

WORKING THE LAND: THE STORY OF CONNECTICUT AGRICULTURE

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Maple Lane Farm Catches the Currant

A keen eye for food trends keeps the fields fruitful

Interview with Allyn Brown III

Owner, Maple Lane Farms, Preston

To farm successfully requires agility, innovation, persistence and adaptability. New crops, emerging technologies, value-added products and sharp marketing help farmers cope with change.

Allyn Brown, a pick-your-own farm proprietor, saw opportunity in the black currant, a small berry extremely popular in Europe but not grown in the U.S. since the early 1900's. The berry, loaded with antioxidants and Vitamin C, was banned by the federal government when it was thought that black currants helped to spread a pine tree disease that could threaten the U.S. lumber industry.

Once the federal ban was lifted in 1966, Brown was one of the first to start planting black currants, in the late 90's. He recently opened his own processing and bottling facility in the building that once housed his closed farm store. Brown's juice is finding its way into stores throughout the region as more people become aware of the black currant's healthful qualities and vivid taste.

The largest grower of black currants in the country

My father bought this property in the early '50s. It was basically a grown-up farm – all but, say, 10 acres was woodland. What you see now is about 120 acres of productive land that was all cleared of woods and stumps and planted for different fruit crops and Christmas trees.

I went through four years of agricultural college and when I graduated in 1978 from UCONN, it was a pretty easy decision. We had the land available, so I decided to go into the agricultural business.

Maple Lane Farm is pretty much a year-round, pick-your-own farm. We start with pick-your-own strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, move into apples and pumpkins in the fall and finish out the year with cut-your-own Christmas trees. But we are always keeping our eyes open for new and interesting crops.

In the late '90s, we stumbled onto a new berry crop called the black currant, which is very popular in Europe but for certain reasons was restricted in the United States up until the late '80s. The black currant is very high in antioxidants and vitamin C. We thought it was a crop that was destined to be popular here, so we started growing it in large acres and we are now the largest grower of black currant in the country.

We're the first to produce a fresh black currant juice and we are distributing that all throughout the Northeast at this time. We do have the ability to get the fruit, to produce the fresh, single-strength juice not from concentrate. This gives us the ability to produce a unique product.

We supply a lot of retail outlets in Connecticut. A good percentage of our sales are in Connecticut and supported well by Connecticut consumers. We are concentrating on the Northeast at this point, but it could be a nationwide product before too long.

We are interested in doing more than just the straight black currant juice. We'd like to do blends – black currant blends very well with apple and cranberry and things like that. We have built our own bottling operation so we can do our fresh juice yearround at our farm.

Things change over the years and we're kind of evolving a little away from the pick-your-own business – more into the processing of the black currant. Right now we farm on this property about 120 acres of fruits and Christmas trees. We also lease approximately 35 more acres for the black currants on land that is under the Farmland Preservation. And we are planting every year more and more acres.

We have purchased a black currant harvester from Finland, which has the ability to pick anywhere from 300 to 400 acres a year. We easily could go to that level with acreage at the level of equipment we have now. There is quite a bit of preserved land around, and I do get calls from landowners all the time looking to rent out their land. So we do have a possibility of putting a nice crop on those those lands that are preserved.

In the mid-80's or so, we were looking around for other crops to try to diversify the farm a bit, so we got into the specialty mushroom crop of oyster mushrooms. We built the facility to grow the oyster mushrooms as a contract grower. We don't retail mushroom so people don't really even know we grow them. We pick seven days a week and ship them three days a week to Franklin Mushroom Farm where they are packaged and sold under the Franklin label throughout New England and the northeast.

[Since this interview, Franklin Mushroom Farm moved its operations out of Connecticut and Brown is no longer growing mushrooms for the company.]

Passing the farm to the next generation is the long-term plan

There are more and more farmers going out and land is being gobbled up for development. So the only real land available to me is land that is preserved.

We have not sold any development rights as of this point, but we do lease a lot of land that is under that program. (Brown is referring to land protected as farmland by Connecticut's Purchase of Development Rights program.) With the pressures of development in eastern Connecticut, farmland is becoming more and more scarce, so for the black currant crop, which is a long-term crop, we have to get into a minimum of a ten-year lease.

I would like to see the farm outlast me. I'm kind of thinking in that direction right now. We actually have dropped out some crops, minor crops – peaches some of the small raspberries, blackberries – just to simplify the operation a bit. And we may drop more crops as we go.

I have one daughter, she's nine years old and does show some interest in agriculture. So I'm trying to develop a farm that she can take over, not quite as diversified as we are right now.