

SALUTING ATLANTIC CANADIAN AGRICULTURE



(Photos by Linda Harrington)

Efficiency Needed in Farming Practices

By Linda Harrington

Curtis Millen has been farming all his life. He says agriculture has changed so much in the last thirty years because of the need to be more efficient in your farming practices.

"Thirty years ago you didn't need as big a piece of land; you didn't need a bigger tractor to make a living because that's what everyone was doing. Today, if you don't have larger pieces of land and larger gear, it becomes difficult to be efficient. The other part is with agriculture I don't think we are doing enough to protect our agriculture in our province. Today we are all eating, but things can change in our world of Nova Scotia or Canada in a hurry, and I feel we need to do more to protect our food source at home. There are a lot of things that could happen, we hope not, but something could happen."

Millen Farms grow blueberries and strawberries and Cur-

tis's sons Jonathan, Brandon and Eric have their own company which grows turnip and onions along with some blueberries and strawberries. "They have recently branched out into beef cattle and pigs to supply the new Masstown Butcher, expected to open this fall," he says.

Curtis doesn't see diversification as the only way to succeed in farming. "I think niche is important but I think a lot of farmers out there could be better at what they do. Anything you do, you have to do well."

There are many creative ideas related to agriculture, with people looking to do new things, but Curtis says you must be careful when taking on new ventures. "Farming is a big commitment. You can't make hay in the rain!"

Curtis has talked to the Minister of Agriculture and expressed his views. "Agriculture is an annual renewal resource to our province. We go to the

table three times a day and we need to protect this. If you grow something that displaces something coming in, it is as good as an export. These dollars stay in our province instead of going to China or Mexico."

Millen Farms sells strawberries and wild blueberries to Masstown Market and Sobeys stores in the Atlantic Provinces plus wild blueberries to farm markets in Ontario.

Curtis says one of the biggest challenges in his agricultural business has been labour. "We use a lot of foreign workers because of our unique work requirements that most local people would just not do. We work 7 days a week at the drop of hat. For instance, we could be in the field and at 10am drops of rain start, and we have to leave. Maybe an hour later we are watching the radar, and even though it is still raining, we can see the blue skies ahead. So, we are loading buses and heading back to the fields. This is very often the way we work in order to have the ability to harvest this crop without losing it and to ensure a top-quality berry."

Millen Farms has made a huge investment to ensure a dependable labour supply and the Curtis says the reward is "every one of these people are ready and willing to go to work at any time of the day as needed and their dedication is appreciated."

We are fortunate to be able

Many hands and machines involved to get the job done as the strawberry beds are formed in the Millen Farms fields. These fields will have late a summer/fall strawberry crop.



With this many hands, it does not take long to get a large field planted. Foreign workers provide a necessary source of labour for Millen Farms.



to get fresh food on our plates year-round but not everyone understands the process. "A farmer's life is a lot different than anyone else's. You just need to go when the door is open and that is 7 days a week. And you need to know you have the ability to go and sometimes people don't understand this," says Curtis adding, "And it is hard work, very hard work, especially this

time of year in the cold wet weather." Millen Farms employees 8 to 10 local equipment operators and supervisors, as well.

The ability to supply the local market with berries for much longer puts dollars back into the community. "All these strawberries going into the local stores today is 5 fold what it was used to be, so the 80% that used to be coming

from California is coming from local farmers and going back into the province."

Curtis expects there will be fresh strawberries in local stores before the 10th of June. These berries are more expensive because of the extra costs involved in growing them under plastic. Millen Farms will have a couple hundred acres of strawberries in production this year.



Curtis Millen, of Millen Farms, says anything a farmer does they have to do well in order to be successful. Millen Farms will have a couple hundred acres of strawberries in production this year.

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