

## Value-added Agricultural Success Story



# Forgie's Fruit 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*



*Bill Forgie, owner of Forgie's Fruit Farm, inspects the blooms on trees in the peach and cherry orchard.*

**B**ill and Vicki Forgie moved to Tennessee from Michigan in 1989 when Bill accepted a job near Spring Hill. The couple wanted to return to their roots and add to future retirement income by developing an agricultural enterprise unique to the area. When they realized there were few orchards around, they began researching and planning.

"Before we even started our orchard, we met with UT Extension Agent Ricky Skillington, who referred us to David Lockwood (Extension tree fruits and nuts specialist). "We can't say enough for all the great help they were, particularly with production issues," shares Bill.

In 1994, the Forgies planted 350 peach trees. While waiting for the trees to mature, the couple developed and finalized marketing strategies. In 1998, they opened for business.

UT Area Farm Management Specialist John Campbell worked with the Forgies to develop a cash flow analysis of their enterprise and showed them what to expect in terms of expenses and income.

During the first few years, the Forgies struggled with building up their customer base and actually had more fruit than customers. That gradually changed, however, and in 2006, they found themselves in a predicament when they ran out of peaches twice. "I would rather have excess fruit than have people upset they just drove over an hour to get our peaches," says Bill.

The orchard has been expanded over the years and now has 750 peach trees and 800 sweet cherry trees. They have one of the very few cherry orchards in the state, and the 2008 season will bring their first crop. "Our cherries are sweet varieties with excellent flavor and are great for eating fresh," Bill says. "Our peach customers can't wait, and we expect to draw more customers to the orchard just because of the cherries."



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Cherry production has brought challenges. "When I planted the first trees, we lost at least 50 percent each year because of various problems, but we didn't give up," Bill shared. He visited cherry orchards in Michigan to learn from other growers and again enlisted the help of David Lockwood, who tweaked production techniques for Tennessee's climate.

Currently, the Forgies sell 80 percent of their fruit as "U-pick." The remaining 20 percent is split between pre-pick and approximately 10 businesses that purchase their peaches and then resell at grocery stores, roadside stands or farmers markets.

The Forgies try to create a relaxed, family-friendly atmosphere at their farm by encouraging children to help pick and by giving rides to and from the rows within the orchard and back to the cars. They educate their customers on the finer points of choosing a peach for their particular needs, whether for eating fresh, storing, cooking or preserving. In addition to interacting with customers on the farm, the Forgies provide information through their Web site.

"We're happy with how the orchard is doing," Bill says. "We had hoped to have profits sooner, but part of the business is putting money back into it while it is expanding." The Center for Profitable Agriculture (CPA) has helped them to be realistic "As far as business decisions go, Rob Holland was a big help in the early years. He helped us realize we needed to grow our business and make the orchard self-sufficient before we expanded into other things." The advice was very important when they lost their entire crop in 2007. In 2009, the Forgies hope to go forward with a bakery and café expansion.

Because of so many repeat customers, Bill and Vicki feel they've succeeded in their goal of making their orchard a destination. "We want our customers to have a great experience while they're here and want to come back." For anyone embarking on a direct marketing venture, Bill offers this advice, "Do your homework before you start. And if you don't plan on lots of hard work, don't start."

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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