
Tammen Treeberry Farm

*Bruce Tammen, Manager
Joliet, Illinois*

Bruce Tammen is manager of Tammen Treeberry Farm, located about 20 miles south of Joliet, Illinois, near Braidwood.

Tammen Treeberry Farm offers choose-and-cut Christmas trees and pick-your-own blueberries on 50 acres. Tammen's father established the farm nearly 50 years ago. Christmas trees were first planted in 1956. Blueberries were added to the farm in 1965. The farm employs up to 16 people during the busy seasons. To aid with blueberry pollination, the farm rents 200 beehives.



Tammen has witnessed a flux in the you-pick berry business over the years. Most of the blueberry crop is sold as you pick from mid-July through early August. To provide consistent weighing and easy blueberry transporting for customers, each visitor uses a galvanized bucket lined with a white plastic bag. Each bucket is weighed after picking and customers take their blueberries home in plastic bags.

Tammen Treeberry Farm grows Christmas trees and blueberries. All of the trees are sold direct to the consumer on a choose-and-cut basis. The largest share of the blueberries is sold direct to the consumer as pick-your-own. Some are machine harvested and marketed through the Michigan Blueberry Growers Association, a marketing co-op.

Motivation

According to Bruce, the farm is sand. Much of the soil is not suitable for other crops. His father started planting Christmas trees on the lighter sand in 1956. He bought another farm in 1963. About one-third of that farm is blow sand. He bought the farm for the purpose of growing Christmas trees. He tested the soil and found some of it to be with a low enough pH to grow blueberries. He talked with some blueberry growers near DeMotte, Indiana, and decided to start growing blueberries, too.

Business Development

Bruce's father never developed a business plan. Neither has Bruce, who says he wouldn't know how, nor would he know what to do with one if he had one. His father borrowed money from the bank when he needed to. He died in 1990. The mortgage is paid off, now, and so far we have avoided having to borrow money to operate the farm. The Tammen's learned about this type of farming as they went along. Originally, all the Christmas trees were wholesaled. People began asking questions about cutting their own trees. Around 1970, they started to allow a few people to do that. Now, that is the only way trees are sold.

Market Access

Tammen Treeberry Farm did newspaper advertising. Much of their business came by word of mouth. They have done some radio advertising in the past but no longer do any of that. In the mid '70s, the *Chicago Tribune* began to print an annual article about families going out to a farm and cutting their own Christmas tree. They listed many farms where families could do that. The Tammen's was one of the farms listed. According to Bruce, that did more to increase sales of Christmas trees than anything. In recent years, they have had to contend with a glut of Christmas trees and a large increase in competition.



Customers are now demanding Fraser fir rather than Scotch pine. Although they do grow Fraser fir, it does not grow well in Illinois, so they are unable to grow enough of that species.

U-pick blueberries were in their "golden age" in the late '70s and early '80s. After that, u-pick sales gradually decreased until the last two or three years. Most of the Tammen Treeberry Farm customers were farmers and full-time homemakers. There has been a large decrease in the numbers of both of those segments of the population. In recent years, they have been gaining larger numbers of East Europeans. There also seems to be an increase in the number of people who think of picking your own produce as a "fun, family thing." That is a more new-fangled idea. Recreational pickers never used to make up a significant part of the Tammen's customer base. They pick much smaller quantities of berries than "serious" pickers.

Critical Steps

According to Bruce, getting out of the wholesale Christmas trees was a very wise decision. That seems to be a good way to go broke today. With the blueberries, his parents, in the early days, chose to ignore Chicago as a source of customers. The Tammen's chose to look downstate to rural communities. That was a good decision at that time. Today, rural communities are declining in population. The farm has to look more toward the suburbs today. Those people are more fickle and less "serious" about canning and freezing. They have an entirely different lifestyle. Many of them, however, are people who grew up on farms and left after high school.

Barriers to Success

The weather is the biggest problem. There have been times when there was a serious shortage of labor. That is not a problem at the present time. There is talk off-and-on about keeping the kids in school year-round. According to Bruce, that would be a disaster for the farm as they are dependent on high school and college students for laborers. Another current problem in the community is the encroachment of the suburbs. This has already created conflicts between rural people and suburbanites. People who move there from the City of Chicago seem to adapt better to country life than suburbanites. It appears that it is only a matter of time before suburban encroachment will drive the farm out of business.



Unexpected Problems

The unexpected problems they have had to deal with, so far, have had to do with insect pests and diseases. Weather conditions from floods to droughts have also contributed their share of problems. Another unexpected problem has been from suburbanites and their apparent lack of respect for others. Further, the suburbanites do not have a clue about how people get along in a rural community and try to work together to solve common problems, according to Bruce. They seem to be more inclined to be contentious than to be cooperative.

Success or Failure

So far, the business has succeeded. The Tammen's say they will continue to adapt to changes in customer demands for trees and the change in their customer base. "Entertainment" farming does not appeal to Bruce. "I am not P. T. Barnum."

Industry/Market Changes

I think I have already commented on this.

Lessons Learned

"The only thing that never changes is the fact that everything changes." One has to accept this and adapt to it, according to Bruce.

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