

Chester County Orchards
Chester County Town & Country Living
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The sign by the roadside beckons:
Pick your own fruit! Pick your own vegetables!

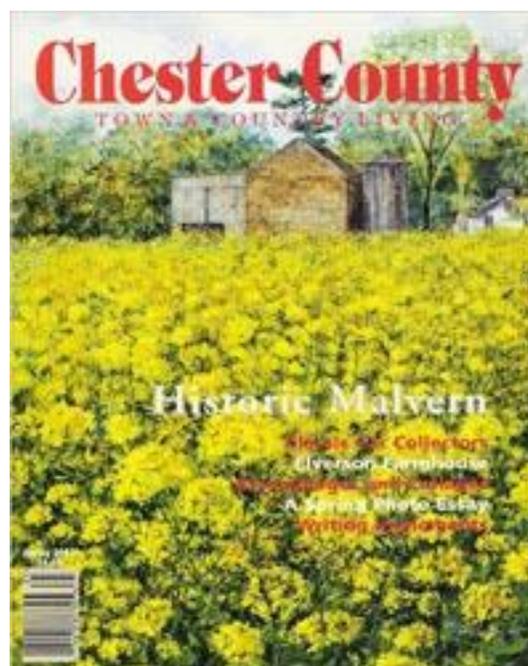
For most of us, that's the closest we'll get to farming. Oh, we may dabble in backyard gardens or grow tomatoes in patio containers, but farming as a way of life has dwindled over the past several decades. As housing developments sprout where corn once did, as expenses rise and returns shrink, it takes a devoted individual to continue to operate a family farm.

We decided to take a look at four local farm orchards, how they've grown and what it takes to keep them running. Although similar in many ways, these four family owned and operated businesses are also unique.

The stone farmhouse at the small Vollmecke Orchard is inhabited by Jan and Karen Vollmecke, who run the business with heavy reliance on community members and the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. Public participation is handled differently at the large and rambling Highland Orchards, whose rolling 350 acres yield a vast variety of fruit, and where public tours, "pick-your-own" and entertainment are the means of maintaining a delicate balancing act.

Barnard's Orchards and Greenhouses grows enough fruit to stock its store nearly year-round, which operates on the honor system during the months when no one mans it. In its several large greenhouses, colorful snapdragons and fragrant fnesia are grown for local wholesalers to supplement the farm's produce output. And at Glen Willow Orchard, co-owner Tom Rosazza fends off weekly offers from developers in order to maintain his quiet, productive corner of the county, even as a new housing development is planned nearby.

Theoretically, the fruit growers around here are in competition with one another, but it's a friendly sort of competition. Each spoke of the need to communicate with the others, to work together to a degree, to be willing to share information on predators, soil condition and weather. Their similarities outweigh the differences.



“The fruit growers of our region are organized because there aren’t that many of them,” says Cheryl Bjornson, Horticulture agent of the Chester County branch of the Penn State Cooperative Extension Service. “They work together so they can stay abreast of what’s going on in the market. If one of them tries something new, the others learn from their experiment. And they struggle with pricing and with educating the public about buying local (produce).”

This is where Bjornson comes in. She spends her workdays educating the buying public about the opportunities that exist in their backyards to find some of the finest produce anywhere. And she works with the growers to educate them about marketing practices and new farming methods. Because of the population growth in Southern Chester, Bjornson also educates residents who have never lived next to a farm before on the realities of farm life. And she works with the growers to foster tolerance and understanding of various community concerns.

Bjornson is passionate about her work. “These farms are like jewels and should be valued by consumers as such. There is homegrown, locally grown produce right at their doorsteps. Just drive by on the way home and stop and pick it up. Their value needs to be treasured so they will survive.” She continues: “Family farms struggle to maintain; there are often several generations trying to live off one operation. They struggle to bring in the people, who don’t have or don’t make the time to stop in and buy from them. They’re passionate about what they do and they want to pass that on. If it all goes and turns into houses, we’ve lost a major asset to our space.”

The extension service provides information on food and nutrition, horticulture, dairy and 4-H programs and more. They are starting a deer coalition to explore methods to deal with the growing deer population. The public can call with questions at 610/696-3500.

Farming is a tough occupation. The hours are long, and the financial rewards may be few. But the wonderful variety – in the changing seasons, the diverse crops, the constant balancing act and the contact with the community cause the area’s fruit growers to cling to this lifestyle and proudly continue to call themselves farmers.

A larger-than-life mechanical Red Delicious apple greets visitors to Highland Orchards Market with a smile and a cheery hello. Its size mirrors the orchard itself. Highland Orchards is a big farm and a big business.

