

Blackberry Bottoms covers up for winter

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With the cold weather, plants are sometimes covered to keep them alive. At Blackberry Bottom in Bedford, 70,000 feet of rows of blackberry plants had to be covered to keep the plants warm for their first winter.

Bedford Reinforced Plastics, Inc., purchased 20 acres in Bedford Township, along Belden Road, last January. In mid-July, the plants were put into the ground and were covered up following a short growing period.

Drive by today, and the farm looks like a snow-covered field in this almost-snowless winter. It's plastic-covered.

Shannon Foor, business development manager for Bedford Plastics, said the berry plants are on the trellises which are keeping them close to the ground until the last frost. "The farm is set up to weather the winter at this point," he said, and all activities have been stopped until spring. He said that areas further south

are able to go through the winter without a protective covering.

Once the cold weather gives way to spring, the trellises will be turned over horizontal to allow the sun to hit the plants. When the blossoms bloom on one side of the trellis, where the berries will grow, they will be lifted vertically to give the berries an airy environment while protecting them from too much of the hot summer sun.

There have been challenges, Foor said, in the process. "Because it's our first year, and we started from scratch, I don't want to call them setbacks," he said.

The biggest challenge was the time the plants were put in, he explained, which didn't allow for full summer sun and a good growing period. "We were late getting them in and we stressed the plants," Foor said, which has affected the crop they will be expecting come summer.

Normally, blackberry plants are expected to produce one to two pounds of berries per row-foot, or foot of row of plants. Foor said that they are now expecting to harvest around one half of a pound per row-foot.

"I don't know if that's necessarily a bad thing," Foor said, because they are still expect-



No, it's not snow, instead white plastic covers and protects the rows of blackberry bushes at Blackberry Bottoms in Bedford.

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ing a crop between 36,000 and 40,000 pounds of blackberries. Foor wasn't sure if a crop three or four times larger would have been a good thing for their first year.

"The next step in this is finding a market," Foor said. He said it is expected that one or two of the local grocery chains, though he couldn't say which ones, could be supplied by the local farm.

Foor said some produce or crop may be sold at the Downtown Bedford Farmer's Market as well, and you-pick services may become available toward the end of the

season, when the commitment to the grocery stores begins to run out.

"At least the first year, everything that we harvest should stay local," he said.

As the harvest gets larger in the coming years, Foor said he expects the extra harvest to make its way into more largely populated areas.

In the fields, a lot needs to be done before the berries hit the shelves. The covers must be removed, the trellises turned for the blooms and then rotated upright for the plants to grow. After that, workers must inspect the

plants to make sure they are healthy and weed the fields.

Some of the plants had seen between four and six feet of growth last year before the cold set in, Foor said. "Those plants should see an additional 10 to 16 feet of growth."

"There's a lot of work on that end of things to be done," he said.

For right now, the berry block is quiet and waiting for spring. Around the middle of July, Foor said customers can expect to see Blackberry Bottom blackberries on the shelves of the local grocery chains.