

## **Wildwood Berries and Produce: Virginia Cooperative Extension Mentors Growers in GAP Certification Preparation**

### **PART I: Introduction to the Farm**

Okay, welcome. Today we are at Wildwood Berries and Produce. And we're talking with the farmer, Lorrie Barron, who owns this. Just tell us a little bit about your farm and how long you've been here and what you all are growing.

We have been growing produce, probably going on 15 years. The reason we got into the produce, production with tobacco was fading out. We took the buy-out, which left us not really having a lot to do. We got a grant through Virginia State University for blackberries. Once we put those in, we decided to add a little produce to that, to the package, I guess you could say, to the farm, to add to the income. It has really helped us a lot because now that we're GAP certified, we are able to move a little further step, I guess you could say, in our production.

We've been doing the produce for a while, but now that we've been GAP certified, we're actually doing more produce, which has really made a big difference because we know more about what we're doing. We can utilize our greenhouses and stuff a lot better because we can plant for a longer season that extends our season and it extends our money, which is great.

We really do enjoy planting. I've been in the produce business ever since I was little. My dad, he used to sell at the Richmond Farmer's Market. We grew when we were there and we lived in Gloucester. And once we moved up here, I met David and we married after we worked together at a dairy farm, and we went into produce and tobacco and then the blackberries, and that's just a wound up into a...It's big now. It's much bigger than it used to be, that's for sure! Two high tunnels, probably about five acres in production. Another acre of blackberries, and a half acre of blueberries.

So tell me where you sell through.

We sell it to farmer's markets: One is at Charlotte Courthouse and the other is in Lynchburg. And then we sell through the Charlotte Courthouse Produce Growers Association.

Okay, so you were talking about your berries. I see in here you're growing in a high tunnel. Can you just tell us more about the structure and the benefit of it and how does this compare to something like a greenhouse?

With the high tunnels, you control the environment. Basically, you don't have the rain on it. You don't have as many insects supposedly, because it keeps it out of the elements. You don't have the worms as bad. There's a problem with white flies in just about every high tunnel that I've talked with. We have really good production with tomatoes and cucumbers because we can grow them longer. I plant in March, and the last picking of stuff on some varieties that I don't have to replant again is all the way into November.

Wow! So how long does that extend the season on both ends then, would you say, compared to field grown?

Oh, yeah. It's three months, four months, sometimes, yeah because you can get it out. Like, I can pick cucumbers--we can pick cucumbers as early as the end of April. They produce really fast and they produce a long spell. Our tomatoes have been really good inside the high tunnels. We've got mountain varieties, we've got the heirloom varieties and they do really well inside.

The benefit of having the produce and stuff planted inside, we can control our water. We have underground water so we don't have to worry about spraying any water on our produce, which is part of the GAP. They don't want any water to touch your produce. It's better to have everything underground. Insect control is a lot better inside. Disease control is definitely a lot better inside. We don't have to use as many chemicals because you don't have the fungicides to have to tend with because it's not getting wet all the time. The GAP, it's actually easier in here because you have everything underground so you don't have to write down that you had a leak or you had water get on your plants or anything like that. We maintain the animals out of the high tunnels also. That is another part of GAP that they definitely don't want animals or farm animals in and around the produce.

## PART II: GAP Audit Certification

Okay. I know that you are GAP certified. Tell me how that all came about. Why did you need to get GAP?

Through the blackberries, first, when we started selling to Produce Source in Ashland, we had to be GAP certified in order to sell to them. [Okay]. We've been GAP certified, you know, I'm saying throughout the years since 2013. I think it was a couple of years we missed because we had a failure of the blackberry crop, so I wasn't selling commercially. And then we started back getting GAP certified again, of course, COVID, so nobody was doing anything then, you know. And then we're reapplying to get the GAP certified again this year because we'll be selling.

What types of certifications do you have with the GAP? The harmonized GAP?

Yes, I have HGAP.

Tell me about with your GAP certification process. I know many growers tend to be afraid of it because they see the manuals, they see the paperwork. To them, it seems like this huge hurdle. Tell us about your experiences as a grower, working with Extension, because we try to help growers as much as we can.

The first GAP that you go through, of course, is like extremely stressful. Then once you get that under your belt, each one is not too bad, but you panic every day. You go through a GAP, that's the thing. You're going to panic because you want to make sure everything's right. Make sure you're doing everything right in the field to make sure you're doing everything right in your tunnels. And that is the big part of it. But we've gotten good help through the Extension office with them telling us what we need. Joanne Jones printed off a lot of paperwork and stuff for me. I think it was last year, or year before last. She's giving me books and different things that I can collect information or mailed in information for me. I'm saying it really does, really does help.

With our GAP, we have to maintain our records, daily records, when we fix our hand wash water, when we water our plants, when we spray our plants, everything's got to be written down. The old saying is if it wasn't written down, it was not--it never happened. They do check that they will go back through your GAP book to see if you've checked for wildlife in your field. You make sure you put it down every day

that you went down and checked. If you check once a week, write it down. You checked once a week you spray. You need to put down what you spray, when you sprayed, and what your re-entry is on your plants.

Being GAP certified, we've been able to market our produce a little easier at our farmer's market. We put up that we've been GAP certified. We put our certificate up. It puts us in a database where other people can see us. We are in the locally grown catalog where people see us and what's grown, which they know that we're GAP certified. Because it's put in that for some growers or for some buyers, that actually is very important because they know the product has been taken care of and properly taken care of and that we've maintained our records because we have to be GAP certified. That is one of the big things is maintaining records. If anything happens, they have to trace it back, they know where to come to.

We would like to thank everybody for coming out and taking time to come out and talk with us today. I know that it seems that GAP is a little scary, but really once you get into it, you get involved with it. It really makes a huge difference in your farm and what you can do with it. Wildwood berries and produce - we're just glad to be able to do this in this form of life that we're living right now...

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