



Brandi Cooley-Easler
Cooley Farms, Chesnee, SC

Spotlight on Cooley Farms

Cooley Farms, also known as, Strawberry Hill USA sits just outside of Chesnee on Scenic Highway 11. The white, open-air building with its American flags waving visitors into the market is a top draw to this area of Spartanburg County. Take a stroll under their open-air roadside market and it's easy to see what keeps bringing people back.

Where Strawberry Hill USA sits today was once a cotton farm in the early 20th Century, but in 1946 when James Cooley's father, Gene, returned from World War II he bought the land from his father Perry and planted his first peach trees. Farming is still a way of life for the Cooley Family. Today, in their fourth generation, the Cooley's are still producing peaches along with assorted other fresh fruits such as strawberries and blackberries.

"We're proud of what we do and what we put on the table is important to us," said Brandi Cooley-Easler.

The family farm, consisting of over 1,000 acres in production, includes 40 varieties of peaches, 90 acres of strawberries and 34 acres of blackberries. Brandi said crop diversification is important to their farm and extends the growing season. There's also the honey from the 100 beehives that sit alongside the blackberry and strawberry fields.

"Our season really starts with strawberries in April and continues through the end of October," Brandi said. "We not only grow our fruit, we incorporate an experience in our farm," Brandi said.

That experience reaches beyond the rocking chairs and fresh-made ice cream. The Cooleys are using agritourism to reach new audiences. Each year nearly 10,000 school children experience life on a farm during strawberry season. Agritourism is a big draw for their farm.

"One thing feeds off the next," she said of the school tours. "I attribute our growth to agritourism."

Cooley Farms is also a proud member of the South Carolina Department of Agriculture's Certified SC Grown branding campaign. Brandi said they joined the Certified SC Grown program when it was first introduced three years ago. She said customers recognize the Certified logo and appreciate locally grown produce.

"We're honored to be a part of the Certified program and three years later it's worked tremendously," Brandi said. "Anything and every thing we can put that seal on, we will."

Cooley Farms' peaches are sold all over the northeast and southeast in addition to those sold at their roadside stands. Brandi said their peaches do not have the fuzz removed through hydro cooling, but rather are cooled by forced air coolers. Peaches picked fresh from the farm are either sold at their open-air stand or packed in boxes and shipped within hours of picking to ensure the freshest product reaches the customer.

Brandi encourages everyone to stop by and visit their Highway 11 location and restaurant or their second location located off I-85 in Gaffney surrounded by 200 acres of peaches.

"We're not looking back, we're only looking forward," Brandi said of their operation.

For more information about Cooley Farms or to contact Strawberry Hill USA, call them at 864-461-7225 or visit their website at <http://www.strawberryhillusa.com/>