

FEATURES

GAITHERSBURG GAZETTE

Scouring the fields for ripe berries on the Homestead Farm is Megan Cobb of Poolesville, (right). Farmer Benoni Allnutt Jr., (below), points out farm animals and equipment to first-graders from Poolesville Elementary.

Berries bring out 'urban farmers'

by Susan Snyder-Goodson



Photos by Chris Spivey



Snuggled back in the northwest part of the county, away from the bustle of the regular comings and goings of Montgomery County residents is the Homestead Farm—a farm that has managed to retain much of the charm and character that helped build it back in the 1700s.

The farm is owned and operated by the Allnutt family. Benoni Allnutt Sr. was born on the farm 70 years ago and says while modernization has changed many things, the farm still raises animals, grows crops and sees to the needs of the Allnutt family, just as it did over 200 years ago.

The Homestead Farm is spread out over 267 acres in Poolesville, just off Route 107 on Sugarland Road. While the farm is noted for its age, it is also known for its "pick-your-own" fruits and vegetables that are offered to area residents from May until November.

With the arrival of strawberry season two weeks ago, many area residents will make the short drive through the

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Owners expect full crowds in Homestead's berry fields

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countryside to pick a few berries, visit the farm animals and chat with members of the Allnutt family.

Allnutt Sr. says the idea of picking your own fruits has increased in popularity in recent years and several thousand people will scour his farm between now and November in search of ripe berries, fresh vegetables and, of course, the perfect jack-o'-lantern.

"People seem to like the idea of getting out in the country," Allnutt says. "They can get away from the hustle and bustle and get to be a farmhand for at least a little while."

Right now, strawberries are at their peak on the Homestead Farm, and will be available for the picking through Thursday, June 25. Raspberries will be ready around Monday, June 15, according to Allnutt and, just like this year's strawberries, he says they promise to be some of the best berries seen in these parts in quite a while.

Benoni Allnutt Jr., who runs the Homestead Farm along with his dad, says this year's weather has been exceptional for growing.

"Our black raspberry bushes are just laden with berries," Allnutt Jr. says. "I think this recent hot spell has been harder on our workers and customers than it has on our plants."

The Allnutts open their farm during strawberry season seven days a week at 7 a.m., not closing until 8 p.m. "After strawberry season we close on Mondays to give ourselves a chance to catch our breath," Allnutt Jr. says.

With a 15-month-old son at

home, Allnutt Jr. says as much as he enjoys the farm and talking with visitors who have come out to pick berries and vegetables, he would like to be able to spend more time with his family.

"I don't see us as getting much bigger," he says, explaining that he and the other farm workers stay plenty busy, directing customers to the fields, baling hay, planting

to the ground.

When asked how the workers are able to prevent other visitors to the strawberry patch from filling up on berries before bringing their cartons up to the front to be weighed, Allnutt Jr. says "That's just part of the picking process. We expect people to eat berries while they're out there."

Allnutt Sr. says he has his own

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and doing all the other jobs required on a large farm.

In addition to opening the farm up to the public, the Allnutts provide field trips for local school children and other area groups. The children get a tour of the farm, a hayride, a chance to pet farm animals, and, of course, time to pick berries in one of the fields available for picking.

"You each get to pick a pint," Allnutt Jr. says, as he directs a group of Poolesville Elementary first-graders to the fields. "Fill your basket and eat as many as you like, but don't put any in your pockets or bookbags, it will make a mess."

Despite Allnutt's warning, several overly enthusiastic 7-year-olds bound out of the fields, holding their shirts up as strawberries fall

method of checking to see how many berries people eat while picking. "I just squeeze the girls before they go out in the field and squeeze when they come back to see if there's much difference," Allnutt Sr. says. "There usually isn't, but you have to check these things."

With their easygoing Allnutt manner, it's not surprising that many of the family's customers have become close friends, returning every season for fresh fruits and vegetables.

"While we may not be as well known as some of the other pick-your-own farms in the area, we stay plenty busy," Allnutt Jr. says. "Many of our customers tell us they want to keep us to themselves. I guess you could say we're a good secret to find."



Photo by Chris Spivey

THERESA SCHEIDT, a first-grader at Poolesville Elementary, enjoys a taste of sunshine as she samples a fresh picked strawberry on the Homestead Farm.

Farms offer berry picking

Homestead Farm is not alone in offering "pick-your-own" strawberries this season. There are a number of other farms and orchards in the area that welcome berry-pickers.

Here is a list of the farms, the times of operation and the price per pound for strawberries.

- **Butler's Orchard** in Germantown. Take Interstate-270 north to Damascus. Turn left on Route 27 and follow the signs. Open Monday through Friday 7:30 a.m. to 8 p.m., Saturday 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday 7:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Strawberries are 75 cents per pound, containers are available.

- **Homestead Farm** in Poolesville. Follow Route 28 to Route 107, turn left on White's Ferry Road and follow signs. Open 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. all week. Strawberries are 75 cents per pound, containers are available.

- **Innstead Farm** in Poolesville. Follow Route 107 through Poolesville, turn left on Edward's Ferry Road and follow signs. First driveway on the right. Open every day 7 a.m. till dark. Strawberries are 79 cents per pound. Boxes are available.

- **Larriland Farm** in Woodbine,

near the town of Lisbon. Take exit 71 off 170, three miles south of 170 on Route 94. Open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Saturday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Strawberries are 69 cents per pound, containers are furnished.

- **Paul's Patch** in Brookville, north of Olney. Take New Hampshire Avenue north through Ashton. Turn right on Greebridge Road. Open Monday through Friday and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Strawberries are 75 cents per pound and containers are available.

- **Raspberry Hill** in Laytonsville, near Olney. Open Saturday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Strawberries are 50 cents per pound, bring your own container.

- **Rockhill Orchard** in Mt. Airy. Take I-270 to Damascus, turn left on Route 27, the orchard is two and a half miles on left. Open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. till dark and Saturday and Sunday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Strawberries are 75 cents per pound and containers are available.