



Le Coteau Farms and Garden Centre

Victoria BC



A family affair

During the month of October at Le Coteau—French for “the hillside”—trolls dart in and out of the forested Troll Trail in an effort to elude visiting children. People jostle along on hayrides, get lost in the corn and hay mazes, and scare themselves silly in the haunted house. They are entertained by the bands and performers onstage, delighted by the animals, which include two goats, and astounded by the huge field riddled with pumpkins.

Pumpkin Fest is an annual event at Le Coteau Farms and Garden Centre, located just north of Victoria on Vancouver Island. Now in its ninth year, the festival is a tradition for many families living on the Saanich Peninsula. But it's not just a family event; Pumpkin Fest is a community event, too. Local cadets organise and manage the parking for the festival, the local high school's drama students act in the haunted house, and the local Lions Club runs the concessions.

And if you think that Le Coteau's Pumpkin Fest is diverse, just wait until you hear what Dan Ponchet and his father and partner, Jack Ponchet, do the rest of the year with Le Coteau's 40-odd acres. “We have two acres of apple trees, an acre of kiwi plants, 36,000 broiler chickens, an acre of greenhouses for flowers, and the rest is either fruit or vegetables,” Dan explains. The fruits

they grow include strawberries, blackberries, cantaloupes, loganberries, raspberries, and rhubarb, while the vegetables they grow include broccoli, brussel sprouts, corn, cucumber, garlic, lettuce, peppers, potatoes, squash, and zucchini. More than just apples, there are also tree fruits such as cherries, kiwifruit, peaches, pears, and plums available for sale.

Jack Ponchet, Dan's father, emigrated from France to Canada in 1950 with horticultural training but without farming experience. All that changed in 1956 when he started Le Coteau Farms and began growing strawberries, loganberries, and some raspberries. “And then it just progressed from there,” Dan comments. “It was the early 70's or late 60's, and somebody said to my dad, ‘You have nice plants here,’ and then bought half of my dad's plants. So my dad started growing a few plants, and the next thing he knows, he's building a greenhouse.”

Nearly half a century later, Dan's father and mother still live on Le Coteau's main site where Dan and his other siblings grew up. Unlike his father, Dan has been a farmer all his life, except for one year when, at 19 years of age, he

apprenticed at a mill in Prince George. Because he found the work too monotonous, he returned to farming, an occupation he finds much more exciting. In regards to farming, Dan comments, “It's never boring. There's always so much diversity. We're not just doing one crop, so there's always something interesting. It's exciting is what it is, and I love to grow things.” Shortly after returning to farming but almost 30 years after his father began Le Coteau's main site, Dan purchased Le Coteau's secondary property. He now lives there with his wife and children.

In fact, besides Dan's partnership with his father, Dan's marriage to his wife, a registered nurse, has added another unique partnership to the farm. His wife's family has a farm in southern Peru near the Chile border where they grow garlic and vegetables. In future, Dan hopes to bring up some of her family's specialty garlic and onions so that he can try growing them at Le Coteau.

Which means that Le Coteau, including both Pumpkin Fest and the operation itself, will continue to be a family affair for years to come.

FARM FACTS

Employed –
seasonal: 15
year-round: 7

Gross Farm Sales –
\$1.2 million

Land Owned –
25 acres

Land Leased –
20 acres
