

## **Panel Discussion: Successful diversification for tree fruit growers**

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Twenty-six years after starting our farm enterprise from scratch, we have transitioned from a start-up, survival business approach, to one in which we are enjoying success. Our growing diversity is serving to insulate us from large economic downswings, even in seasons with major crop losses.

Our foundation is production diversity. We grow just about every fruit adapted to our area; strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, peaches, nectarines, plums, apples and pears, all of which are offered pick your own. Apples are our most important crop, with 65 varieties in production, each of which is grown in sufficient quantity to support our retail and pick your own sales in an average year. Our apple storage is not very large, so we use Retain thoughtfully and pick much our crop on an as needed basis. We grow varieties such as an early Braeburn and a late Gala to help with this. All of our new plantings are on the French Axe, which is very simple to manage and offers better support than individually staked trees. We produce about 10,000 gallons of high quality, unpasteurized cider a season, and shut down our store for the season following Thanksgiving. We also produce about 10 acres of sweet corn, as well as dozens of different vegetable varieties, bedding plants and 6 acres of unusual pumpkins, squashes and gourds. Total production acreage is about 70 acres on our 145-acre farm.

We have taken our production diversity a step further by looking at season extension. We now have eight 19 by 100 foot greenhouses for tomato production, giving us a great jump on the season with mid June production. This year, we also experimented with a 2000 plant trial of Seascape ever bearing strawberries in a Vertigro system. This shows promise over growing on the ground where insect and disease pressure is greater. We are evaluating this system for pick your own, as well as for other crop choices in and out of a greenhouse setting. We have also constructed raised beds for mesclun, radish and spinach production for early harvest.

Though our primary sales venue is our farm store, we take a diversified approach towards marketing/sales as we participate in three farmers markets; one to two CSA's a season, and a large local farm product cooperative. Add to this mix a couple local restaurants and a school, and we are all over the place. These outlets really help absorb our extra product at prices that exceed wholesale levels with the flexibility we need.

Our field labor has also been quite diverse as we have been home to over 60 who have come from agricultural universities from around the world. This has brought a very rich, cultural element to our farm, and to be honest, we have picked up some great ideas from their own experience. . We host Monday Night Dinner every week for our workers, and have at least one adventure trip a season. This year, we shot up to Baxter State Park, camped for 2 nights, climbed Mt Katahdin and rafted the Penobscot River. The culture of our farm is critical in creating a healthy, positive, caring work environment, which easily passes on to the customer

We have come to realize that it is true that a pleased customer will be our best advertisement, and with our current growth rate, we have cut our yearly advertising budget to zero. On the other hand, we are putting a lot of effort into creating and maintaining an attractive and informative website, and have solicited a current email list of over 3500 addresses. We use this contact list carefully and “feel” the response immediately when used.

In our continual effort to identify how to keep our farm on our customers’ radar and to stay progressive, we have initiated a renewable energy program at our farm with the construction of 3 10kW wind turbines and a 10kW photovoltaic array, all of which will cut our electric bill by 30%. Our customers have responded with incredible enthusiasm for these projects and feel they are part of something very innovative and healthy when they support us with their shopping.

One challenge we continue to tackle at Cider Hill Farm is managing all of this efficiently and profitably. We have identified dozens of areas of responsibility and have rewarded many of our employees with opportunities to lead and control. In industry, this is considered a normal business practice, but is often hard to do on a farm. My current team has been in the building process for over 10 years, and has evolved into a group of collaborative leaders.

Our approach to diversification has taken us far beyond apple varieties and training systems. We have been financially conservative by taking a pay as we go approach, but have always loved the challenge of building the business while spreading out our risk. The business has become fun, creative and rewarding. My last simple truth: My sons will never want to farm if I am always working, tired and trapped.