

Value-added Agricultural Success Story



Oakes Farm

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 Black, with his wife Leigh and their son Elijah, used his tourism experience to help Oakes Farm expand into agritourism.



An aerial view of the 9-acre corn maze.

Oakes Farm in northeast Knox County is a third-generation operation that has been transformed over the past 30 years from a traditional tobacco and beef cattle business into a value-added direct-marketing and agritourism operation.

Bill Oakes was the first to farm the land and, along with son Stewart, took their passion for growing daylilies from a hobby to a prosperous niche venture. Although Bill passed away in the late '90s, Stewart and his son Ken continue to operate Oakes Daylilies, which offers some 1,600 varieties of the hardy perennial through a catalog mail-order business and Web site. To strengthen their presence in the flower-marketing business, they also bought *Paradise Garden Nursery*, an online company that offers a full line of perennials, hosta, peonies and shrubs.

Seeing a national trend toward agritourism activities as another way to add income to their operation, Ken invited his brother-in-law David Black to join the business in 2001. David had worked in tourism for years and offered a fresh perspective on how to expand Oakes Farm.

Typically, fall has been a slower time for the daylily business. So after considerable brainstorming and research, Ken and David decided to start a corn maze, tapping into a concept that had become increasingly popular nationwide. "I also attended a seminar in Wisconsin to learn more about how to make this type of attraction successful," David points out.

Their next step was to contact Harry Bryan and Doug Dalton at UT Extension for advice. "It was a good move," says David. "We had heard Extension was a good resource." Ken and David also hired Al Rutledge, who had already retired from UT, to consult with them about growing pumpkins and corn.

Designing the maze was beyond their expertise, however, so they turned to an Idaho "maze master" for a unique design and the cutting process. "He uses a small John Deere tractor rigged with a GPS system to cut the trails," David explains.



The Oakes Farm maze is family entertainment.



For additional information, contact:

**Center for Profitable Agriculture
University of Tennessee Extension
P.O. Box 1819
Spring Hill, TN 37174-1819
Phone: 931-486-2777
Fax: 931-486-0141
cpa@utk.edu
<http://cpa.utk.edu>**

With nine acres of labyrinth passageways, the Oakes Farm Corn Maze opened in fall 2001. "It's really two intricately designed, separate mazes," with six hidden checkpoints in each maze," David says. "Finding all the checkpoints and then finding your way out is a challenge."

Besides the maze, visitors can take a covered hay wagon to the pumpkin patch and purchase varieties ranging from the size of a baseball to a 40-pound whopper. A gift shop and a concession stand are available onsite.

The newest attraction to the Oakes Farm entertainment venue is the haunted *Trail of Doom*. It's a separate corn maze, consisting of elaborate sets, sounds and characters to scare even the most seasoned fright-night fan. A portion of the proceeds is donated to a local hospital. "We feel it is important to give back to the community," David observes.

Feedback is important to the success of any business, and David has turned to the Center for Profitable Agriculture (CPA) for assistance. "Megan Bruch has been especially helpful with the design of our brochure and suggesting other ways to market our activities," David offers. "The Center does an excellent job of keeping us posted on educational opportunities that will help us grow our business."

Online, David has created MySpace pages for people to post their reactions to the farm's Halloween-related events; he has also played a key role in developing the company's Web site.

Tennessee Agricultural Enhancement grants have helped to improve the business, enabling David and Ken to purchase tents, build a new shed, redesign their Web site and add restrooms.

A strong proponent of value-added agriculture, David is now serving his second term as vice president of the new Tennessee Agritourism Association.

To stay at the top of their game, they share ideas with a national network of corn maze owners and visit other similar operations. "Each year, we try to raise the bar by offering something new," says David. "We listen to what our customers say, and we think outside the box. Our goal is to be the best."

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.

Visit the UT Extension Web site at
<http://www.utextension.utk.edu/>

E12-4015-00-007-09 400-7/08 08-0265

Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture and county governments cooperating.
UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.