

Bridges Orchard: Public rediscovers fresh fruit

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

WENATCHEE. Wash. — Lee Bridges grew up on his parents' farm near Wenatchee, Wash., in a small community called Sunnyslope.

"My parents purchased the land in the mid-1940s, and part of it was an orchard," Lee said. "My brothers and I grew up working in the orchard."

His oldest brother became a professor at a community college in California, and his other brother was a superior court judge in Chelan County, Wash.

"I went to college but after graduation in 1974 came back and started farming with my dad. I don't think any of us siblings enjoyed the orchard when we were young; we just thought it was a lot of hard work! But it drew me back," he said.

His parents started packing their own apples in the late 1940s. They continued until about 1965 when apples had to be waxed.

"We didn't have a waxer on our



Lee and Cassandra Bridges.

packing line. When I came back to the farm I started taking apples to warehouses and after about 5 years decided to start packing my own again," Lee said.

He bought a waxer and dryer for apples and pears, and shipped them himself until about 2004.

"I started taking them to other warehouses again, but the past 7 years I've been selling direct to cus-

tomers through our small self-service fruit stand," Lee said. "I also sell to some hard-cider producers; I grow a lot of heirloom varieties that make good cider."

The orchard also grows sweet cherries. The cherries and some of the pears are sold through the fruit stand, but some cider-makers buy the Bartlett pears for hard cider.

This is a good location for grow-

ing fruit but farmland is dwindling as the city expands.

"When I was young this was all farms. Now we are almost the last farm left. There's a school on one side of my orchard, and houses and apartments on the other. With people nearby, spraying is an issue, but I work around school hours and make it work for everyone. I have a good relationship with the school and other neighbors."

Some folks enjoy having an orchard next door, and became customers.

"The first year of COVID, sales took a hit, but eventually more people wanted something besides buying at a grocery store," he said. "It's nice to see young people coming back to buy fruit."

They are discovering traditional sources of food, he added.

"I'm happy to see the younger generation going back to some of the things their parents did — buying fresh fruit, canning, etc. I've talked to other growers and this is

what they are finding also.

"At first, people didn't know what to do when COVID hit, then began buying locally grown food, fruit to make their own applesauce, fruit for canning, etc. and this is very encouraging," Lee said.

The orchard is a lot of work but he does almost all of it himself.

"I hire one couple to help occasionally but otherwise I do it myself. As I get older I'm not as fast as I used to be, but the most discouraging thing is all the regulations for small businesses. It makes it hard to hire anyone because of all the paperwork," he said.

"We had a lot of cherries at one time and 50 or 60 workers. My wife, Cassandra, helped me do the bookwork but as things progressed it became too much bookwork, and all the food safety rules when we were taking fruit to warehouses," he said. "I am not against food safety, but the amount of paperwork took all the enjoyment out of farming! It detracted from what I really liked to do."

Thank You Berry Much: U-pick operation keeps family busy

By **GEOF PARKS**
For the Capital Press

SALEM, Ore. — Once they get past the smile-inducing name of the business, customers at Thank You Berry Much blueberry farm in east Salem can settle into finding the best way to bring home the product.

Cristina Wheeler, who with her husband, Mike, purchased the 10 acres that are home to nearly 3 acres of blueberries in 2013 after living in nearby Keizer for 18 years. Prior to the purchase, the 1970s-era farm had been a mostly commercial operation.

The Wheeler family, which includes a son, Jonathon, and daughter, Julia, chose to transform the berry crop to a full-time U-pick operation. The farm features



Geoff Parks/For the Capital Press
Cristina Wheeler checks the buds on her blueberries at Thank You Berry Much Farm in east Salem.

varieties such as Earliblue, Blueray, Bluecrop, Olympia and Jersey.

Mike Wheeler is a for-ester appraiser for Northwest Farm Credit Services, while "queen of the farm" Cristina works as a Spanish translator for the City of Salem. She is also an avid beekeeper.

The couple started their blueberry operation with just

a horse trailer on their property that was converted into a U-pick stand.

"It was the only structure we had," she said, and the rudimentary operation produced "a lot of leftover berries" that ended up being picked by food bank workers.

"Every year we figured something else out and every year something new would come up," she said. "It was a little overwhelming."

They built a barn a few years later and the Wheelers set up a store and U-pick operations center. Last year, the U-pick berries were priced at \$1.25 per pound. Those who just wanted to bring home berries without the U-pick experience could purchase "Ready Pick" quarts at the stand for \$3.75 with larger quantities available.

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