
SPILLING THE BEANS

RASPBERRIES SAVED THE LAND AT SILFERLEAF FARM

In Concord, Massachusetts, Svea Johnson and her son Tom have been growing organic raspberries on their farm for over twenty years. Silferleaf Farm came into being in 1978 when Svea decided that she needed a way to get the land to pay for itself. As she tells the story, “I had been recently divorced and was raising my children, and working as a nurse. One day I decided that I would like to get the land to help me pay for its upkeep because it was getting very difficult for me. I had open fields and thought about what I could grow, what would give me a decent return for my efforts, and not take up all of my time. I thought about raspberries and blueberries. I checked around to see if there were any local growers of these fruits. I chose raspberries, as they would produce berries the following year. Also, I could plant an ever-bearing variety, have one crop in the fall, avoid the summer heat and people would be home as school would be in season. Tom and I cleared the first field here and there of brush and several cedar trees. It was plowed in the fall and in the spring we got the extended family out to plant the little sticks and roots. So began this job of hard work, lots of learning about life and running a business.”

Silferleaf Farm occupies 11 acres and is a natural work of beauty with a pond, a small wood, and fields. Back in the 1800’s there was a dairy farm on the land along with a guesthouse for vacationing city people who arrived by train from Boston. In WWII it was a chicken farm and now it is a raspberry farm and so the farming tradition continues!

On average, the land yields 2,000 pounds of raspberries per acre during the 6-8 week harvesting season. The Johnsons raise their fruit on 2 acres of land of which a portion is always fallow. They rotate the crop every 12 years allowing for a 3-year rest before replanting. On another small piece of land, the family grows their own vegetables and has planted a few apple and peach trees.

From the beginning, Svea knew that she wanted to keep her expenses as low as possible and so she decided upon a “Pick Your Own” business with a heritage fall bearing variety of berry. Tom told me that “the thing that makes the business work is that we essentially have no labor costs as it’s a pick your own operation. We could not do it otherwise because of labor costs in this area. We would be competing against California berries and they are picked under much better conditions and much lower labor costs.”



Photograph: Carole Topalian

A 6-8 week harvesting season on two acres of planted land did not seem like much work to me but I was quickly corrected. He said, "It does take a lot of work. There is rotating, fertilizing, weeding (we go across the fields 3 times a year) along with hand weeding, trellising, and monitoring the drip irrigation system. Long durations of rain will destroy the crop so this is always a worry and one that is out of our hands. High humidity is a problem too as it will cause molding on the bush. We decided to grow a heritage long time standard of fall bearing raspberry so that the bushes can be pruned mechanically and cut down at the end of the year.

The summer bearing variety, while it will give you several crops, has to be hand pruned that is why we didn't chose them. Another thing I would like to mention is that with raspberries the flavor is locked in on the day you pick them. They will not continue to ripen once you pick them. If you pick them under ripe they will darken but they will not have much flavor. The more ripe the raspberry the more flavor they have."

As is natural when you have an abundance of raspberries on your doorstep, Svea started looking for something to do with them. As she tells it, "In Sweden, they take any fruit and thicken it with potato flour to make a pudding and that was the first thing I made. That is just wonderful so I made a plain raspberry sauce that I froze to make the fruit pudding in the winter. I also made jam and the infusion occasionally. I thought about selling the sauce but at the time I did not have a certified kitchen. Two years ago, I thought about having tea and raspberry desserts in the garden for the public. I had my kitchen certified by the health department. With an excess of berries the following year, we made some raspberry infusion and sold a few bottles at the stand. This was easier than having tea in the garden!"



In 2006, Tom decided to get the kitchen certified so they could expand the sales of the Raspberry Infusion. Svea told me "the nice thing about the infusion is that just before a frost or rain, people don't come to pick and you can't pick wet raspberries as they have no shelf life. So the infusion allows us to pick wet berries, process them and make the infusion."

When they began production, the majority of their customers were people who came to pick their own berries.

They have expanded the distribution locally to Debra's Natural Gourmet in West Concord, Concord Provisions in Concord, Lionette's Market in the South End and the Whole Foods Markets in Bedford and Fresh Pond. Word has been spreading about the product and they now receive calls regularly from people looking for it. Most recently Olé

Grill in Cambridge has started using the infusion in their shrimp empanada dish and has bought out their entire stock from Fall 2006.

There are many different uses for the Raspberry Infusion from plain over ice cream to a glaze/marinade for meats or vegetables. We recommend you experiment and use your imagination!! ❖

Silferleaf Farm, 460 Strawberry Hill Road, Concord. You Pick starts in September, call for more information: 978-369-3624.

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Photograph: Courtesy of Silferleaf Farm

Photograph: Courtesy of Summerhouse Baking