

MONTGOMERY FARMS

Feeding the Future

Getting to Know the Family Behind Lewis Orchards



VIEW OF THE LEWIS ORCHARDS FIELDS IN DICKERSON, MD

Set against a picturesque landscape of forest, fields, and cropland is the Lewis Orchards Farm Market. Driving down the winding roads of Dickerson, Maryland inevitably takes drivers past the farm, which houses one of the largest on-site farm markets in the area.

In operation since 1888, Lewis Orchards is a prime example of Montgomery County farm life. The 197-acre farm has passed down through four generations of the Lewis family to its present owners, Robert and Linda, who took over the operation from Robert's grandmother in 2001. "Usually farms don't pass through grandmothers like this one. I think that part is cool," says Linda. "Her wish was to see the farm continue on," adds Robert. "I found that out after she passed away and by that time, Linda and I were already running the operation."

A love of farming and stewardship of the land seems to be a common theme for the Lewis generations. "Robert's dad and grandmother never left the farm. Robert has only lived a quarter mile from this farm his entire life," says Linda.

Agriculture is so embedded in the

*"We do what we do
because we love to
do it."*

-Linda Lewis

Lewis family that the next generation is also involved. Robert and Linda's son, Daniel, who is now the fifth generation, helps manage the workload of the farm with his parents. Robert says, "Our son grew up on the farm; now he does the planting of the sweet corn and the pumpkins and hauling in the vegetables. He loves what he's doing. He said, 'I wouldn't want to change.'"

Younger generations returning to agriculture may even develop new and better ways to farm over the coming decades. But it may be that the lifestyle is what appeals most to these returning farmers. "I think people are coming back because it's a different way of life," says Linda. "In some respects, it's a little slower, but in other ways, it's a little faster. There are challenges, but ... You're out there trying something. On our farm, it's who gets to try the first whatever. The first ear of corn, the first peach, it doesn't even really matter what it

is. It's who gets to try it first. If you really think about it, you do, sometimes, have fun. Who, being an adult, still gets to play in the dirt or have rotten cantaloupe fights, rotten tomato fights because someone was being smart?"

Newer communication technologies such as social media and online ordering have paved the way for customers to easily interact with the farmers on a more frequent basis and get a behind-the-scenes look at their local farms. Younger farmers readily take advantage of these developments to reach new audiences and expand opportunities for the public to learn more about farm life.

Although the Ag Reserve and a growing interest among consumers in buying local has been a boon to area farmers, agriculture remains a tenuous and stressful business for many. "When you farm, you are a gambler," says Linda, "because you gamble with weather, you gamble with Mother Nature, and sometimes you win, and like [2018], it rained and rained and rained, and sometimes you lose. This has been the most challenging year that we have ever faced."

Helping the public and the farm's customers to understand the challenges of farm life isn't always easy. "Starting in April, right up until we close around Thanksgiving, it's seven days a week," says Robert. "You put in long hours. You've got to go by the sunshine. You get a couple rainy days, that sets you back. So, you've got to catch up for that. To do it, you've got to want to do it."

The County and the areas which surround it have transformed even during Robert's lifetime. With almost one million residents, Montgomery County has added more people, cars, and light pollution, among other issues. "From our location here, we can see fireworks from Virginia now. We



LINDA LEWIS, OWNER OF LEWIS ORCHARDS

can see them in Washington, all the way around to Damascus. When I was growing up, we didn't see all that, except Washington," reflects Robert. "I'm not much into change, but it's coming."

Narrow rustic roads, which sometimes aren't paved, and a misunderstanding of traffic laws contributes to the problems many farmers in the area face. Linda notes that while they try not to impede traffic and are as considerate as possible for other drivers using the same roads, "... sometimes you have to move equipment and people get upset ... people don't realize that farm equipment has the right-of-way. So, if you see a piece of farming equipment, you need to slow down or stop, because the roads are so tight that sometimes you can't get by."

As for consumers, even with the growing popularity of buying from local producers, and the creation of marketing initiatives such as the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission's Buy Local Challenge every July, Linda believes most customers are still disconnected from a healthy understanding of and relationship with their food. "People are removed from where their food comes from," she says. "You can go to the grocery store and you can get strawberries in December. People are very disconnected."

Although the growing and market season is short, the work continues on the farm even in the winter. "The market is open six months out of the year. When we're closed, people think we go on vacation," Linda says. "But we don't ... We've already started for next year, pruning the blackberries back. We're always moving, it's just that you don't see things happen."

The lack of income for half of the year is an issue for many farmers. The growth of agritourism has



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LEWIS ORCHARDS WEBSITE

provided many operations with some financial flexibility. The ability to host events on the farm expands the opportunities to generate more income even in the winter. "If I wanted to be able to have weddings [on the farm], I should be able to have weddings which can bring in a little bit of income to help pay the mortgage," says Linda.

Legislative action at the end of 2018 in the County Council began the process of allowing more events at farm properties in the Ag Reserve, but the measure was more directly addressed at wineries and breweries rather than farms. It also placed a cap on the number of events not related to farming and agriculture, such as weddings and music festivals. The issue is not without its opponents and challenges, but farmers may be able to host more events in the near future while maintaining the rural farm life that makes the Ag Reserve so unique.

When asked what she wished the



PEPPERS FROM THE FARM MARKET

public knew about farming, Linda says, "I hope that people realize we do what we do because we love to do it. We do like to grow food for people. We like to feed people. If you see something growing along the side of the road, whatever you do, don't take it. If you're hungry, come to me, I will feed you every day of the week."

Still, Linda and Robert wouldn't consider doing anything else. "The happiest thing is to have kids try new foods and see the smiles on their faces. Then the next time they're in, they'll come to me saying, "What can I try? It's great to watch kids be kids," says Linda.

The season at Lewis Orchards runs from June to Thanksgiving. At the market, visitors can find an enormous assortment of local products, including jams and jellies, honey, sweet cream butter, cheeses, sauces and spices, and of course, fresh fruits and vegetables. Even with the size of the market, the Lewises emphasize high quality rather than quantity—Linda would be heartbroken to deliver a substandard product to the farm's beloved customers.

Learn more about Lewis Orchards at their website, www.lewisorchardfarmmarket.com, or connect on Facebook at www.facebook.com/lewisorchardsmd.

