

A young child with short brown hair, wearing an orange puffy vest over a blue long-sleeved shirt, is shown from the side, reaching up to pick a ripe red and yellow apple from a tree. The tree is filled with green leaves and several other apples. The background is a soft-focus view of more trees and foliage.

# FRUITS OF THEIR LABOR

**Reed Valley Orchard, which planted its first apple tree in 1988 and now has some 5,000, is considered the region's premier fruit provider**

**By Jacalyn Carfagno / Photos by Mark Mahan**







## fruits of their labors

There is no hope of uninterrupted conversation with Dana and Trudie Reed on an early June morning at their orchard near Paris, Kentucky. A visitor, arriving well before the farm store opens, can grab a few minutes with them, but the calm and birdsong are constantly punctuated with questions from workers and calls from eager customers.

By the 9:30 a.m. opening, the small parking lot at Reed Valley Orchard begins to fill and Trudie is a whirl of motion, jumping up from a rocking chair on the store's porch to greet customers, hand them buckets, and point them toward the fruit they've come for.

The first car is from Wheelersburg, Ohio, "two and a half hours just to pick black raspberries," Trudie said after telling them where to pick.

Like so much else at this orchard, there's a family story behind those berries.

"They were planted because of my mom. Black raspberries were her favorite fruit."

Trudie's husband, Dana, added, "They cost us to raise them; the yields are terrible."

But it's a fact, not a complaint. "I've never seen a couple work so well together," said Sharon Thompson, who as a food writer at the Lexington *Herald-Leader* got to know the Reeds and worked a summer in the farm store after her retirement.

Reed Valley Orchard is a thriving business but it is, foremost, a labor of love.



Raising fruit goes so deep in both Dana and Trudie's families that it's hard to believe this couple hasn't always raised the near-perfect apples they are known for throughout Central Kentucky and beyond.

Trudie's family operated orchards in Eastern Kentucky. She has an early memory of riding horseback with her grandfather as he inspected his orchard, and she grew up peddling apples with her mother. Dana's family in western Massachusetts "supported themselves on red raspberries through the Depression and the war," Trudie said.

But the two weren't thinking about fruit in the early years of their marriage. Dana worked as a commercial printer and then joined Trudie's family in a small agricultural trucking concern. Trudie wrote Thoroughbred pedigrees, first at The Jockey Club and then at Pedigree Associates.

In 1987 the family sold the trucking business just, Dana said, "as farm real estate took a dive." They considered, looked around, and found 117.9 acres (Trudie is emphatic about the decimal) with not much on it but an old wooden barn.

The first year they planted alfalfa and soybeans, but their hearts and histories pointed toward an orchard. "Well, let's try this," Dana said.

So in 1988 they planted about 500 apple trees.

"And" Trudie said, her voice rising, "He said that's all we were going to plant."

Now there are about 5,000 apple trees representing over 50 varieties, plus pears, peaches, blueberries, blackberries, red and black raspberries, and pumpkin plots.

"We never wanted to be big," Trudie moaned, but "we had to keep expanding just because he keeps planting apples ... He won't quit!"

The Reeds produce about 168,000 pounds of apples a year. While



Top, Dana Reed is hands-on in the orchards and at the Lexington Farmer's Market while Trudie tends to customers at the farm store.

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they sell to local supermarkets and public schools, almost three-quarters of their fruit is sold directly to the public, either at the Lexington Farmer's Market or from the farm store that Trudie's father and Dana built from that old barn.

The Reeds' operation is big, by Kentucky apple growing standards, but they remain committed to quality and to their customers. "The Reeds know their product. No matter how you prefer your apples — crisp, sweet, tart, or mellow — you can simply explain what you like and they'll pick the right one," Thompson said. And

they know when each fruit is best. Dana "can practically predict the exact day a variety will reach its peak."

Both of the Reeds worked other jobs before the orchard began producing fruit and revenue. Trudie split her time between pedigrees and the orchard while Dana worked fulltime at Toyota, devoting his free hours to planting and cultivating trees.

And they studied, hard, both the business and the cultivation sides of the apple business.

"Yes, we grew up in it," Dana said, "but there was a huge learning curve."

They scaled that curve in the early years at meetings of the North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association, where, in a few whirlwind days, they

learned about everything from how to track expenses and profit margins, to the best lighting in a farm store, to displaying produce. They learned from the produce managers at Randall's markets, a small chain that has since left the market, and from their customers.

