



Edwards Orchard

For my 10th birthday, my grandmother surprised me with my very own apple tree. I know, kind of an odd gift for a young girl right? But, to this day, it is still my favorite. When I was younger, I ate apples every day! My father and I planted my tree in our back yard and now ten years later, we enjoy big, juicy Red Delicious apples every fall. At the time, Red Delicious was my favorite. Now that I am older I have found a few other varieties I like even more. Ken and Barb Hall of Poplar Grove, IL have a hard time picking out their favorite variety since they have 15 to pick from in their very own backyard!



The Halls are the third generation and the current owners and operators of Edwards Apple Orchard, Inc. What is now a family orchard and farm market, started out as a dairy farm. In 1964, Barb's parents, Bob and Betty, converted their dairy operation to what would soon be a local favorite in the fall. In 1984, Ken and Barb came to work on the farm. Before they decided to come back to the family business, Ken worked as an agronomist and Barb was a high school teacher. They purchased the operation in 1990.

A little over 50 years later, Edwards Apple Orchard provides a gathering place for family fall traditions. There are 16 members of the Edwards family still working on the farm to provide seasonal fruit to the community. But, there is much more to the experience of visiting Edwards Apple Orchard than just purchasing fruit. (Although, that is one of my favorites!)

On the farm, family activities include u-pick apples, pumpkins, and raspberries. Fresh apple cider and warm donuts are also for sale. (Okay, that might actually be my favorite.) The store offers an assortment of fudge, gifts, and specially foods that celebrate the fall season. In The Cider Cellar you can order a BBQ pork sandwich or slice of hot apple pie. The "down on the farm" theme is really felt here as you can sit on a milk can while you enjoy your snack. Visiting

the animal farm and “driving” retired tractors in the play area is always a hit with the young visitors.

During the fall season, Barb and Ken play very active roles in making sure the operation runs smoothly. Barb manages over 260 seasonal employees and Ken works on the logistics of the crops and sales portion.

But, here it is springtime. For a typical row crop farmer, this is a very, very busy time. It is no different for apple farmers. Except, instead of spending time in a larger tractor and planter, apple growers spend their spring doing various other tasks. At the time of the interview, Ken explained that they had just finished pruning 30,000 apple trees. That process alone takes a large amount of time, not to mention the cleanup process afterwards. They mow down the raspberry canes, pushing this summer producing crop off until fall. Springtime also means removing older apple tree blocks and preparing that ground for pumpkins, gourds, oriental corn, and squash.

New apple trees were planted last week. The planting process for an apple tree is much different than corn. Trees are ordered from nurseries three years in advance of delivery. Growers must anticipate changes in consumer demand well in advance. Trees are usually planted in April. As soon as they are in the ground, a trellis system is built to help train and support the trees. It will be another three years before newly planted trees begin to produce fruit.

Sustainability to Ken and Barb is the key to a successful operation. Recently, new apple varieties and pest management practices have been put in place to help reduce pesticide use. Each year, orchard managers install 10,000 pheromone strips in the trees that release the scent of a female codling moth. This causes the male moth to search for his mate. However, he can smell her but he can't find her. In an essence, this confuses the moths and mating is prevented. This is a safe and harmless method that proves to be very effective and efficient as no insecticide spray is needed. This is important because according to Ken the codling moth “is the classic worm in the apple that we are trying to avoid.”

The Halls have also established a prairie on their farm. This feature not only looks gorgeous and preserves the natural prairie land that was once found in Northern Illinois, but it also provides a rich food source for the pollinators that apple farmers rely on so much. They have also restored a wetland on their farm. The purpose of this is to make sure the water discharged from their farm will be cleaner than ever.

Producing the best products for their customers is very important to everyone at Edwards Orchard. They do this not only by implementing the most sustainable practices they can but by treating their customers, whom they call guests, like family. They are so very passionate about their business and enjoy providing a place where families can gather. They invite you to join

their family and visit this fall. Mother Nature influences their opening date from season to season. “Each year, we open when the apples and berries are ready to harvest,” said Ken. They plan to open on August 26th and run through the Sunday after Thanksgiving. You can learn more at www.edwardsappleorchard.net (Published April 29, 2016)