



## NORTH FEATURES

# Working Together to Move Ahead

by Tamara Scully

**Third generation continues heritage of New Jersey blueberry industry**



Pickers in the field at harvest.

*Photos by Tamara Scully.*

Blueberry Bill Farms, Inc. is one of many blueberry farms in the small town of Hammonton, N.J. Located in the middle of southern New Jersey's Pine Barrens, home to the first cultivated blueberry, Hammonton is the heart of blueberry country. It's no surprise that the blueberry is New Jersey's state fruit and that Hammonton is known as the Blueberry Capital of the World.

"Blueberries are all we have in Hammonton anymore," Bill Mortellite, aka Blueberry Bill, said.

Mortellite doesn't worry about competition from other New Jersey growers. Today's atmosphere isn't one of competition, but one of working together to promote New Jersey's blueberry industry, which historically ranks among the top states in the nation in value of production and in acres cultivated. Growers here typically have ties going back two or three generations, and many are related somewhere along the line.

"My colleagues are the best in the world," he said.

There have been some overproduction issues over the past few years, causing berries to be diverted from the fresh to the frozen market. Mortellite is confident that consumer demand and New Jersey's promotion of the blueberry crop will resolve any surplus issues. After all, blueberries and cranberries are native to the Pine Barrens, and play an important role in the agriculture and economics of this region.



An old photo of the family operation shows crates of freshly harvested blueberries.

### Industry concerns

Labor issues are a concern for New Jersey's blueberry industry in general, as migrant workers travel between the southern states, pass through New Jersey, and then northward up to Michigan, following the ripening of the crop. New Jersey's window to retain pickers is small, and the 2010 season was early.

"I think the big story of 2010 was the heat. It was a hot spring, so we were 10 to 14 days early getting started, and it stayed hot so we finished much earlier," Dr. Gary Pavlis, Rutgers Cooperative Extension agent for Atlantic County, said. "The bees didn't get here early enough, the pickers didn't get here early enough, and in some cases the pickers left early to go somewhere else."

With southern states, such as Georgia and Florida, now entering the blueberry market in force, New Jersey growers have felt some pressure. The development of blueberry varieties for warmer climates has meant that New Jersey needs to work harder, get innovative and change as needed to keep its prominence.

The labor shortage necessitated a move to mechanical harvesting, as pickers were scarce.

"This move may be the trend of the future, as the technology of the harvesters is getting much better and can now be used for the fresh market," Pavlis said.

The hot, dry weather was actually much more welcomed by growers than the wet 2009 season. Although early, the crop was plentiful for most growers. Blueberries cannot be picked wet, Mortellite said, so getting the harvest in at all was difficult last season. Every season has its challenges, but the blueberry industry in New Jersey has continued to thrive regardless.

"We've seen a lot of changes in our business. The ability to change is key in this environment," Mortellite said.



Workers install irrigation pipeline, financed via the EQUIP program.

### Changing with the times

Mortellite has a steady seasonal labor force of about 100 workers, primarily from Mexico, who are housed at the farm. Blueberry Bill Farms did not experience any labor shortage issues, Mortellite said. He takes pride in providing quality housing and care for his labor force.

“We are very friendly to our employees, very generous,” Mortellite said. “We have to treat our men even better,” ensuring that they seek out work at Blueberry Bill Farms each season.

In total, Mortellite estimates that 15,000 workers descend on Hammonton each harvest season, generating millions of dollars into the local economy. This year, only about 10,000 workers came to town, with many having immigration difficulties or opting to work on the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, in addition to the early season issues mentioned by Pavlis.

With 120 acres of blueberries, Mortellite can use as much help as he can get. Berries here are handpicked three times, and two final pickings are completed by mechanical harvester.

The last picking is “as good as the first pick,” Mortellite said, primarily due to the drip irrigation he has recently installed in many of his fields. Drip irrigation has caused plants to be an average of 35 percent bigger and produce about 20 percent more berries, in his estimation. The drip irrigation allows Mortellite to control the amount of water utilized and deliver it directly to the plants via the root system, allowing less loss

due to evaporation and better control of precise amounts delivered to the plants. The less water, the better the product, Mortellite said of his blueberries.

He added drip irrigation to 20 acres over the past two years. His participation in the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQUIP) has allowed him to purchase the diesel pumps he needs to power the drip irrigation. The old overhead irrigation system had burned out his pumps, trying to deliver enough pressure to water the crop. Mortellite compared the overhead irrigation system's capacity, which would water 8 acres in 12 hours, versus the drip system that irrigates 25 acres much more precisely in only five hours. Sensors in the ground measure the moisture content, and the precise amount of irrigation needed is calculated.

