

Select a Taste of Michigan

Getting to Know Your Local Blueberry Grower

Dennis & Shelly Hartmann--True Blue Farms

Grand Junction (South Haven area), Michigan



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

Dennis' farm heritage starts with his grandfather who relocated from Chicago and started a produce business: Hartmann's Plantation. Blueberries, both plants and berries, began to become a more important part of the farming operation. In 1986 Dennis started True Blue Farms with 10 acres of blueberries. In 1990 he married his wife Shelly, owner of two local beauty salons. Dennis originally worked for a company making blueberry equipment but later went into full time farming after purchasing two more farms and bringing his acreage up 50 acres. Dennis fell in love with blueberry production and now has 150 acres and has built his own processing facility where blueberries are packaged into 30 lb. boxes and frozen. Currently 30 different growers bring a total of 4 million lbs. of blueberries to be processed. One million of that is grown on the Hartmann's farm.

The Hartmann's also have 3 daughters who help out on the farm and at their blueberry store where a smorgasbord of products, all of which contain blueberries, are sold: mustard, juice, jam, jelly, blueberry carmel corn, baking mixes, jerky, brats, & sausage. You may of course purchase fresh blueberries at the store or u-pick your own.

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

A: The Select a Taste of Michigan program makes the consumer more aware of the need to buy locally and take pride as citizens of the state of Michigan in purchasing fresher product from local growers. Shelly asserts, "Once you have tasted a Michigan blueberry you won't want to buy one from another area." Consumers can better relate to products produced close to home. The Hartmann's own line of blueberry jerky, brats and polish sausages, has been well received by retailers and consumers in their area for that reason.

The Hartmanns have been watching with sadness as urban development has continued to swallow up prime blueberry ground in the South Haven and Holland area. It is imperative that consumers support and increase the profits of local farmers by buying locally to help avert this trend. The Select a Taste of Michigan program therefore plays an important role in helping farmers increase profits and making consumers aware of all the ramifications of supporting the local farmers.

Q: What do you like about farming?

A: The Hartmanns consider it a pleasure to supply a consumable product that brings such high satisfaction in taste and is full of antioxidants and subsequent health benefits such as improving memory and eyesight. In addition, seeing the production cycle from start to completion: pollination, ripening, harvesting, and finally delivery to final end user, is very fulfilling and also sufficiently varies the work throughout the year. This year-round cycle involves a tremendous amount of work but according to the Hartmanns: "If you didn't love farming you would not be farming".

Q: How do you approach farming?

A: Dennis and Shelly see themselves as stewards of land that is given to them by God. They work hard to make their business a success but ultimately they are dependent on God and grateful to God for their success.

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

A: All decisions are made upon the basis of how it affects the quality of the product that is delivered to the end user, the consumer. The Hartmanns are very intent on delivering the highest quality product no matter what the sacrifice in time and effort. Consistent high quality means access to more markets and more sales which is important when one needs to sell 1 million lbs. of berries.

The farmers for whom they process and pack are also their customers and the Hartmanns do everything possible to help them ensure delivery of quality product. They host educational meetings for this group of farmers each winter for that purpose.

Q: How do you include sustainable practices?

A: Through a routine program of visual inspecting and monitoring the field for insects, diseases, and weeds the Hartmanns are able to correct problems at optimum times and ultimately reduce costs of production. Traps that attract pest insects are strategically placed around the farm. These are checked to determine when an insect is present and control measures can then be applied at the most efficient time.

The Hartmanns also are working with the Van Buren Conservation District groundwater technician to monitor the rainfall and thereby apply the optimum amount of water for irrigation, thus conserving water and energy. In addition, the Michigan Department of Agriculture Water Stewardship program monitors the water source and participation helps ensure that they are best prepared for water shortages or floods.

Product safety and quality consistency is an important part of sustainability. The Hartmanns are audited by American Institute of Bakers yearly and given "superior" ratings on sanitary measures, cleanliness, and quality of product. The Hartmanns have written specific detailed instructions to ensure quality and workers are trained to adhere to those standard procedures and safety protocol. Their tracking system is so progressive that they know for each lb. of blueberries harvested, from which day, farm, and field it was picked. Problems can then immediately be traced back to the point source.

Q: Why do you work this way?

A: The Hartmanns property is prime ground for growing blueberries and they feel responsible to preserve that productive potential of the land for future generations and one day pass it on better than they received it. Sustainable practices not only preserve the land but also result in reduced costs of production and a safer, premium quality product which ensures their long-run marketing and business success.

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

A: The Hartmann's have a very optimistic view of the future. People are becoming more health conscious and restaurants are beginning to serve more as they become aware of the health benefits of blueberries and a new product: blueberry concentrate for juice. Much of the Hartmanns' success can be attributed to use of state-of-the-art processing facility which utilizes a high tech color sorter and the recognition that self-education is important. Dennis recently completed an MSU Extension program in scouting and Shelly a program in business planning. Although Shelly acknowledges that getting enough labor and all the paperwork issues associated with hiring seasonal labor is difficult, Shelly was hard pressed to come up with any insurmountable problems that might plague their business in the future. Perhaps it is this optimism that allows them to keep improving and expanding. For example, right now they are working with a company to produce bird feed, making a market for lower grade blueberries that would otherwise be thrown away. In addition, much of their optimism is rooted in the current success of the Michigan Blueberry Association where between 85 to 90% of their blueberries are marketed.