

## Value-added Agricultural Success Story



# Berry Ridge Farms

This story is one of a special series of value-added agricultural enterprise successes in Tennessee. The entrepreneurs featured have worked with specialists at the Center for Profitable Agriculture in different ways to achieve various levels of start-up, sustainable and long-term enterprise success. I hope their stories will be interesting, informative and inspiring.

*Rob Holland, Director, Center for Profitable Agriculture*



*David Webb owns and operates Berry Ridge Farms near Livingston in Overton County.*

**D**avid and Diana Webb's *Berry Ridge Farms* is located 13 miles north of Interstate 40 in Overton County. The farming operation consists of slightly more than three acres of berry crops, including 1½ acres of blueberries, one acre of raspberries and ⅔ acres of blackberries.

When the Webbs first began growing blueberries about 15 years ago, they quickly realized that a few bushes produced more than they could consume. So they started selling to church members, neighbors and friends. They noticed a strong and continued interest in their fresh products in the local community and soon began to consider expanding production.

Approaching retirement from his full-time job, David realized he would soon have the time necessary to devote to increased production and marketing efforts. David and Diane also realized that expanded berry production might help them alleviate a potential problem and even present an opportunity. A new four-lane highway was being built adjacent to the cattle farm that David operated with his father. Concerned about increased liability from their cattle grazing near such a busy road, they felt that more expensive fencing would be needed. On the other hand, the additional traffic could be helpful for their direct marketing efforts.

The Webbs decided to plant more blueberry, raspberry and blackberry bushes. Before they knew it, a few bushes became 100, and they were operating a full-fledged, pick-your-own and pre-picked berry business.

When asked about the shift from raising cattle to producing fruit crops, David says it was just a natural progression. "My dad was getting older, and so was I. We were thinking about getting out of the cattle business anyway, and the new road just helped seal the deal," he says. "The biggest obstacle we've faced since the transition has been the weather. Berry crops are much less forgiving of poor weather than cattle," he says.



*David Webb uses black plastic and modern irrigation systems to produce several acres of crops for direct marketing.*

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The Webbs invested in a state-of-the-art drip system to irrigate and fertilize their fruit. "We got lucky by hitting a great well on this property, so lack of water hasn't been an issue for us." The late freeze of 2007, however, wreaked havoc on a good portion of their crop. As a result, the Webbs are in the process of culling and replanting in 2008. The newly planted bushes will not be ready for harvest for three years, so David's biggest worry is not having enough berries. "There's nothing worse than having to turn a customer away," he says.

The Webbs are happy with the current size of their operation and are not inclined to increase their production base, nor do they want to change their clientele, even though they have been asked to sell commercially. They are planning to make a few changes, such as replacing most of the current blackberry crop with blueberries. They sell more blueberries, and blackberries seem to have more disease issues.

What makes Berry Ridge Farms so successful? "Having happy customers is the best advertisement," David says. "We've got a great location, and we've had a lot of help along the way. When I was getting started, Allen Straw (former UT berry and vegetable specialist) was great with selecting varieties, an irrigation system and spraying schedules."

"We've also added some nice signage. Megan Bruch at the Center for Profitable Agriculture suggested that we put the large sign on the barn. She also recommended changes that would make the farm stand more customer-friendly, so we are adding a pavilion with picnic tables this year. Hopefully we'll get another Tennessee Department of Agriculture Enhancement Cost-Share grant. The first one helped out when we expanded our parking lot and sales area."

Overton County Extension Agent Ron Johnson applauds David Webb's efforts and ingenuity. "If you want to visit a top-notch place, just go to Berry Ridge Farms. David took the time in doing this venture the right way."

**The mission of the Center for Profitable Agriculture is to help farm families improve income by identifying new ways to add value to food and fiber products through processing, packaging and marketing. We focus on three areas:**

- Working with families and entrepreneurs to analyze value-added agricultural enterprises;
- Implementing market development studies to determine the viability of new products;
- Conducting educational programs for Tennessee farmers and agricultural leaders.

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