

Sweet Seasons Farm



Late March, 2019. Meet Sue Haynie of Sweet Seasons Farm. Located in beautiful St. Johnsbury, Caledonia County, the spectacular views would be reason enough to make your way up the farm drive, but Sue is a dedicated grower, and she provided a fascinating tour of her farm, still mostly blanketed by late winter snows.



Sweet Seasons Farm has 4 acres in production, including 2½ acres of blueberries, 1 acre of apples, and ½ acre of a mix of raspberries, blueberries and “hazelberts” (hazel nut/filbert). Sue sells retail through U-Pick and built a farm stand in 2018 which has helped her expand on-site retail sales. Sue also sells farm-identity value-added products, including teas, jams and confections. In addition to retail sales, Sue has a unique contract supplying berries wholesale to local schools. Sweet Seasons Farm is certified organic through Certified Naturally Grown, but with this organization based in New York State, Sue has found it to be challenging to get inspectors to travel all the way to her location, though this is necessary for the farm to maintain that certification.



Sue is the owner/operator, which also means she is the mainstay of the workforce. She gets some assistance from family members, but also came up with a creative way to supplement the need for labor. Sweet Seasons Farm has a volunteer program that incorporates local volunteers who come to spend time at the farm and assist with some of the tasks through the growing season.

When identifying risk, the two areas that were most challenging were 1) factors that threaten production and 2) human resources. The greatest production threats were from dry or drought conditions, potential damage from insects or disease, and critical planning in order to harvest and sell or put into storage when berries are ready and not suffer losses in quality, since the timing from harvest to spoilage is a relatively short window.

Sue identified lack of water as the greatest obstacle. There is no irrigation system, so during dry periods she has to water by hand using 900' of hose. She has found that mulching with wood chips does the best job suppressing weeds and retaining water. With a few springs on the hillside, she is looking into the feasibility of developing a spring-fed water source that would enable irrigation through a gravity-feed system.

To combat insects and disease, Sue is diligent with pruning to keep air circulation optimal. She also sprays with an organically-approved foliar nutritional spray.



Sue has to manage both production and human resource challenges as various varieties of berries approach ripening. Like so many farm operations with limited labor assistance, she is constantly confronted by multiple duties requiring her attention and feeling like she never has enough time to keep up with everything. The network of Sweet Seasons Farm volunteers helps with the demand for labor for timely harvesting. She also has to be vigilant about preventing weeds from choking out new plant growth and she spends considerable time hand-pulling weeds; she also uses a 5% white vinegar spray to suppress weeds.

Sue looked into risk management protection plans available through USDA that might help her moderate production and revenue risks and provide indemnity payments if losses should occur. The Whole Farm Revenue Protection (WFRP) looked like it might be a good option for her diversified enterprise.

However, when Sue contacted crop insurance agents about signing up for this coverage, she was unable to enroll. Despite being a meticulous record-keeper, WFRP required even more detailed sales receipts (to verify Schedule F income) for all wholesale and retail sales than Sue maintained. The Non-insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP), available through FSA, covers crops for which traditional crop insurance is not available. It is a disaster assistance program, so losses must typically be fairly significant to trigger a payment, but Sue is looking into this option.



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UVM Agricultural Risk Management and Crop Insurance Education



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