"I want to do something each year to better the operation," Mortellite said. Over the next four years, EQUIP will help him to install drip irrigation on the rest of the acreage, which he estimates will save \$70,000 per year in diesel fuel. Another bonus is that the drip irrigation has directly decreased the amount of fungicides he needs to spray each season.

Other areas in which modern technology has improved the cultivation include the pesticide spray program. Mortellite uses Rutgers' integrated pest management program, and active scouting determines when there is a problem, what the problem is, and how to treat it efficiently and effectively.

"We're targeting with a specific pesticide for that pest," Mortellite said. "Before it was all guess [work]."

### **Blueberry fields forever**

Mortellite's soils are sandy, but do contain a lot of organic matter. Because he is in the heart of wild blueberry and cranberry territory, the soils are well-suited to cultivating blueberries, too. Mortellite augments his fields in order to "hold as much moisture as we can, naturally," he said.

Augmentation entails adding peat and blending it with the sand in each planting hole. Mulch is then added on top. This combination of peat, which repels water but doesn't dry out, and mulch, which attracts and holds water, is key to keeping the moisture retained. While peat does also acidify the soil pH, Mortellite's soil is already within range for blueberry cultivation and doesn't really need any additional acidifiers.

Fertilizing is done each spring and again after harvest. Mortellite currently grows two varieties of blueberries, Duke and Blue Crop, and each has its own individual requirements. Typically, 400 pounds of 10-5-10 in spring and 150 pounds of 10-10-10 postharvest is applied to the Dukes.

"I look at the plant and see what its needs are," Mortellite said. Observation, knowing your fields and gut instinct all come into play.

Pruning of the crop also plays a vital role. His fields are hand-pruned each season, with the emphasis on pruning out older shoots and leaving plenty of space for new shoots. Pruning is done strictly during winter dormancy.

Mortellite prides himself on his pruning acumen and is among the top pruning farms in the area, he said. Others do not pay as close attention or they prune out of season. Hand pruning is labor-intensive. Mortellite maintains a year-round labor pool of 10 employees to prune the bushes and to keep the fields clean.

The Duke variety of blueberries is an early-season crop, traditionally picking in June. Mortellite has 105 acres of Dukes and another 20 acres of Blue Crop, which is a midseason producer. He is adding Elliots to capture the late-season blueberry market.

### Commercial operation

“As a commercial grower, you have to have quantity and quality,” Mortellite said. “You’ve got to have quality in this market. You can’t sell junk.”

Blueberry Bill Farms is a commercial operation, selling under its own label. Its own USDA-inspected packinghouse, as well as USDA third-party audit certification, allows Mortellite to distribute his berries through two brokers and onto the shelves at several large, regional supermarket chains. The fresh berries are packed in pints for retail sale.

Documentation of water use, pesticide use, packinghouse sanitation, the requirement of deer fencing and bird deterrents to eliminate animal waste contamination in the fields and more are some of the issues faced on a food sanitation level. Programs to train workers in sanitation and proper hygienic facilities for workers’ use are needed. It is all documented daily.



Workers in the field at Blueberry Bill Farms, where the family takes pride in providing optimal living and working conditions for their migrant labor. Many workers return each season.

The emphasis on food safety has led many supermarket chains to implement their own auditing process in excess of that required under USDA programs, and may even include sprayer calibration and other issues. Keeping precise, accurate daily logs is a necessity.

“We don’t have time to recover if there is a problem. We have to make sure everything is in order,” Mortellite said.

### Other venues

While Blueberry Bill Farms grows berries primarily for the fresh market, they are also available frozen in 30-pound boxes. This allows a year-round market. Another way of marketing is agritourism and catering to the pick-your-own crowd. Situated with fields on both sides of the Atlantic City Expressway, Blueberry Bill Farms is poised to attract families heading to and from their Jersey Shore vacations.

Three years ago, Mortellite decided to open a few acres for pick-your-own customers. He sees it as a chance to educate the general public about local food and farming and allow them to see firsthand the operation of a commercial farm. He also gives tours of

the farm and packing plant. Last season, he sold about 200 pounds of blueberries via pick-your-own customers, just a drop in the hat compared to the quantity he distributes commercially.

Mortellite already has future plans to turn the farm over to the up-and-coming generation. Developing the pick-your-own market is a part of that plan. Mortellite is not only working to keep his quality high and his farm financially sound via commercial distribution, he is also looking to keep blueberry farming an enjoyable occupation in spite of the intense pressures a short-season crop can bring. Diversifying the farm helps with both objectives.

“The more outlets you have, the better off you are,” Mortellite said. “I want them [the next generation] to have fun. It should be enjoyable.”

*The author is a freelance contributor based in New Jersey. Comment or question? Visit [www.farmingforumsite.com](http://www.farmingforumsite.com) and join in the discussions.*

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