm business, and Dan also works full time from their home doing market research. Eventually, they hope the business will grow to where it can support them.

Keck writes from Raymond.

Tour Ann's Raspberry Farm Sept. 18

THE Trudels are active members of the Innovative Farmers of Ohio and credit the organization's mentoring with helping them realize the potential for their farm business. In turn, they'll share their experiences during an IFO-sponsored farm tour on Sept. 18. For more information on this year's tours, go to www.ifo.org. To learn more about Ann's Raspberry Farm and Specialty Crops, go to www.annsraspberryfarm.com.