

Produce and agritourism—as well as family and perseverance—make a winning combination at Strawberry Hill USA.

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Coming Out On Top



While disking one fall day, James Cooley had been contemplating a means of marking his irrigation heads.

The turned, reddish-brown dirt may have seemed barren to some, but to this Chesnee, S.C., farmer, his farm fields were things of beauty and sources of pride, and a promise of what was to come.

He tried plastic fenceposts, PVC pipes ... but those options marred the landscape. Finally, an ingenious solution for row markers came to him: American flags.

From there, the idea grew. Today, his 1,200-acre farm and farmers' market, Strawberry Hill USA, features 400 flags sprouting all over the property. James even adorns his large open-air produce sheds with them, replacing the stars and bars three times a year. Solving a practical problem with patriotic flair is typical of this innovative farmer's flexibility.

Presentation remains important to him.

"Grande rojo," he says to one of his Mexican laborers, plucking out a big red sample from just-picked peaches. "Make sure that everybody picks big and red. Leave anything on the trees that can stay until tomorrow. All we want is the very best." The employee nods. Message received.

The same care applies to every aspect of his operation, 850 acres of which comprise peach trees and 120 acres in strawberries. The rest includes acreage for cantaloupe, blackberries, pumpkins, pickle cucumbers and squash. He also grows a 10-acre corn maze and 100 acres of wheat and soybeans, used in rotation with the peach trees.

Besides other venues that range from Atlanta to Minneapolis, James sells at the main Chesnee location and another large market in Gaffney, S.C. The Chesnee market also has a year-round café run by James' wife, Kathi.

Depending on the season, farm tours offer the corn maze, wagon rides, pumpkin or blackberry patch visits, calf feeding, pig chasing and more. Daughters Bethani and Brandi handle the farm's marketing and agritourism. Two other daughters, Brooke and Brittani, work off the farm but help occasionally.

The Fruits of Family Labor

The farm's fruit stand still sports the name Cooley Brothers Peach Shed, homage to James' deceased father and uncle who established the farm in 1946. Back then, the Cooleys sold some produce directly, but the farm was primarily a packing shed.

Outdated equipment forced a decision in 1989: upgrade or change direction? "We elected to go >>