

FAMILY LIFE

We've got the



blueberries



for you...

GLOSTER – A story in the winter 2007 edition of the periodical, LandScapes, a Portrait of Living and Working in Rural America, was entitled "Got Blueberries?"

The writer asked that question of Chris and Daye Alexander in presenting a story on how they came to trade dairy farming (considered by those who should know to have the worst working hours of any farm occupation) and blueberries (considered to be the healthiest food on the planet).

Well...we didn't have to ask the Alexanders Friday morning if they had berries. All we had to do was gaze on the hillside farm where 55,000 blueberry bushes are ripening with zillions of the blue berries.

In fact, more than half a million pounds of fruit from Tifblue, Premier,

as local markets.

Chris has recently purchased an additional blueberry harvester to increase the efficiency and speed at which the berries are picked. Harvest begins the first week of June. "That's when local customers will begin coming to the farm to hand pick their berries. We'll do that about four weeks, then we'll begin the mechanical harvest."

Daye, who was in pharmaceutical sales for eight years, has joined full time with her husband in running the operation at Hillcrest Blueberry Farm. "Now for 10 months of the year I'm a stay-at-home mom and love to be with Chris, our 20-month-old daughter, Holland and son Brian.

The other two months I'm at the farm helping Chris full time," she says.

Definitely weather plays a part in the harvest process, done from about 10:00 p.m. until about 4:00 a.m. "That way the berries are cool when the machine shakes them off the bushes. The fruit is then transported to the processing facility where it is pre cooled before being processed and put into a clamshell.

The Alexanders generally hire 25 people to help with the picking, processing and shipping and pay them above minimum wage. In fact, the economic impact of what the Alexanders pay their workers amounts to \$1,155,000 annually.

Plus Hillcrest Blueberry Farm is a drop point for other blueberry growers in the area who bring their crops to the Alexanders to be processed.

Chris got the notion to raise blueberries and get out from under the harder work of the



Chris and Daye Alexander pose beside the huge sign that welcomes blueberry customers to Hillcrest Blueberry Farm just off Ferguson Road in De Soto Parish.

weekly to pick up berries ready for the market. Grade A frozen berries are sent to Dallas where they are bagged up

into the season now to do anything but harvest and process," she said.

And watch for the signs direct-



This new monster machine is now used to harvest blueberries from 55,000 bushes at Hillcrest Blueberry Farm. The bushes are mechanically shaken and doliied up a track that dumps them into lugs which are then carried to the processing room for further handling.

Climax and Brightwell blueberry bushes will be harvested this season.

That's if Mother Nature cooperates.

Chris says he has ultimate respect for the grand ole' dame of weather for she can wreck their crop with one good swoop.

"We're at the mercy of Mother Nature," he said with somewhat of a solemn look. He knows the havoc she can



"We're at the mercy of Mother Nature. This is our livelihood and it's sort of a scary time of the year."

Chris Alexander

for the frozen section of major retailers.

Both Chris and Daye have received all types of training, including food safety from Texas A&M College and both are certified in food safety.

And you'll enjoy a touch of southern hospitality if you go pick your own berries.

ing you to Hillcrest Farm. They'll be posted at the intersection of Highway 5 at Kickapoo Corner and US Hwy 171. They will direct shoppers to head east on Hwy Five 2.2 miles and turn right onto Ferguson Road and drive for 1 mile. You'll see the beautiful hillside on the right planted in blueberry bushes and



The cleanliness of their operation is as important to the Alexanders as the taste of the berries. Here a lone worker loads downed limbs onto a trailer for a clean landscape.

"I love to make homemade Blueberry Lemonade for our customers who come to pick the berries," Daye says, but she is contemplating adding to the company's bottom line by including blueberry breads, muffins, jellies and jams and having items for customers to purchase when they come to get their berries.

"I may look into doing those things next year but we're too far

the huge sign that tells you when you've arrived at Hillcrest Blueberry Farm.

One thing's for sure...you can't beat the taste of the berries you'll find grown in DeSoto Parish by Chris and Daye Alexander. "Blueberries are considered by many to be the healthiest food in the world," Chris says. "It's nice to grow something that does a body good."



"For ten months of the year, I'm a stay-at-home mom....the other two months it's hands on in every part of this operation."

Daye Alexander

deliver if she gets on a tear. "This is our livelihood and it's sort of a scary time of the year."

The Alexanders began their blueberry operation in 1992 when they planted 30,000 bushes. An additional 10,000 were added in 1994. Now they have a total of 55,000 bushes that cover 91 acres of land. A typical blueberry bush in this area has a life span of about 20 years.

As to the harvest, Chris says in an ordinary year two-thirds of the crop is shipped fresh, one-third frozen. The average price per pound is \$2.50 for fresh berries. The frozen will average \$1.60 per pound. That's wholesale prices.

The fields are fully irrigated via drip system which helps keep the bushes healthy and producing. The farming duo are members of the Texas Blueberry Marketing Association that maintains strong ties to the Dallas, Houston and San Antonio markets as well

dairy business when he read a newspaper article about the profitability of blueberries. He looked further into the subject of blueberry production and decided it was a good idea.

"I gross twice as much as the average dairy farmer in this area, and the hours of work are better. We don't have to work seven days a week," he said.

Hillcrest Blueberry Farm is the largest blueberry farm in Louisiana and Daye says they are one of the largest, if not the largest such farm in the south. In 2007, the operation grossed more than half a million pounds. The farm offers "you-pick" or "we pick" availability.

All of the pre-ship processing takes place in the Alexander's state-of-the-art facility on Ferguson Road. Two 18-wheelers arrive at the farm twice



Daye, Holland, Chris and Brian Alexander welcome you to share in the delight that is Hillcrest Blueberry Farm. Taste the blueberry lemonade and enjoy their fresh healthy blueberries.



Almost as far as the eye can see, blueberry bushes dot the hillside farm. Hillcrest Blueberry Farm is the largest such farm in De Soto Parish and the state of Louisiana and possibly in the south.

Blueberry Lemonade

- 1/3 cup fresh lemon juice (about four small lemons)
- 2 cups water
- 2 cups fresh or frozen blueberries, thawed
- 1/2 cup sugar
- Garnish: lemon slices
- Prep: Process first 4 ingredients in a blender until smooth, stopping to scrape down sides. Pour through a wire mesh strainer into a pitcher, discarding solids. Serve over ice, and garnish, if desired.
- Yield: 5 cups