Its 350 acres produce a cornucopia of fruit from trees – apples, peaches, plums, pears, cherries, apricots – and from the ground – raspberries, strawberries, pumpkins.

Throughout the summer and fall, all of these fruits, in their season, are part of Highland’s “pick your own” program. It doesn’t get much fresher than this.

In the apple orchard, twenty-seven varieties sit in labeled rows to help pickers correctly identify their favorites. Of course, less adventurous customers can always buy their fruit in the Roadside Market. Sweet corn grown at Highlands and a wide variety of other vegetables grown on neighboring Chester County farms also is for sale there.

The original farm that would become Highland Orchards was

purchased in 1941 by John and Rachel Webster. The Roadside Market was built 17 years later by the Webster's daughter, Elizabeth and her husband, Robert. The tradition continues as a family affair with their children and grandchildren working the farm. Today the Market sells baked goods, packaged jellies and sauces, honey, and more in addition to the fresh produce. The family leases out space in the building for a deli, craft shop and an upstairs apartment.

"It's a tough business and we've had to grow in non-agricultural ways, through our retail business, and public activities," David Hodge explains. "We don't want to get too big, but we plan to expand the non-agricultural side and fine tune the agricultural side."

Continuity, balance and family are important to Hodge, who grew up on the farm and holds a degree from Penn State in agriculture and economics. Although he works in the office handling the business end of the business, he is equally at home in the fields, pointing out the varieties of fruit trees that make up his family's legacy.

"We provide a high quality product here," Hodge says earnestly. "Everything is picked by hand. We are always growing in knowledge, trying out new things and trying to find just the right balance."

As far as the eye can see, leafy and inviting fruit trees line the surrounding hillsides. In the spring, the fruit hasn't yet formed, but the apple blossoms are beginning to lure bees and the apricots resemble little green olives.

One large orchard is full of semi-dwarf and trellis apple trees. Not more than six feet tall, these little trees provide an important function.

"In fruit trees, all the best fruit ends up on the outside where the sun can get to it," explains Hodge. So they grow these compact trees and keep them thinned, to ensure that the all-important sunlight reaches each and every branch, allowing for maximum fruit production and maximum quality of that fruit. But why tie some to trellises?

"The root systems are weaker on the smaller trees, and some require support to keep from toppling over," he explains. Once the trellis is established and the boughs have been trained to grow horizontally along the lines, the little trees create a natural fence. There is a higher cost to the farmer to establish the trellis trees, but "in theory it's a wash" since they produce a higher quantity of usable fruit.

Hodge points out some blooms, explaining that apple blossoms appear in sets of five. The first to open, the king bloom will produce the strongest fruit. To help him succeed, some of the other blossoms have to be sacrificed. "One of the hardest things to see," says Hodge, "is piles of blossoms that have been thinned by hand on the ground." He actually sends workers into the orchards with scissors to cut them off the trees. "It's like looking at lots of fruit lying there. It almost makes you feel like crying."

The new plantings in one field will take a year to produce their first fruit and up to five before they become economically viable. They sit next to a field of gnarled 40-year old Ida Reds that are nearing the end of their lifespan. Hodge plans to cut them soon, sell the wood, and plant corn, then pumpkins, maybe strawberries later on. Five years later, the field will be planted with apple trees again, and the cycle will start over.

Regular fertilization and crop rotation is all important for maintaining the health of the soil and that of the fruit produced there. "It's a constant balancing act," he says.

The non-agricultural side to Highland Orchards has been growing as steadily as the crops. A few years ago, Art Whitehair was hired as events coordinator to expand the entertainment side of the business. Now, education has become a large component of Highlands. Elementary school classes from all around the region visit during the spring and fall to witness first-hand the apple growing and harvesting process. Dandy the Donkey and Jake the Llama live in an adjacent field with goats and chickens. During the Fall Festival, games, a maze, and families fill the fields too. Kids can also practice their milking skills on a wooden cow.

Whitehair says 10,000 people visited Highlands last year on specialized tours such as a growing tour, nature tour, packing house tour or orchard/hayride tour.

Expansion into new arenas has been a boon to the large Highlands Orchards. But small operations, where one or two farmers manage the day to day running of the orchard have to find other means to compete. The much smaller Vollmecke Orchards in Coatesville relies on organic methods and has joined a growing national movement that suits its owners just fine.

"We know we can't compete in price and volume. There's no way. So we compete in quality." Karen Vollmecke, part owner of Vollmecke Orchards is proud of her 37-acre operation. She's proud of what she has accomplished in the 18 years since she and her parents bought the farm and proud to be a steward of the land.

