

Blackberries diversify farm

Key Points

- Jones Farms diversified with two varieties of blackberry plants on 4 acres.
- It takes two years to get first berries, but healthy plants produce for 12-15 years.
- The Joneses plant rows so that morning pickings can be done in complete shade.

By MICHAEL BRANTLEY

It all started because Barbara Jones was looking something to do.

It wasn't that she had loads of spare time on her and her husband, Jim's, 800-acre-plus sweetpotato and plant farm — she just wanted something to call her own.

"I wanted something that could be 'mine,'" she says. "A sweetpotato breeder who was out [on the farm] doing a test plot suggested I try blackberries. He introduced me to his wife, who was a specialist at [North Carolina] State [University]."

Pretty soon, Barbara and Jim were selling blackberry plants cut from mother plants at NCSU. That was seven years ago. Today, they have three blackberry greenhouses — two with thrips screens — and ship plants all over the nation.

After a year of selling plants, they started a planting of canes — the official name of blackberry and raspberry plants — on 1½ acres of the farm.

"We planted each variety of plant we sold, because I wanted to be able to answer questions," Barbara says. "We found varieties we liked and ones we didn't. I was looking for something that stored well and had a good taste. So, we took out what we didn't like and planted the varieties we did."

The Joneses settled on the thornless Arapaho and Ouachita (pronounced was-A-tah) varieties. The rows are planted north to south, and picking ends at 1 p.m. each day so that the fruit is in the shade after it comes off the cane.

From a production standpoint, they make a great pair. Arapaho is ready to harvest in early June and runs about three weeks, while Ouachita comes off in mid- to late June and runs until mid-July.

"We get in early, and get out before the market gets bombarded," Barbara says.

That small start has grown to 4 acres of blackberries. Their biggest bulk customer is the Trader Joe's food stores chain, and a majority of the berries from Jones Farms in Mount Pleasant, N.C., end up in Boston, Mass. B&B Produce in New Jersey often takes overflow production, and the Joneses sell at farmers markets in Rocky Mount as well as Raleigh.

In addition to production, the Joneses still sell the plants and are certified with regular state inspections. It takes two years to get berries from a plant, but a healthy cane can produce for 12-15 years. Every three years, the mother plants are upgraded and new varieties released.

The couple employs a shift-trellis system that keeps all the berries on one side of the canes, so they can be picked in the shade. Because heat and light turn blackberries back to their red or "not-yet-ripe" appearance, or cause white spots, the picking boxes of workers are



FARM VETERANS: Jim and Barbara Jones have been farming for over 30 years. In early June, the blackberry crop shown in the background was just hitting stride and ripening in stages.



JUICY FRUIT: Barbara Jones gives some scale for the blackberries produced at Jones Farms in Mount Pleasant, N.C. Their two varieties are known for taste and shelf life.

collected every 15 minutes and taken to an on-site cooler.

"[Once collected] they have a great shelf life and ship great," Barbara says. "If you put them at 34-36 degrees, they could be in there two to three weeks ... but they don't stay here long, as we have pickup at least twice a week."

The beginning of the harvest in June was shaping up as an average year, which Jim says beats a bumper crop anytime. "The problem with a bumper crop is that there is usually a bumper crop elsewhere, and the market gets flooded," he laughs. "So far, this is a good, average crop."

The North American Raspberry and Blackberry Association (formerly the North American Bramble Association) estimates blackberry production at 704 million pounds worldwide. Demand has increased as the health benefits of blackberries have been touted both for nutrition and for cancer-resistant properties.

Jones Farms produced over 60,000 pounds of the berries last year, a figure far exceeding average yield numbers.

Experience counts

The family farm includes their son, Jimmy, and daughter, Jessica, a handful of full-time employees and as many as 100 pickers at peak season.

The Joneses are no rookies when it

comes to farming. Jim started working the current property in 1977 and was able to buy it in 1980 when he and Barbara were married. Both grew up on farms, and Jim has grown tobacco and sweetpotatoes for 33 years, before recently giving up the leaf.

Jones Farms has six sweetpotato greenhouses, besides 800 acres of seed and production sweetpotatoes. They have 2 acres of muscadine grapes and about 75 acres of wheat and soybeans.

The Joneses saw an opportunity with the plant side of the business and took advantage. Jones Farms is a certified seed and plant wholesaler, selling to producers all over the U.S. and Canada.

"The micropropagation at N.C. State was started to get a clean source of plants, and they started with sweetpotatoes because they mutate so bad," Jim says. "The reason we got into plants is there wasn't a big, clean source of plants in the U.S., and we saw a chance to do something not everybody was doing."

Cross-product advantages

Being in the plant business has also helped the Joneses keep an eye on trends in the sweetpotato business.

"We are seeing sweetpotatoes growing in more areas now, and we are shipping to places like Nebraska, where I didn't think you could grow sweetpotatoes," Jim says. "The sweetpotato french fry has turned on a lot of places that have [white] potatoes, especially areas that already have production facilities."

Foreign demand has also been a boon to the state's growers, Jim says.

"Promotion overseas has helped sell a lot of North Carolina sweetpotatoes. A lot of containers are going to England, and more are going to Germany and Spain. But the big deal could be the french fries. If somebody like McDonald's or another chain of restaurants starts selling the french fries, that is a lot of volume." Until then, the Joneses will continue to do what's been successful for them for decades: finding opportunities, doing their homework and producing quality crops.

Brantley writes from Nash County, N.C.

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