



Heather and Buck Counts take a break from work on the farm to spend time with their daughters. From left to right, their children are Kaelyn, Reese and Addison.

The hundreds of families who purchase fruit and vegetables from Buckeye Acres see proof the family farm is alive and well when they meet owners Buck and Heather Counts.

The couple farms north of Warrensburg, Mo., growing everything you need to fill your salad bowl — spinach, kale, cucumber, tomatoes, leeks, kohlrabi, carrots. The list goes on with fruits, pumpkins and herbs. For the Counts, providing their community with healthy, homegrown foods is just as important as feeding their family the same produce grown on their land.

Their fruits and vegetables are sold in a number of ways. Through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) service, 55 families pay in installments and pick up fresh fruits and vegetables from the farm's store every Tuesday during the 20-week growing season. What

is in a customer's basket for the week depends on what has been harvested. Families usually find a selection of up to ten different vegetables.

"It's a fun way to build relationships. We get to see our customers every week and they become family to us," Heather says.

"It allows us to have capital to put back into our farm, and it allows them to have a part in the farm. They feel like they're a part of what we're doing. Most don't even have the space for a garden."

The Counts have other outlets, such as selling at the local farmers' market. Two days each week, Heather and Buck can be found on the Warrensburg courthouse lawn selling homegrown fruits, vegetables, herbs and flower bouquets.

They also deliver produce to a local restaurant. Patrons of Café Blackadder, a Warrensburg gour-



blackberries



zucchini



kale



strawberries



kohlrabi

met restaurant, often enjoy a menu full of fresh vegetables from Buckeye Acres. The farm provides the restaurant spinach, kale, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions and potatoes.

When they aren't making rounds delivering produce, the Counts are selling directly from their on-farm store. For the purists who like to get more connected to the land, they can pick their own produce when in season. Fresh strawberries and blackberries draw lots of u-pick customers to the farm during the summer, and sweet corn, tomatoes and green beans are also big sellers when in season.

"The number of people who come to the farm has increased every year," Heather says. "People want to come here to see what's going on."

The farm is truly a family operation. The Counts have three young daughters, Addison, 5, Kaelyn, 3, and Reese, 4 months. Addison and Kaelyn find ways to help around the farm. "They'll get out there and pick, especially if it's tomatoes, cherries, strawberries or blackberries, because they like to eat those," Heather says. "Addison does the herbs. She helps pot them in the greenhouse and sells them at the market."

The couple took over the produce farm in 2009 from Buck's parents, Jim and Jeanne, who moved to the area from Ohio in the late '70s and started Buckeye Acres. Now retired, they still help on the farm.

Buck does most of the field work. "It really depends on the day what I do," he says. "It ranges from weeding to irrigation to spraying. Early spring, we're trying to push things to get out early. Later in the summer it's mostly maintenance, trying to keep

the weeds out. We usually start early in the day and a lot of times it's dark by the time we're done."

The farm operates with drip irrigation to conserve water and much of their fertilizer is compost. Some manure comes from a local chicken farm.

Buck would like to use more genetically modified crops, but public opinion doesn't favor the tech-

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nology. "The anti-GMO movement is not based on solid science," Buck says, "and GMO crops can actually be better for the environment. Some people don't take the time to see what's actually going on and how GMOs helps us produce enough for them to eat."

Sweet corn is a good example. "I can go from a minimum of seven insecticide applications down to maybe two applications per season with GMO corn. That leads to less fuel consumption and less insecticide that we're putting out there. I would see that as better for the environment. But until people figure that out, we're going to be waiting awhile in the vegetable and fruit industry," he explains.

Despite the frustrations that come with farming, Buck can't imagine doing anything else. He worked in construction for a time, before earning a master's degree in plant pathology from Michigan State University in 2006.

GROWING AS A FAMILY

PRODUCE FARM'S FOCUS IS ON FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Story by Robert Overmann. Photos by Chris Fennwald.



Farming is what Buck knows best. Farming is what he finds the most fulfilling. “I get to set my own schedule, and I love being at the market when kids come up and they’re actually excited about vegetables,” Buck says with a smile. “I’ll get an email from a CSA customer saying they needed more broccoli last night because the kids enjoyed it so much. That’s exciting.”

Heather and Buck understand it is important to introduce youth to agriculture since so many are generations removed from the farm. Much of the education and outreach is part of Heather’s job. As the marketer for Buckeye Acres, she gets families excited about fresh vegetables.

Students from preschool through high school come to Buckeye Acres on field trips to learn more about how food is grown. Heather works closely with Farm Bureau’s Promotion and Education department to find activities for students that provide an educational punch during the short visits.

“We talk about where products like hamburger and milk come from,” Heather says. “Sometimes they say ‘the grocery store.’ We have to backtrack and say, ‘Where do you think it comes from before the grocery store?’ We teach them that it comes from a farm, whether it’s the cotton in their clothes or food they eat.”

Some schools bring students back year after year. Heather works with schools to plan new field trips

to the farm. Often the problem is a lack of available funds, so she encourages teachers to apply for Farm Bureau mini-grants to fund the field trips.

The children’s parents are appreciative of the educational outreach and are themselves often curious about the farm. “Even many parents are so far removed from the farm these days that they don’t understand what we do,” Heather says. “They’re very happy to learn a bit about what we do.”

With three small children of their own, Buck and Heather know learning from the right source makes a difference.

Parenthood has given them a new perspective on the importance of growing healthy, safe food on the farm.

“We’re not organic, but we’re not conventional — I tell people we’re unconventional,” Heather explains. “Our children are eating the same things their children are. So, we’re very conscientious about what we do.”

From u-pick services to field trips, the Counts consider Buckeye Acres an agritourism destination. They plan to expand the size of their berry and pumpkin u-pick patches which have become so popular community demand has outpaced supply.

“The more we can educate people about what we do with agritourism, the easier it’s going to be for us in the future,” Heather explains. “People want to know what’s going on. If we can educate them rather than other interests educating them, we can really tell our story. If we don’t, somebody else will tell it for us.” **FB**



Above, cucumbers and broccoli are two examples of what Buckeye Acres CSA customers might find in their weekly basket. Customers can also purchase directly from the Counts’ farm.

Right, Buck walks through rows of tomato and pepper plants. He performs his ritual of inspecting vegetable plants daily to stay a step ahead of any pest problems.



Heather raves about this sweet dessert treat. She says you’ll never know these chocolate brownies are made with zucchini. What a great way to eat your vegetables!



CHOCOLATE ZUCCHINI BROWNIES

1 ½ c. sugar
½ c. cocoa
1 tsp. salt
½ tsp. baking soda
½ c. oil
1 tsp. vanilla

Mix ingredients above for 2 minutes. Add 2 cups flour. Then add 2 cups grated zucchini and beat until well blended. Bake in ungreased 11x15 pan (9x13 pan also works) for 15-20 minutes at 350°. Do not over bake. (Optional: Add 2 eggs for a more cake-like brownie.)

While hot, frost with recipe. Mix together: 6 Tbsp. butter 3 Tbsp. milk 3 Tbsp. cocoa 3 c. powdered sugar

LEARN MORE

You can find fresh produce at a farmer’s market in your area. Go to agebb.missouri.edu/fmktdir/index.htm to find an Extension Service directory of markets around the state.