Vollmecke was trained in ornamental horticulture at Longwood Gardens. This schooling provided the perfect platform for understanding what constitutes good soil, how to work with the lifecycles of pests and diseases, and has helped her farm in an environmentally aware and friendly manner.

Tall and lean, in navy blue coveralls and mud-coated black rubber boots, she is the picture of someone who loves the land. A strong handshake and genial smile welcome the visitor to her world.

The orchard is small in comparison to some farms in the county, and Vollmecke and her mother, Jan, operate it with a skeleton staff. Karen does a little bit of everything, from management to mechanical work to getting out in the orchards pruning, thinning and picking. She envisions a day when she will be able to devote more time to

pursuing her hobby – sculpting in clay, wood and metal – but for now, she still relishes getting her hands dirty.

Thirty varieties of peaches and nectarines and fifteen of apples mean that Vollmecke always has something fresh coming in for her customers. She doesn't pack the fruit or ship it anywhere, but picks and sells when the fruit is "really ripe." She tried wholesaling for a while, but says it wasn't the same as having direct customer contact.

Several men lean ladders against rows of trees off in the distance, pruning the peaches that will be ready for consumption beginning in July. On another hillside, the apple orchard is home to the old standby, the Red Delicious, and newer varieties, including the Lodi a cooking apple that ripens first, in July. The Macoun, Vollmecke's favorite is harder to grow, but has a tart, yet sweetly distinctive flavor that is gaining in popularity.

"Apples are trendy," Vollmecke explains with a smile that causes her eyes to crinkle up. "In the '70s and '80s you had the Delicious, and today you have the Stayman, Gala and Fuji for the 'foodies' who like exceptional fruit."

The farm's dog, an aging Shepherd-Collie mix named Mr. Buckwheat, ambles over to see what's going on as Vollmecke discusses her participation in the CSA program. "Our members want a different experience in flavor and variety, and we give them something exceptional."

Something like a co-op, the CSA is a "venture between the farmer and the eater," she explains. "We target what the family likes to eat, and distribute produce twice a week."

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a win-win proposition for a small farm like Vollmecke and its customers. The community members help the farm remain financially stable by purchasing a share of the season's harvest. The farm, in return, provides its members with fresh, nutritious and naturally grown food

Vollmecke Orchards relies on its network of nearly 100 CSA members. These regular customers have kept the orchard going in the four years that the bridge on Cedar Knoll Road has been under repair. "The convenience shoppers we used to have don't come past here on their way home from work any more," she says. "The bridge being out really damaged our business and we had to cut back on sales."

So the Vollmecke Orchards Sales Porch is open now only Tuesdays and Fridays from 3 to 7 p.m., which is also when the regular distribution is held.

The produce grown here is "basically organic" according to Vollmecke, although not "certified" because of the costs involved. Although the organic farming movement began decades ago with small farms like hers, Vollmecke says now the big players like Dole and new federal standards placed on produce in order for it to be "certified"

have made it prohibitive for the small ventures to keep up. “They really put the pinch on. You’re paying for paperwork and inspections, and we’d have to pass the cost along.”

So, Vollmecke composts – manure from other farms and customers, recycled hops from the local Victory Brewing Company, and chipped Christmas trees and fallen leaves collected by West Brandywine Township. “The chips have a high fungal quality and are particularly good for the fruit trees,” she explains.

And she practices ‘integrated pest management’ determining a need to use chemical sprays before actually spraying. When she does spray, it’s with only those carefully chosen for low environmental impact. All the time, she works hard to create and maintain the foundation of trust at the core of her relationship with her customers. “Our members are our support structure through the good times and the bad,” she adds.

The bad, of course, includes the bridge problem and the drought of two summers ago. The good times include potluck dinners, picnics, hayrides and bonfire parties around Halloween. “This is really their farm,” Vollmecke insists. They come in and cut their own flowers, help in the gardens, or with sorting and packing and with giving out food on distribution day. Some of the members work off part of their annual \$500 membership fee through their work on the farm.

Besides the peaches and apples, Vollmecke grows potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, sweet corn, lettuce and carrots that “taste like sunshine.” Members gather up their produce farm market style at one of three distribution spots. Some share a “box” and others may trade off their spinach for green beans one week or pass entirely on the Swiss chard.

“Sometimes people look at something and say ‘What do we do with this?’” Vollmecke says. “So we’ve started offering recipes. But they always enjoy the variety and have a sense of adventure about food.”

The death of her father in 1989 left a hole in the operation that’s been hard to fill. “He was a big part of the farm, and we miss him, but we’ve made transitions and moved in new directions. There are so many variables to farming, but that’s what I really love about it. That, and the people.”

