

# Vested Heirs: Hoping for Sweet Success



On top of a mountain in Preston County you'll find some of the sweetest, juiciest strawberries you ever put in your mouth. Vested Heirs had a waiting list this season for customers to get their hands on a pint or two.

The farm sits on the edge of Aurora. It's owned and operated by two sisters, Debbie Fike and Darla Stemple, Debbie's husband B.J. and Cindy Murphy. The name Vested Heirs has special meaning. "We all met one weekend and brainstormed about a name for the operation. Our grandparents bought this place. Her name was Vesta. His name was Fred. We put the names together and came up with Vested," explains Debbie. "Darla and I are the heirs."

The sisters were raised on Four Winds Farm where their father grew acres of strawberries. He would hire Amish workers from Oakland, MD every season to help pick the fruit. The sisters remember cars lined up the farm driveway and out onto Route 50. People would come from miles around just to buy their berries.

When their father became too ill to work the farm several years ago, Debbie, B.J., Darla, and Cindy had to make a decision.

"We didn't want to see him sell. So we had to hurry and come up with a plan. We decided to do the produce thing and see how it works," says Debbie.

Most of the 100 acres is leased out to other growers. The "Vested Heirs," as they call themselves, farm 3 acres. 2014 was their first season. They raised 1,000 strawberry plants along with more than three dozen other fruits and vegetables to help get the operation up, running, and making money.

"Local produce is so hot now. People want to know who's growing their food. Who's the farmer," says Cindy. "They have that personal connection with us."

At 2,600 feet, the strawberry growing season is rather short in Aurora. Their first harvest this year came in early June, the second in early July. They hope to extend next year's season into the fall.

"We have good conditions to use high tunnel technology. It may be something little by little we go into. We could have a crop as late as early November," says Cindy.

Right now they're in the trial and error phase. By adding an acre of new strawberry plants this past spring, they hope to have a thriving u-pick business in the next couple of years. Their goal is to once again have customers lined up to pick and purchase their strawberries.

"If we can grow it here in West Virginia, why should customers buy produce from California that's been on a truck for a week," stresses Cindy.

"If you taste one of the strawberries from California and then taste one of ours, there's just no comparison," says Darla.

"You can tell you're eating a fresh strawberry with ours. That juice, that deliciousness does not come from a grocery store strawberry," adds Cindy.

In order to make their dream of fields of strawberries a reality, the group has expanded into other types of produce. Tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, spinach, Brussels sprouts, kale, squash, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, carrots, beets, onions, turnips, and blueberries are just a few of the crops popping up in the fields this summer.

The only time all four of the Vested Heirs are on the farm at once is on the weekends. Otherwise they're out in the fields whenever their schedules allow. They've got the division of labor down to a science. Debbie is the Chief Financial Officer, handling the books and the money. B.J. is the Chief Equipment Officer, operating the tractor and fixing machines around the farm. Darla is the Chief Planning Officer, mapping out what crops will go in each section of the field and doing seed trials in the greenhouse. Cindy is the marketing and advertising expert who handles social media and safety issues. All together they plant, weed, and pick the fruits and vegetables as well as deliver them to customers in several different counties.

"We're big into social media and texting. We've developed a website where people can go and see what's in season. We make an inventory list on Saturday and Sunday of what produce we have available. We send it out in an e-mail to our customers," explains Cindy. "They can e-mail us back and tell us what they want."

When it comes to getting the produce where it needs to go, some customers will pick it up at the farm, other times they deliver.

"When you've got several customers in the same area it makes it worthwhile to deliver," says Darla.

They've also been successful with Farm to School programs in Tucker and Preston Counties.

All four owners have other jobs. However, they're all just a few years away from retirement. The farm is their second career.

"We planned on being professional porch sitters when we retired," laughs Cindy. "That's not going to work out!" Helping out on the farm are the "wee people." Debbie and B.J.'s three grandchildren are junior farmers who love to go out in the fields and pick produce. Sometimes they eat more than they pick. The kids are one of the reasons Vested Heirs came about. The hope is one day they'll take over and become 5th generation farmers, selling strawberries.

"People have fond memories of coming to the farm as kids and picking their own strawberries. We want to pass that on to the next generation," says Cindy.

You can learn more about the farm at <http://vestedheirsfarm.com/story/> and on their Facebook page.