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Picking for Profits

Monadnock Berries

by Marcia Passos Duffy



The view from the back orchards overlooking the farmhouse with Mt. Monadnock in the horizon. Inset: Anthony and Fenella Levick, owners of Monadnock Berries.

PHOTOS BY MARCIA PASSOS DUFFY.

The first thing you notice when you arrive at Monadnock Berries in Troy, N.H. is the view. It is a grand, almost surreal, unobstructed vista of Mt. Monadnock, the second most-climbed mountain in the world next to Mt. Fuji. Next, you'll notice the lovely farmhouse, a brick-red farm stand and gift shop. To complete the idyllic setting, sloping below the farm stand are acres of bushes, its branches heavy with plump, just-right-for-the-pickin' blueberries.

It couldn't be a better spot for a pick-your-own berry farm. And for the Levick family there couldn't be a better time for blueberry growers. "We get free advertising every day from national media—that is,

about the antioxidant benefits of blueberries," said Anthony Levick, who owns and runs the farm with his wife Fenella and their three children. It also has helped that the farm was selected as the Best Scenic Blueberry Picking in all of New Hampshire by *New Hampshire Magazine* last year, and was listed as "Editor's Pick" for *Yankee Magazine's* 1998 Travel Guide.

The number of PYO customers at Monadnock Berries has swelled to outstrip their commercial berry growing business since the Levicks opened the farm in 1996, when their revenue was an even 50-50 split between PYO and commercial sales. Now they can barely fulfill their commercial orders and must turn down repeated

requests for more blueberries from the numerous farm stand customers throughout New Hampshire and Massachusetts. "We just don't have the blueberries—they are being picked by our customers," Anthony said, adding that he has not even used his mechanical harvester and grading equipment this year. PYO blueberries sell for \$1.75 a pound. Prepackaged blueberries sell for \$3.50 a pint and \$6 a quart. Raspberries go for \$3.99 a pound PYO.

The 14 acres that Monadnock Berries sits upon has been farmed traditionally since 1767. It was transformed into a blueberry farm in 1976 by its 14th owner, a "gentleman farmer" who was retired and ran a PYO and commercial operation. The Levick

family purchased the farm in 1996. Anthony and Fenella, who were farmers in Herefordshire, England, had grown black currants and apples for commercial processing for 24 years at their 224-acre family farm before immigrating to the United States in 1995 to be closer to Fenella's family who lived in New Hampshire. "When we were looking for a new farm we didn't specifically look for blueberries. What we wanted was to scale down, and we wanted to have closer contact with our customers through pick-your-own," said Fenella. "We never saw the end customers at our farm in England, we'd just send everything off on 18-wheelers three or four times a day to factory processing plants to make apple pie and juice. We would never hear if it was good or bad, or if there was something we could do better."

"I love it. I love the people who come here," added Anthony. "Blueberries are easy to sell. We package it, we charge whatever the market will take. To me, this is freedom."

Commuting farmers

Relying just on PYO blueberries for the entire family's income is a risky business, being that they have two children in college and one in a private high school. While every year has produced a good crop, one failure could devastate the business. The couple has planted 6 more acres of blueberries, along with red raspberries, black raspberries, gooseberries, red currants, black currants, hothouse tomatoes and herbs, all of which can be handpicked. They also supply 2-gallon pots of blueberry plants to five area Agway's, as well as to their customers. To further help with the added school expenses, the couple has leased an additional PYO farm in Massachusetts called Hill Orchard, where they grow 20 acres of apples, peaches, nectarines, plums and apricots. The 50-mile separation between the two farms is a challenge when blueberry and apple seasons overlap. "We're commuting farmers," said Anthony with a laugh, adding that the couple takes turns traveling between the farms, has hired help and gets assistance from their children manning the farm stands. They're also leasing four acres just up the road from their New Hampshire farm, where this past spring they planted 4 acres of 11 varieties of strawberries, along with early raspberries and pumpkins. "There is a demand in our area for pick-your-own strawberries, since the only pick-your-own strawberry farm closed," said Anthony. The demand for pumpkins in the Keene, N.H. area runs high at the end of October, not only because of Halloween, but the annual Keene Pumpkin Festival, which holds the Guinness World Record for the most lit jack-o'-lanterns in one location at one time: 28,952.

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Fenella's Gift Barn at Monadnock Berries.



Anthony Levick looks out over the back orchards.

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Staying with what they know

The gift shop is open until Christmas and has been profitable for the Levicks. There is a variety of food and gift items for sale at the shop, including Fenella's own woven items, such as hats and scarves. "We don't make jams, we don't make pies—we are diversifying with what we know," said Fenella. This goes against the grain of what they have heard for many years while attending pick-your-own conferences across the country. "All you hear during these conferences is agritourism, but we don't want to drive around in choo choo trains!" said Fenella. "And our customers say they like this as a farm, not an entertainment center. The farthest we've gone is to put in a sandbox for the kids and get some goats."

The advice they often got during PYO conferences was to put in a bakery. "I've talked to farmers about this, and what happens is that you become a baker instead of a farmer," said Anthony. What the couple doesn't do well, such as baking, they purchase from other farmers in the area. They do sell blueberry pies at the farm stand, but the pies are purchased from Valley View Orchard Pies of Hebron, Maine (www.valleyvieworchardpies.com). "They are a farm, but they make pies, too. That's their own thing—their specialty. We tried making pies, but we all got worn out. We're too busy here all day," said Anthony. The couple has recently noticed that PYO conference leaders have changed the focus to just what they have

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sometimes forget the knowledge we have about growing that the general public doesn't have. It's a whole education process." Her answer about spraying depends on the customer who either wants reassurance that the berries are okay to eat, or for those customers who are extremely concerned about nonorganic produce. The general question gets the answer: "We tell them, 'Yes, it is sprayed, but it is before it is fruit, so there is very little residue. So, you can wash it, but you don't need to before you eat it,'" said Fenella. The answer for a customer who appears concerned takes a little longer and is more involved: "For that customer, we go more into depth about what can happen to the blueberries if we don't spray, such as getting worm in the fruit. We say we like to have a good crop so we can pay our mortgage, and we like people to come back to pick. The majority are satisfied when they understand why we do it," said Fenella.

The extra time that the Levicks spend with the customer is worth it. "I love it. It is rewarding [to] see the consumer enjoying and they tell us so," said Anthony. Fenella says, "Sometimes you're out there in the winter and its minus 10 and you're in your snowshoes and you're busy pruning and you know you have 7,000 bushes to prune and you'd really like to be on a vacation in the warmth. But then when you open up in the summer people say, 'Oh I'm so glad you're here. We come every year.' It is so nice to hear that and makes it all worthwhile."

Visit the Monadnock Berries Web site at www.monadnockberries.com.

