



Silverside Farm

Cobble Hill BC



Retired and busier than ever

On Bill and Jean Aten's 40-acre property, the scenery is spectacular. Cobble Hill is lush, quiet, and green. Here, the pace of life slows, there's room to move, and, everywhere you look, you are surrounded by nature.

Except that, instead of soaking up their beautiful views and relaxing into retirement life, Bill and Jean operate a farm.

At Silverside Farm on Vancouver Island, Bill and Jean grow six acres of blueberries and raspberries and 14 acres of hay. About 99 per cent of their berries are sold directly off the farm at an on-site market that opens during the summer when the berries are ripe. But don't expect to buy fresh berries without calling first: all berries are ordered well in advance and only the best are sold fresh. The rest are used for Silverside Farm's jams, jellies, vinegars, syrups, pies, ice cream, and frozen yogurt. These are also sold at the market, along with local artwork—including many of Jean's paintings—and other locally produced food items, such as strawberries and organic breads.

But it wasn't always like this. Prior to farming fulltime, Bill worked for the Ministry of Forests for 33 years, retiring in June 2000. The farm, however, was established about two decades ago in 1982. Bill and Jean were both raised on farms, so beginning one themselves seemed a logical way to supplement their income. However, their plan didn't work out quite as they hoped.

Bill and Jean started by raising beef cattle, then added laying chickens, and eventually weaner pigs. But juggling the animals with off-farm employment proved quite difficult and not very profitable. They began looking for a better alternative and, after some searching, started into berry production. They held onto the cattle, however, until one day when they were berry picking and their bull walked through the fence. That was the last straw for the Atens, and, soon after, they sold off their herd. "It's like having 12 errant young children running around, waiting to get into stuff. Getting rid of them was a great relief," comments Jean. Bill laughingly adds, "And a hay bale doesn't kick you like a cow does!"

Now it seems that Bill and Jean have replaced the management of wayward animals with the management of an unwieldy berry season. They cope by working together and using their strengths. While Jean takes care of berry orders and runs the market in the summertime, Bill looks after berry picking and manages the hay fields. In season, both work about 16 hours a day. All of which begs the question: Is this really retirement?

Bill replies, "I retired when I was 55, so I left work as soon as I could because I wanted to get time to do more things that I liked to do." Many of those things, it seems, involved farming. "I prefer fulltime farming," Bill comments. "It's yours. I like the ownership of it."

Jean adds, "We have space. We have beautiful views. And we have the satisfaction of doing this." For the two of them, farming is both their livelihood and their recreation. "We could have investments in mutual funds and probably make more income than we do off the farm, but both Bill and I are not play oriented. This is our play."

Bill also enjoys the challenge of farming. "It's a way of life, the challenge of trying to overcome the difficulties that you run into, the challenge of getting things to grow," he explains. "You sort of keep saying, 'Well, next year is going to be better, if I only can do this or that.' It's sort of like prospecting for gold. I keep thinking that the next bend in the river, I'm going to find the mother load. I'm going to be able to produce a raspberry that weighs a pound!" he laughs.

And while the Atens may never produce giant raspberries, given that they are doing what they want to do, it looks like they've already struck it rich.

FARM FACTS

Employed –
seasonal: 12
year-round: 0

Gross Farm Sales –
\$75,000

Land Owned –
40 acres

Land Leased –
0 acres