Vollmecke exemplifies small fruit growers. Like her, others have had to figure out methods to make a living that stretch beyond the fruit itself. In the case of Barnard’s, a decades-old reliance on growing and selling beautiful flowers provides another dimension to the orchards and their output.

Wooden apple bins are stacked neatly along the drive and in the yard of the white stucco farmhouse, built in 1862 by Milton Barnard. Several large greenhouses, built by his son Percy around the turn of the century look down at the home whose door is

answered by his son, Richard, who still works in the orchards, even though he's in his 80s.

As Lewis Barnard, representing the fourth generation to farm this land, leads a visitor out of the rain and into the largest greenhouse, it's apparent how much of a family affair Barnard's Orchards really is.

Apple, peach and pear orchards cover the hillsides and about 70 acres behind the greenhouses. Inside it is moist and smells of wet earth. Heavy wooden beams hang low in the potting shed connected to the greenhouse. In the corner, water streams down a moss-covered brick wall. Buckets of snapdragons in red, pink, yellow, white and purple sit waiting to be trimmed up for local wholesalers. A gray cat sleeps on a shelf while an orange one explores. A Shetland Sheepdog named Schuyler noses around the floor.

The feel at Barnard's is one of timelessness and hard work. Lewis Barnard runs the retail shop while his Uncle Sam and father Richard manage the greenhouses and orchards with part time help. Life at Barnard's is all about experimentation, change and growth.

"My great-grandfather grew white Niagra grapes and tried to grow strawberries. Then around 1900, my grandfather, Percy, planted the orchards of peaches and apples. Farms were more diversified back then, in case crops failed," says Barnard, a slight man in a down vest and baseball cap with the exhortation to "Keep Farming First" on its side.

Sweet peas and tomatoes and later carnations and pompom mums were grown in the greenhouses that are now reserved for the snapdragons and fresia – and the cats.

In addition to the apples and peaches, Barnard plants a half acre of pears and some assorted berries and vegetables. "I'm working on diversification for the retail market," he explains. Barnard's market isn't fancy, but functional, housed in a white concrete structure adjacent to the greenhouses. It's open from mid July through mid April, selling Barnard's own produce as well as some bought from other Chester County farms. Even when the store is officially closed, Barnard keeps a few bushels of apples and some bunches of flowers available to his customers, strictly on the honor system.

Barnard welcomes school tours and personally leads dozens of young children through the orchards, packing house and store each year. He feels it's his way of giving back to the community that has supported his family for so long.

A graduate of Delaware Valley College in Doylestown, Bucks County, Barnard holds a degree in horticulture, and loves farming's diversity and challenges – especially from the weather. "You really can't fight a drought, but you can supplement a bit. Having a good water source is key." An unexpected freeze can be just as dangerous.

The timing of this day's rain was unfortunate, as he had just sprayed one of the orchards for apple scab fungus, and heavy rain can negate the spray's benefits.

Other factors impacting small farmers are equally as uncontrollable. "China is now the leading apple producer and ships all over the world," Barnard explains. He used to ship apples to supermarkets, but doesn't anymore. Instead, he has focused his efforts on growing produce that he knows he can sell in his store or wholesale out to other local growers.

He experiments with 28 varieties of apples to ensure something is always ripe and ready for his store. Pink Lady apples and Braeburns, brands one can't always buy in the supermarket, line the shelves next to the old standbys.

"You know, there are more than 100 strains of Red Delicious," Barnard says. "They kept making them redder and darker, but sometimes redder isn't always better." The mutations were encouraged to get the darker color to appeal visually to shoppers. "But no one ever thought to check to see if they tasted better," he adds with a chuckle and a shake of his head.

Apples are harvested here the same way they were 100 years ago. A large ladder is propped against the tree, and pickers climb up toting a canvas apple-picking bag over their shoulders. When a bag is full – each one holds three pecks, or about three-fourths of a bushel – the picker adds his haul to the wooden bins that are emptied in the packing house, sorted, washed and put out for sale.

To grow the best possible apples, Barnard uses a mix of organic and non-organic pesticides. "I follow the spray recommendations from the Penn State Extension Service and I scout out the orchards to see if pests are becoming a problem. I use the most effective mix the fewest times necessary," he says.

Diseases that strike apple and peach trees also can be a problem. Fire blight and sooty blotch or apple scab fungus all require treatments of a fungicide, and Barnard uses an equation of temperature, humidity and rainfall to determine how and when to treat the problem. "Then when I'm sure they need it, I use the most powerful fungicide possible." He receives a fax every day from Sky Bit, a private company that works in conjunction with the PSU Extension Service and alerts farmers to local growing conditions, temperature and expected weather conditions. He and other fruit growers also talk on the phone and compare notes.

