

her business

Berry Easy Pickings

BY OLIVIA M. HALL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CORTNEY MYERS AND JULIE MAGURA

City-girl-turned-farmer **Linda Eldred** makes strawberry picking an experience.

Linda Eldred wants customers to have fun. Forget aching backs, stains and mushy berries. When visiting her pick-your-own strawberry farm, Strawberry Fields, just outside of Skaneateles, she invites guests to “experience strawberries like never before.”

First-time berry pickers can begin this exploration at the upcoming, second annual Strawberry Jamboree Summer Festival, an excellent opportunity to get acquainted with the farm’s hydroponic system: Plants drape their fruits heavily over the sides of white styrofoam pots, stacked five high, and receive daily doses of nutrients through long tubes.

Since Eldred opened the business in July 2009, it has become a popular destination for children and adults, who criss-cross the neat, tarp-covered rows — accessible even by wheelchair — to

snip shiny, plump, deep-red berries directly into their baskets.

“They love that it’s like a treasure hunt,” Eldred said. “They’re looking for the most perfect, biggest berry they can find. It’s a lot of fun.”

With a business degree from Onondaga Community College and a knack for marketing, Eldred has even found ways to bring her visitors back repeatedly throughout most of the year. Before the first berries are ripe, she offers cheerful hanging baskets, while during the season the farm’s small shop sells all-natural jams, hydroponic vegetables and herbs, strawberry blossom honey and a variety of other local products. Thanks to an everbearing berry variety, customers can pick from June until the first hard frost in October, when she closes operations for a month. “In

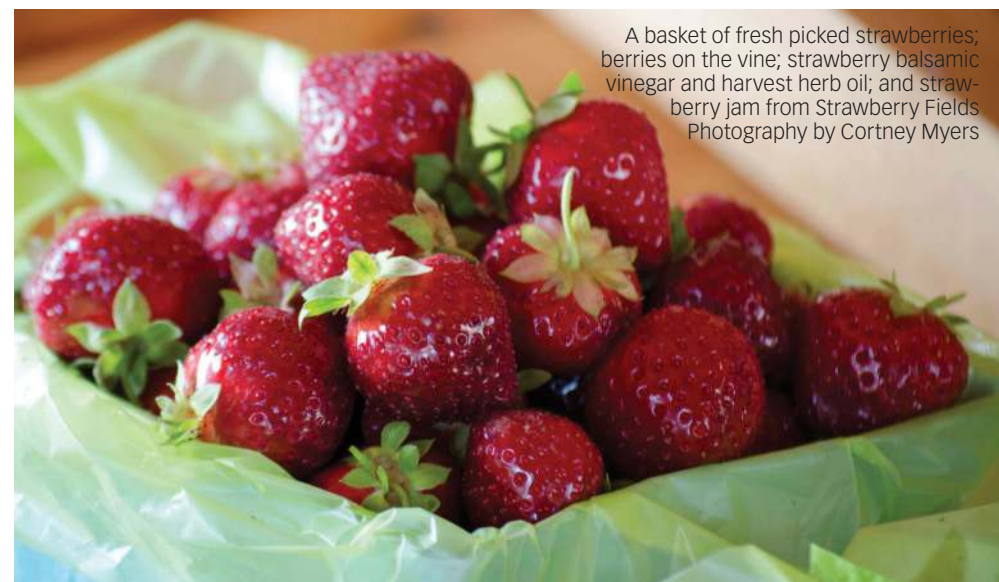
November,” she said, “all of the summer stuff goes out, and I transform this store into Christmas. People love our trees, wreaths and gifts.”

But perhaps as important for Eldred’s success are her warm, hands-on manner and hospitality towards her guests — think free, iced lemon water on hot days, a testament to her motto: “Enter as strangers, leave as friends.”

Although she has a part-time employee to help run the shop, she arrives an hour before opening to arrange free samples of jam and other products for visitors and makes a point of giving first-time customers a personal tour.

Ironically, running a flourishing farming business is just about the opposite of what Eldred envisioned for her life when she was a young girl in Middle-

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A basket of fresh picked strawberries; berries on the vine; strawberry balsamic vinegar and harvest herb oil; and strawberry jam from Strawberry Fields. Photography by Cortney Myers



“It’s hard work, but it’s a good, honest life.”



Linda Eldred proudly shows off her hydroponic berry farm, Strawberry Fields, in Skaneateles. Photography by Julie Magura

town, N.Y. “I grew up a city girl, and I always said that I would never marry a farmer. Well, guess what? I married a farmer,” she said with a laugh. “My parents decided to move to Skaneateles when I was 15, and I just loved this beautiful area. And when I first met Doug, I started riding out with him on tractors, learning how farmers operate and, if they’re big enough, how diversified they are. I thought, this is great!”

In more than 30 years of marriage, Eldred and her husband, Doug, have raised two daughters and three sons, homeschooled by Linda and ranging in age from 16 to 29. They will soon welcome their fifth grandchild.

Working with Doug on 1,400 acres, producing mostly grain and hay, Eldred has learned to love her farming existence. “It’s hard work, but it’s a good, honest life,” she said.

And now, with her hydroponic strawberry farm, she has carved out her own little niche. “Originally, we were thinking about growing hydroponic tomatoes,” Eldred said. “Then I saw an ad in the newspaper for hydroponic strawberries. When I got there, I was just amazed! Berry picking was so easy

and clean. I was never going to pick strawberries on the ground again.”

She just couldn’t stay away and on several repeat visits, gushed her excitement to the farm’s owner, who promptly asked, “Do you want to buy it?”

“And that’s how we kind of fell into it,” Eldred said. “We took the whole setup down and moved it [from Owasco Lake to Skaneateles]. Doug said, ‘this can be your thing.’”

Eldred already has many ideas for the future of her business. She is planning to expand the strawberry stacks by a third (Strawberry Fields currently boasts 15,000 plants on a quarter of an acre — the equivalent of two acres of soil-grown berries), and perhaps she will add some hydroponic blueberries and more herbs and vegetables.

That’s not to say that growing produce is always easy. “Every year is a challenge,” Eldred said. “We’re really dependent on the weather. Last year it was hot and dry, and this year it’s the opposite, with rain every day. But you just work through it, adjust accordingly and do the best you can.” Spoken like a true farmer. ■



IF YOU GO

WHAT: Strawberry Jamboree Summer Festival; Local vendors offer an afternoon of family-friendly fun, including food, crafts, alpacas, a bouncy house, a raffle to support the American Red Cross, and — of course — strawberries.

WHEN: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., Saturday, Aug. 3

WHERE: Strawberry Fields Hydroponic Farm, Route 20 west of Skaneateles

INFO: strawberryfieldsupick.com