

Berry farm thrives amid growing suburbs

By **SUZANNE FRARY**
For the Capital Press

Bi-Zi Farms owners Bill and Peggy Zimmerman have an understanding with their neighbors. People are welcome to walk the dirt paths around the fields, but please don't eat the berries.

The farm's fruits and vegetables sometimes prove too tempting. Strawberries in particular attract illicit pickers to the property north of Vancouver, Wash.

"We explain that we sell what we grow. It's how we make our living," Bill Zimmerman said.

Zimmerman worries not only about neighbors cutting into profits, but he also worries about their health.

"When people pick the berries, they don't know we have certain times when we spray," he said. "There are mice and other mammals around, and there could be droppings. There's a chance of E. coli."

Interlopers unfamiliar with agriculture are a challenge for the owners of the 105-acre farm in a rapidly developing area of



Suzanne Frary/For the Capital Press
Bill Zimmerman checks the blueberry plants on his farm north of Vancouver, Washington, Feb. 13. Bi-Zi Farms grows about 30 acres of berries, including around 5 acres of blueberries.

Clark County.

The farm, founded by the Zimmerman family in 1872, is bordered by 27 houses and a two-lane road the county plans to widen to four lanes.

Bill and Peggy Zimmerman started farming full-time in 1981. Their son and daughter-

in-law, Doug and Sadie Zimmerman, have joined them.

Since 1993, they have sold their berries, flowers and vegetables directly to customers from their roadside store. Before that, the Zimmermans grew oats and clover seed.

Neighbors have complained about dust and early morning noise. One neighbor said bees were "pooping" on her roof. She was placated with a quart of honey.

Bill Zimmerman said they try to compromise with neighbors. He said there's give-and-take when farming in a residential area.

Some homeowners are happy to have a farm next door. They've told the Zimmermans they prefer fields to another subdivision.

When asked if there's an upside to farming in an urban area, Peggy Zimmerman said, "Yes. 400,000 customers in the county."

"We are almost at the limit of what we can sell," Bill Zimmerman said.

Nearly every acre of the farm, plus 10 leased acres, are committed. About 30 acres are

devoted to strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and blackberries. The fruit accounts for about 25 percent of the farm's business.

"Local strawberries are always a hit," Peggy Zimmerman said.

"All the berries do fantastic here. It's the perfect weather for them," Bill Zimmerman said.

He credits Southwest Washington's mild temperatures and low humidity for keeping the

berries healthy.

The farm grows early-, mid- and late-season varieties, harvesting fruit from June through September.

After the growing season, Bi-Zi Farms stays open with an October corn maze and pumpkin patch. It also sells Christmas trees and wreaths during November and December.

The Zimmermans hire about 25 pickers. Many stay on through fall. About five em-

ployees work in the fields year-round, tending the blackberry and raspberry canes.

In the past, Bill Zimmerman didn't have concerns about finding workers. That's beginning to change. It's too early to know the Trump administration's effect on labor.

Already, though, Zimmerman has heard talk of workers returning to Mexico because they "don't want to put up with the harassment."

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