"Sure it can all be frustrating," Barnard says, "There has to be support within the agricultural community and we do have a friendly competition. But I love the people and the diversity and it's really fun to plant a seed and see it sprout."

Farming throughout the county truly is a family affair. Generations grow up loving the land, tending it and helping it bloom. New challenges face today's crop of fruit

growers, and as each finds its solutions to these challenges, the land will continue to blossom and produce in ripe abundance.

A heady mixture of the aroma of ripe apples and blooming flowers wafts on the air beckoning the visitor to Glen Willow Orchards in Avondale.

Fruits – apples, peaches, pears – and vegetables – sweet corn, squash, beans, peppers, tomatoes and pumpkins – fill baskets and shelves to overflowing in the well-stocked store of this family run business. Spices, jellies, salad dressings, apple butter and cider fill other nooks and crannies.

The store is set far back off the main road, at the end of a long driveway through orchards and fields of rye. It sits adjacent to the circa 1800 farmhouse, home to Tom and Shirley Rosazza, part of the extended family that owns and operates Glen Willow. The farm today encompasses about 169 acres of row after row of mostly apple trees. But peaches, pears and plums also flourish here.

Tom and his brothers Ralph and Richard continue to operate the farm with their sons and wives. During the harvest, they'll bring in eight or ten part time workers to help out. But as with many local farms, Glen Willow is primarily a family affair.

"When this farm came up for sale, my dad bought it," says Tom. "I had hauled peaches for the former owner as a kid, so my father gave me a job." The senior Rosazza started out as a flower grower with a small greenhouse business. Carnations, Easter flowers, mums and bedding plants were their staple then. Gradually, the business expanded to sell to large markets in Wilmington and Baltimore.

Today, the greenhouses still wholesale its crops, as does the orchard. In addition to keeping its own retail operation well stocked, Glen Willow supplies markets in the Philadelphia region.

In some ways, time stands still in the apple orchard. Here, as in other orchards, apples are picked the old-fashioned way. In Rosazza's case, he follows the guidelines set forth in a copy of a 1912 agricultural handbook. "We use the same type of ladder and picking bag. But we do grow smaller trees." Wooden bins holding about 20 bushels are lifted by tractor now however, and other more sophisticated equipment allows the growers to accomplish more in less time.

"I'm still up at 6 a.m. and out in the fields spraying the apples," says Rosazza. Once he comes in, he seems equally at home in front of a flat screen computer in the office just steps away from the market.

In the decades since Rosazza was a boy on the farm, the congenial farmer has seen many changes – some good, some not so good.

Barnard's Orchards and Greenhouses
1079 Wawaset Road (Route 842)
Kennettl Square
610/347-2151

Glenn Willow Orchard
1657 Glenn Willow Road
Avondale
610/268-8743

Highland Orchards
1000 Thorndale-Marshallton Road
West Chester
610/269-3494
Mon., Oct. 13, Fall Festival;
weekends in Sept. and Oct.,
hayrides, family fun area, hayrides
to campfire; weekends from
thanksgiving to Christmas, Santa
hayrides.

Vollmecke Orchards and CSA
155 Cedarknoll Road
Coatesville
610/383-4616

"It's harder to deal with chain stores and big corporations. Government regulations make it hard on the small independent farmer," he begins. "But the technological developments, like better cold storage to keep fruit fresh, are wonderful."

Other concerns besides pests and fungus worry Rosazza as he thinks of the future of Glen Willow. Housing developments have claimed many acres once farmed by growers like him. He worries over encroaching development (Three hundred homes are in the planning stage to be built next to the orchard.) "The number of fruit growers is way down," he says and ticks off the names of former farmers on his fingers. "I'm approached by developers every week."

Financial considerations are many for the small farmer, and some have branched out into other arenas besides wholesale and retail. Although scarecrow displays decorate the driveway in the fall, Rosazza has held off getting into the farm entertainment business. He refuses to say it will never happen. "I just haven't gotten into farm entertainment – yet," he adds. The family still presses and sells cider from its apples, but the decision on whether or not to invest in pasteurization equipment – most likely an

expensive proposition – is still unmade.

Rosazza's handshake is firm and calloused. His ruddy complexion attests to many hours spent outdoors. His welcome is genuine and when he says he loves to "watch blossoms turn into apples" it's completely believable. The farm's mascot, an Airedale named Willow, bounds over, wet from a swim in the creek. Life continues as it always has at Glen Willow, and with a little luck, always will.