

Shaking up the apple trees and a lot more

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Enterprise-Bulletin

THE BLUE MOUNTAINS - When it comes to innovative agriculture, the Farmer's Pantry may be the pick of the crop.

The Beaver Valley orchard and fruit farm located just south of Clarksburg has turned the traditional industry almost on its ear with a blend of innovation and public education.

The 125-acre farm has reduced its use of chemical pesticides to a huge degree thanks to selective tree breeding and planting.

Mary-Lynn Sheridan, one of the owners of the property, said they've also embraced ecological controls to keep pests down.

"We used to have a big pipe with rat poison - all the old farmers did. The rodents after harvest would go in there and eat that, and then they'd come back and not eat our trees.

"Now we're looking for other methods."

That means paying more attention to creating wildlife habitat for rodent predators such as snakes, birds-of-prey and foxes, she said or other methods that are equally simple. The pickers are directed to leave apple cores and unfit fruit around the trees, a strategy that provides food for mice and other animals and their impacts on the trees.

"We're looking for other habitats for wild gaming birds in our bushes. We've put up more bat boxes around the farm so they'll eat insects and keep the kids away from it. They eat a ton of mice, and so do the snakes."

That's a technique more farmers are looking at, Sheridan said, with controls on spraying growing stricter by the year. It's also a sell for consumers who provide detailed records on what chemicals have been used on their crops.

Apples from organic farms or that come from producers who use sprays sparingly are becoming more desirable to the consumer, she said. It's also a plus for local producers, Sheridan said, since they can prove what chemicals have been used on the trees. That's something that's important to international crops.

New varieties of apples, such as the much-sought-after Honey Crisps, are also very disease- and pest-resistant while providing a superior taste, she said.

Under careful management, an apple tree will produce good yields for about 40 years, Sheridan explained. The trees are trimmed regularly and branches encourages new, more productive growth that in effect keeps the tree young.

Cortland, Macintosh and Spartan apples are the most popular varieties, particularly among people who come in to pick their own fruit.

At one time, most people opting for picking their own apples were seniors, many of whom grew up in rural areas that left them quite used to it. Now, it's increasingly families that seize the opportunity, Sheridan said. She also caters to school groups and bus tours.

This summer's weather was a tough one for apple growers. Crop yields may be somewhat smaller than last year, due to the near-drought. The apples themselves are averaging smaller than normal. The recent rains were enough to help fill out most apples, although the Macintoshes were a bit smaller.

Last year, six million pounds of apples were harvested from the farm and an additional 75 acres her family operates nearby.

Sheridan said her pickers handle an average of 5,000-to-6,000 apples a day during the harvest. She hires her workers from Mexico and values their friendly culture.

Sheridan is also an advocate of the new "100-mile diet" being advocated by agricultural producers around this area. The concept suggests eating as much food as possible from local producers within that hundred-mile limit.

"We're trying to get people to understand how the food gets to their mouth and what to look for and what to ask for," Sheridan said.

Figure:

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Mary-Lynn Sheridan, one of the owners of Farmer's Pantry, said they've also embraced ecological controls to keep pests down.

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