

# Value-added Agricultural Success Story

## Valley Home 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*



*Sisters Linda and Vickie produce many value-added products for sale at the Valley Home Farm store, including strawberry cakes, pies, breads, strawberry honey pops and jams and jellies.*

Valley Home Farm is a diversified agricultural operation located near Wartrace, Tennessee. Dating back to the 1800s, it was purchased in 1958 by R.K. and Nellie Potts and son, Lowell. Lowell's children—Nancy Potts Edwards, Bob Potts, Linda Potts Williams and Vickie Potts Pydum—are the fifth generation to operate the farm.

Today, the farm consists of 350 acres in the rolling hills of the southern mid-section of the state. The fully restored main farmhouse, built in 1835, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Originally, the Potts family produced broiler chickens, beef cattle and hay, but in 1998 the farm was further diversified to include direct-farm marketing, value-added products and agritourism enterprises.

The introduction of these new enterprises came about out of a desire of one of the Potts sisters to return to the family operation full-time. When her husband died unexpectedly, Nancy chose to leave her corporate career and return to the farm. But before making the move, she had to find an alternative enterprise that could generate enough revenue to provide a comfortable living. "I looked into nearly every specialty crop that could possibly succeed in our zone: peaches, cantaloupes, watermelons and blueberries," says Nancy. She even considered using the historical farmhouse as a bed and breakfast.

After a year of research, Nancy felt strongly that plasticulture strawberries could be the farm's niche. Though Valley Home Farm is in a rural area, it is surrounded by good-size population centers within an easy 30-minute drive. "I felt we could get people to come out to the farm to pick or purchase strawberries," she says.

Nancy knew she could not accomplish the entire enterprise on her own, so she approached her brother, Bob, who works the farm full-time. "When Bob agreed to partner with me on the strawberries, I knew he could do the



farming, and I could do the marketing,” laughs Nancy. Early in the planning stages, former UT Extension specialists John Buchanan and Allen Straw made farm visits to consult on irrigation designs and production schedules, while tree fruit and nut specialist David Lockwood also proved to be an excellent resource.

“The Center for Profitable Agriculture has also been very supportive by offering conferences and other opportunities to learn,” Nancy says. “They’ve had great ideas for getting people to the farm and recommendations for other farm activities. Everyone with Extension and the folks at the Farm Bureau have given us a great deal of support and information.”

Nancy’s previous background in retail has helped her market *Valley Home Farm* as a destination. In addition to creating a Web site and maintaining a growing mailing list, she sends news releases to local newspapers and other publications, which, in turn, publicize the farm and special events held there.

After Nancy and Bob began producing strawberries, their sisters Linda and Vickie opened a commercial kitchen on the farm, making jams, jellies and relishes as well as baked and frozen confections.

To capture even more value from their investment, the family decided to double-crop their land, planting pumpkins once the berries were harvested. They also offered school and group tours and established a fall market complete with mums, cornstalks, a pumpkin patch and an animal petting area.

The Potts relied heavily on family labor for their enterprises, although they hired additional seasonal workers for harvesting. But in 2006, they decided to eliminate the fall-season products and attractions. To replace that lost revenue source, the family anticipates planting blueberries, which will be a better fit in the overall farming enterprise.

Behind *Valley Home Farm’s* driving force, dedication and basis for success is the desire to maintain the family farm. It requires an enormous amount of time and effort, and as Nancy says, “This business is not for everyone. There is always more work than what you can really do. “But for people thinking about their own business venture, Nancy offers this advice, “Focus on what you can actually do, and do it really well.”

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>

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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E12-4015-00-007-08 500-6/08 08-0253

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