

Just peachy

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— Transcript Staff Writer

Susan Bergen grew up in Boston digging in a very small garden bed.

"I've always loved digging in the dirt," she said. "And we love peaches."

So when a 168-acre peach farm with "great irrigation" went on the auction block in 1999, Bergen and her husband Floyd bought it. Peach Crest Farms is just north of Stratford. They live in Norman but Susan Bergen spends at least 40 hours a week working at Peach Crest.

Bergen knew little about farming when she started but with the help of many people, including farmers, state agriculture offices and county extension agents, she has learned to be a farmer. Peach Crest has fields, orchards and a packing house.

"I never think of myself as a professional farmer," she said. "What you see is how a non-farming person, with the help of many farming people, has made a farm work," Bergen said. "It's the only business that I know of where everyone wants you to succeed because we can never have enough food."

"You don't have to spend a lot of money," Bergen added.

She washes her greens in three bathtubs she bought at a Habitat for Humanity sale, and she makes her own tables. She also borrows what she doesn't have. She needed a refrigerated truck and called the Regional Food Bank. They lent her a truck and she gives them excess produce.

She has a maximum of 12 people working for her but she's not afraid to get her hands dirty. She does anything and everything that needs to be done.



"Yesterday I harvested beets and greens, came back and washed and bagged them," she said. "This morning I went with the truck to the farmers' market, stood and sold them."

It takes about four years for peach trees to produce fruit, she said. Her first crop was harvested in 2003. Bergen plants a special hybrid type of peach tree because she has to know the sequence of ripening throughout the orchard.

In addition to the 9,000 peach trees, she has apricots, apples, pears, cantaloupe, watermelon, squash, tomatoes, onions and a full line of greens -- mustard greens, lettuce and bok choy.

Twelve of their acres were certified organic in 2006. They grow organic turnips, Austrian sweet peas and black eyed peas.

They "irrigate, integrate and implement what the customer is looking for on this acreage -- great tasting produce, grown in environmentally friendly constraints, and sold at a reasonable price," Bergen said.

"We have refined our methods to maximize freshness and consistency," she added. "Post-harvest, we treat them first by cleansing them, then hydro-chilling them. This removes all present fungal spores and bacteria to prolong the life of this delicate fruit."

Bergen also sells her produce to grocery stores, Kamela's Katering, Abbey Catering, many restaurants and the Oklahoma Food Cooperative. She also has been involved with the Farm-to-School program for two years.

The Kerr Center is in a partnership with the USDA Risk Management Agency and the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry to help farmers provide fresh produce to Oklahoma schools.

She sells to Oklahoma City and Noble schools. Oklahoma City will furnish lunches to children at 26 locations this summer.

"It's night and day, the food choices Noble makes," Bergen said. "It is so different, district to district."

"Eva (Dunn with Noble Public Schools) wants to have kids study root crops and then harvest turnips for the whole school," Bergen said. "She embraces the whole concept."

Bergen turns the less-than-perfect peaches into canned products, such as peach jam and peach butter, peach salads, peach mustard and peach barbecue sauce. Each jar has at least one pound of peaches in it, she said.

"The canned goods turn waste into income, and a seasonal crop into a product that sells year-round," Bergen said. "It's been huge in leveling out my cash flow."

Farming is not always peaches and cream.

"You have to have a sense of humor because you're going to have disasters," Bergen said. "Last year we had 45 days of rain and beautiful onions but couldn't get in there to get them. By the time it was dry enough, the tomatoes, cantaloupe, peaches, etc., were ready."

The Bergens have four children, ages 22, 18, 16 and 14 but they don't work on the farm. "They all hate it," she said.

When Bergen is not working on the farm, she is active with her church and also is a member of the Assistance League of Norman.

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