



SUCCESS STORY

Forks Prairie Orchard

Mention orchard country to most western Canadians, and thoughts of the Okanagan Valley quickly blossom. But Alberta?

Yet there you stand, on the north bank of the Red Deer River, just east of Empress, amid the saskatoons, cherries, plums and apples of the Forks Prairie Orchard, thinking that if it can be grown, Alberta farmers will find a way.

In this serene riverside spot, the successful growers are Cathy and Barry Cocks, who have combined the aforementioned tree fruits with raspberries to create a prairie oasis of the green and growing on some two acres carved from what was once traditional cattle country.

In fact, the Cocks, who grew up across the border in nearby Leader, Sask., (they now live on it, a few metres still inside their native province) once worked for the cattle operation on which is today their property. They purchased the operation in 1973 and the orchard soon took root. The couple started growing vegetables in 1980, and streamlined to fruit in 1989.

History abounds for customers who come to the quiet locale to pick their own produce or

purchase a wide variety of fruit from the farm gate. The grounds contain an 1896 historic stone chimney and several picnic areas. The Cocks also sell jams, jellies and pies and are regulars at the Oyen Farmers Market.

Barry and Cathy were aware of the area's orchard history dating back to the 1920s. As farms were abandoned, the orchards were forgotten, but the Cocks knew the property contained the right ingredients, and were keen to see if they could once more coax fruit from the soil.

"We have a beautiful location," says Cathy. "The growing conditions are ideal: close to the river, warm and sandy."

After more than two decades, it's obvious they've found the right formula. After some trial and error, gooseberries, apricots and other varieties were dropped to eliminate those that struggled.

The Cocks don't use machinery to pick fruits. The orchard is organic, with no use of chemical pesticides. Neither does the couple hire much help, preferring to be their own labour force.

"We work hard at what we play with," says Cathy.

The niche industry has a lot of potential, but, as the Cocks will admit, it's labour intensive. The varieties grown at Forks Prairie Orchard keep the couple busy from July to October.

Weather annually threatens and provides. In 2010, cherries and plums were frosted over, but saskatoons produced a bumper crop. Such is agriculture on the prairies. While many folks dealt with flooding due to heavy rains that closed the Trans Canada Highway, the orchard thrived: it was the first year the Cocks didn't have to continuously water. Fruit flourished and was sold out by fall.

Their customers find them through word of mouth and a touch of advertising. The u-pick operation has dwindled as people have less time. Some bring out their kids for the experience, but

most want their fruit picked for them.

An organic processor has expressed interest in the orchard's produce, a possible new revenue stream for the operation. Also, Cathy has long served as a co-operator for the University of Saskatchewan, testing apple varieties for, among other characteristics, winter hardiness. Growers are used to test the university's fruit selections on their own property to obtain information on yield and quality.

Forks Prairie Orchard is just one feature in Empress, a village founded in 1914 and named to honour the late Queen Victoria, Empress of India. The site was chosen as a hub for the Canadian National Railway, an enterprise that never materialized.

Still, the community sits within two kilometres of the scenic forks of the Red Deer and South Saskatchewan rivers, eight kilometres from the village. It's lately become home to several artists who have created an artistic identity for the village apart from the main commerce of agriculture.



Red River queen: The Forks Prairie Orchard in leaf.



Fruit on the Forks: fruit trees have flourished here since the 1920s.