

Spotlight on Hickory Bluff Farms



Walter and Cathy Earley, owners of Hickory Bluff Farms in Holly Hill, have a number of ways to get their strawberries to consumers. They can be found selling their produce at local farmers markets in Mt. Pleasant and Charleston, their U-Pick operation at the farm, and their newest – and most exciting way – is putting fresh, local strawberries directly in the hands of the students at Berkeley County Schools.

The newest initiative is a culmination of months of hard work by the Earleys, along with two employees of the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, and the Berkeley County School District. Its roots go back several months when Hannah Mikell, the Department’s Farm to School coordinator for the Lowcountry, met Walter Earley at a GAP (Good Agriculture Practices) workshop in Charleston. They struck up a conversation and she realized that she could help the farm become GAP certified; because once they were certified they would be able to sell directly to the school district.

“The reward for the farmer is they know they are helping feed a child healthy, local food,” Mikell said. “It also puts SC dollars back into the state.”

The biggest benefit is that the produce is coming from their county. The kids are getting the freshest fruit available. In the mornings the foodservice personnel from the district head to the farm to pick up the strawberries – those strawberries are served the same day on the serving line.

“The kids are really enjoying it,” said Linda Fairchild, Berkeley County School District Child Nutrition Director.

Fairchild said by telling the kids their food is coming from a local farm it is enticing them to eat.

“We needed a market,” Walter Earley said of selling their berries to the Berkeley County School District.

Hickory Bluff Farms is also a proud member of the Certified SC Grown program. “It gives us some credibility,” Walter Earley said of being Certified SC Grown.

Eating fresh, local produce won’t stop after strawberry season ends. Fairchild said this summer the district will feed 6,500 students a day during the summer feeding program in 45 sites in rural communities. They are looking at a way to serve fresh, local produce to the children, and Hickory Bluff Farms will provide much of the produce to fill the district’s requirements.

“Mr. Earley is doing some unique things, but I think it’s a good partnership,” Fairchild said. “The more nutritious food out there the better.”

She said District Superintendent Rodney Thompson is a huge supporter and understands the value of feeding the children locally-grown foods.

Hickory Bluff Farms passed their audit –administered by Jack Dantzler with the Department’s Inspection Services – with flying colors and once their scores were entered into a USDA computer system that transmits to Washington D.C., they received their certificate to display at the farm. Now that they have passed their inspection, they have the green light to begin working with the school district.

In addition to strawberries, Hickory Bluff Farms also has blueberries, blackberries, a nursery, and summer vegetables. For more information about Hickory Bluff Farms, please visit their website www.hickorybluffnurseryandberryfarm.com or call 843-743-8244.

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