

Bedford Reinforced Plastics expands into blackberries

BY LINDA WILLIAMS

THE STAHL FAMILY started Bedford Reinforced Plastics (Bedford) 37 years ago. Today, the company has 260 employees. Most are in Bedford County but there are branch offices in Louisiana and California.

While the main operation is fiberglass reinforced polymer (FRP), the company recently expanded into growing blackberries. According to Shannon



PREPARATION: Raised beds are installed on the farm in Bedford.

M. Foor, business development manager, the idea blossomed when Bedford began selling FRP to Trellis Growing System, a company in Fort Wayne, Ind., to be used for trellises for blackberry plants.

The company's trellises had always been made of wood or steel, but those materials did not withstand the 25-year life of the plants. So FRP was a perfect fit. The trellis is designed to lie flat, allowing the plants to be covered when severe winter weather hits. Thus, they survived minus-30 degree ground temperatures in Circleville, Ohio, last winter where Bedford and Trellis Growing Systems partnered with Rhoads Farm Market on a 10-acre plot. Bedford and Trellis Growing Systems have also started another joint venture on 20 acres in

Bottom Farms. John Koontz, Everett, is the Blackberry Bottom Farms manager. Koontz, a lifelong farmer, was looking for a challenge, which he has found in berries.

The project will provide full-time employment from spring until fall for more than a dozen employees. Additional seasonal workers will be hired during harvesting season, which runs from late June through early September.

Getting the fields ready, installing a drip irrigation system, and planting 14,000 berry plants in 13.2 miles of rows was the beginning. Because no new project is without setbacks, the plants did not get into the ground until July. Five varieties — Apache, Ouachita, Triple Crown, Natchez and Chester — are rep-

West Bend, Iowa, with Riverview Berry Farm.

This year, Bedford took a giant step and purchased a 200-acre farm near the industrial park and immediately dedicated 20 acres to blackberries. The farm has been appropriately named Blackberry

OHIO BLACKBERRY FARM: This trellis is installed on the acreage in Ohio.

resented in the acreage. Natchez will ripen first, followed by the Apache and Ouachita. Triple Crown will be a close fourth and Chester will come on slowly, allowing the season to extend into late summer.

The primary market will be fresh fruit for folks to pick up at grocery store



STEADILY GROWING: John Koontz shows the progress of the blackberry plants planted in Bedford in July.



PLANTING TIME: Blackberry planting begins in Bedford.



WEEDING IS NO FUN: Joe Corle and Eric Jacobson weed the blackberry patch, a never-ending job that ultimately provides a sweet, tasty product.

produce sections. Local fruit lovers will find them at the farmers market next summer.

“We are going to the local market to show folks what is available,” says Shannon.

Berries that are still quite good, but not perfect, will be used for wines, jams and jellies. Koontz says he can attest to the sweetness of the berries.

“These aren’t the kind of berries you used to pick from the hedgerows,” he says. “These are hybrid plants.”

“Without the trellis system, blackberries like this could not be grown in zone 5,” Foor explains. “It is because we can lay them down and cover them that they survive the cold weather.”

When spring comes, the berries are put in an upright position, making harvesting easier because they will be at hand level, causing a 33 percent increase in harvesting productivity.

Weeding is nonstop and once the plants have produced, there is trimming and training them to grow on the trellis.

“There will be lots of challenges,” Koontz says. “We will have to deal with insects, wildlife and birds, but we will take each one as it comes.” ☀