



Grafton Blueberry Farm

Coombs BC



Life in the fast lane

“It was the best thing in the world for us to have a child. It forced us to slow down,” comments Jennifer Dyson, amazingly without a hint of irony.

Except that her statement is nothing if not ironic. Because if the Dysons' life is “slow,” then the rest of us must be lazier than we thought.

Jennifer and Russell Dyson, with the help of their eight-year-old son, Edward, operate two properties with a combined total of 60 acres. They keep more than busy year-round logging their woodlot with draft horses; processing logs at their mill; raising a small herd of beef cattle; and growing flowers, apples, blueberries, and vegetables. In the summer, all of their produce is sold to the public at a market located on their home property, Grafton Blueberry Farm, just outside of Coombs on Vancouver Island.

The market and main farm are charmingly quaint. Large gardens and hand-constructed arbours and benches, fashioned out of logs, are everywhere. In the summer, artists sell their wares on the main lawn and dozens of orders are collected for the farm's unique cut-flower arrangements of perennials and herbs. The operation is also very organised. Nearly all produce is pre-ordered, and customers are given dates on which they can pick blueberries. “We have days when there is line-up all the way down the road of people coming in to pick blueberries,” comments Jennifer. In fact, she says, the problem is not selling the produce at all, but managing the high volumes of people. “We sell out every year.”

According to Jennifer, the farm's philosophy is what brings people back, year after year. Part of the philosophy is to educate every customer that comes to the farm. “People have to know who they're buying from,” she stresses. The Dysons also pass their knowledge along to the people who rent out garden plots on the Dysons' property to grow vegetables.

The Dysons also have philosophies about community and family. “Being advocates for the industry through volunteering and other areas is also part of our philosophy,” Jennifer explains. While Russell works fulltime as an administrator of a local improvement district in addition to his work at the farm, Jennifer consults for an agricultural human resources board and handles the bulk of the advocacy commitments. In addition to sending information to local newspapers to inform them about agricultural issues, she also volunteers for four different agricultural organisations which operate on regional, provincial, and federal levels. Family philosophy also keeps the Dysons on their toes. Jennifer and Russell require that breakfasts and dinners be spent around the table as a family. This may only serve to lengthen their seven day a week, 5 am to 11 pm schedule, but is a

firm priority. Jennifer adds, “And it's very bizarre. If we ever have any downtime, we're playing hockey or mountain biking.”

Not that Jennifer has ever taken much time to wind down. She has worked since the age of 12, often at more than one job at a time. She has managed a tourist bureau, worked at a cattle ranch, planted trees, run a waterfront-development company, owned her own tour business, and acted as vice president of operations for a fishing resort. But through it all, she has always operated a farm. “I love working with the earth, the soil. I love growing,” she comments.

Though she now devotes much of her time to the farm, Jennifer says she's still juggling. “I think that we juggle more because as a farmer, you may be a politician, a human resources manager, a marketer. I'm wearing as many hats as I've worn all my life.” She adds, “It's also very interesting because people are coming to your home as your business. So there's tremendous pride that comes with that, and certainly for myself, I'm doing it because I really love it.”

What the future holds for the Dysons is yet to be determined, but according to Jennifer, one thing is for sure: “We'll always have a farm.”

FARM FACTS

Employed –
seasonal: 1
year-round: 5

Gross Farm Sales –
\$45,000

Land Owned –
60 acres

Land Leased –
0 acres