

Select a Taste of Michigan

Getting to Know Your Local Blueberry Grower

Joe DeGrandchamp



History of farming operation (include acreage, food grown, etc).

The DeGrandchamp farm is located 3 miles south of South Haven Michigan on Blue Star Hwy. They farm 135 acres of blueberries, 30 acres of cranberries, and 10 acres of nursery stock and operate a modern packing and shipping facility and a farm market retail store. The farm is owned by three brothers and one sister: Joe, Mike, Bob, & Judy. In 1958, their grandmother, a resident of Warren, came out to West Michigan to visit family and pick blueberries in South Haven. She so enjoyed the experience and the taste that she was able to talk her son-law, Vince, into buying the farm, which was up for sale at that time. The rest is history... The 4 kids spent their summer vacations on the farm, caring for and harvesting the blueberries. Now Vince has since passed away, but his legacy still lives on in his children. Their expertise in caring for the blueberries can be seen in the fact that the 55-year old plants from the original 12 acre farm are still excellent producers.

Q: Why is a program like Select a Taste of Michigan important?

A: The Select a Taste of Michigan program is very important in that provides a forum to let consumers know about the merits of buying locally and the high quality of Michigan blueberries. Joe believes that Michigan blueberries are superior in quality to those grown in other regions due to the unique climate and soils in Michigan. In addition, Joe points out that Michigan producers utilize a more diverse group of blueberry varieties which allows the farmer to produce a higher quality flavor by matching the varieties to environmental conditions in their local area and the markets demands of specific fresh market or processing markets.

Q: What do you like about farming?

A: Although Joe acknowledges that farming is a lot of work, he enjoys the flexibility, change of seasons and corresponding change of job situation, the people he meets, and the lifestyle of blueberry production. He also feels it provides a good living for the family.

Q: How do you approach farming?

A: Joe takes satisfaction in producing a quality food crop that is in high demand, and has recently proven to be very healthy. It is his desire to utilize the best production practices that will produce healthy blueberry bushes, which will in turn yield the highest quality. This is of utmost importance because markets are highly dependent on quality.

Q: How important is the consumer in your planning and production cycle?

A: The consumer is paramount. Flavor is particularly important for fresh market production and the farmer must do all he can to ensure quality flavor. In addition to flavor, uniformity of size is of high importance to processing markets.

Q: How do you include sustainable practices?

A: Joe attempts to minimally use herbicides. He utilizes leaf sampling to optimize the application of nutrients to each block. He uses field scouts to monitor insect traps and the crop so that control measures are applied at optimal timing. Cutting back on use of control measures also means savings on inputs. He is also working with Michigan State University to test new insect control products, which are safer for the environment. In addition, Joe recycles water taken from his drain tiles and uses trickle irrigation instead of overhead watering, thus conserving even more water. Finally, Joe uses sod to cover and improve the health of the soil between the rows.

Q: What's the basic philosophy that supports the way you work?

A: This is best summed up in an interesting quote: "Farm to live, not live to farm". Essentially what he means is that farming must be treated as a business that makes a profit and will support a good living. However, Joe states that he is also concerned that profit does not come at the expense of the environment.

Q: What issues do you look to in the future?

A: Joe believes that there will be both good and bad on the horizon for the Michigan blueberry industry. He laments the extensive government regulations and the fact that so much effort goes into documentation related to labor usage. The time that the extensive record keeping requires significantly cuts into the profitability of farming. However, overall, Joe is optimistic about the future and the blueberry industry. Blueberries not only taste excellent but also do not need to be sliced, cooked or prepared. They can be eaten just as they come off the bush and therefore will always be in high demand.

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