They joined the Midwest Apple Improvement Association, a group associated with Purdue University's agriculture department that's developing varieties that will thrive in this humid, sunlight-starved region. They joined the Kentucky State Horticultural Association (Dana is now president) and attended the winter meeting each year of the Kentucky Fruit and Vegetable Conference to talk with scientists and practitioners about how to solve

**Below, newly picked apples are crated and ready for sale; inset, pumpkins draw crowds to the orchard in the fall.**





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## fruits of their labors



Customers at the Lexington Farmer's Market look forward each season to Reed Valley Orchard's selection.

problems and produce high-quality crops.

"This is not an easy place to grow fruit," says John Strang, a fruit and vegetable specialist at the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food, and Environment, which hosts the annual conference.

There are at least 50 different pests and diseases that attack fruit in Kentucky while "every customer wants a perfect-looking fruit," said Strang. To get a high percentage of those perfect fruits, which command the best price, the grower must be ever alert, putting out traps to catch insects and spraying to prevent disease from spreading.

There's also the work and art of pruning to allow both air, which combats disease, and sun, which gives apples that rosy blush, into the tree.

"I would rank them up toward the top; they continue to improve all the time" said Strang, who has worked with the Reeds since they bought the property. "They've specialized in high-quality produce, and that's what brings customers back."

While quality was always the Reeds' focus, Dana's years at Toyota honed and improved his understanding of how to achieve it. "I got quality just drilled into me there, and I saw that it worked for them."

At Reed, the drill involves keeping the orchards free of rotted fruit or other debris and hand-thinning early in the season to get the biggest, best



fruit. Dana has studied pruning (and also worked with Strang to produce a video on it for other growers), experimented with new varieties, and been out in the field spraying in the middle

of the night to catch the right moment — too early and the spray can lose its punch before rain spreads the fire blight spores; too late or haphazardly, and the damage is done. "A halfway job of spraying creates resistance; you always want to do a good job."

Doing a good job is not easy. "The work is tremendous during growing season. It's truly a dawn-to-dusk operation," Thompson said. Still, the Reeds are hesitant to raise prices, despite the best advice of the experts and, sometimes, even their customers.

Trudie remembers well the people close to starvation she encountered traveling the roads of Eastern Kentucky with her mother. They gave away fruit and often just took something in exchange, including a goat one time. "Oh, boy, that was the worst mistake we ever made in our lives," Trudie re-



### IF YOU GO

#### Reed Valley Orchard

239 Lail Lane  
Paris, KY 40361  
(859) 987-6480

[www.reedvalleyorchard.com](http://www.reedvalleyorchard.com)  
(Store is open June–December)

#### Hours

Monday	9:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m.
Tuesday	Closed
Wednesday	9:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m.
Thursday	9:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m.
Friday	9:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m.
Saturday	9:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m.
Sunday	Closed





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 CHRISTOPHER ROUSE, Rapture  
 BARBER, Violin Concerto  
 Featuring Tessa Lark, violin  
 TCHAIKOVSKY, Symphony No. 5

October 21, 2016  
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 SIBELIUS, Symphony No. 1  
 SIBELIUS, Finlandia  
 CHRISTOPHER THEOFANIDIS, The Legend of  
 the Northern Lights  
 with Peter Van de Graaff, narrator

November 11, 2016  
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## fruits of their labors



Rocking chairs on the porch of the farm store beckon customers after a day spent picking fruit in the orchards.

called. “The thing chewed the clothes off the line, chased the cows. My dad said this ‘thing has got to go.’ ”

The commitment to quality and customers hasn’t come cheap. They planted 200 Scarlett O’Hara trees only to find a few years in that, in Dana’s words, “it had a bad habit of a moldy core.”

“Beautiful trees, beautiful fruit, wonderful tasting,” Trudie said, but “there’s no way I’m selling this to any of my customers ... bulldoze!”

The customers are Trudie’s customers. She knows them; she’s committed to them. For 14 years Trudie’s been partially blind, a condition that keeps her close to home on the farm, running the store, talking and listening closely to customers. “I listen all the time.”

Many things customers want they get — like Gatorade to restore people who have been picking out in the sun.

What most don’t like is any kind of change. “We even had people get upset



Whether it is apples, berries, or pumpkins, Reed Valley Orchard wants to please customers of all ages.

when we blacktopped our driveway” to keep the dust down, Trudie said.

Reed Valley Orchard, which straddles the Bourbon and Harrison county line, is a bit of a drive from most places. But, like Thompson, people are “happy to make the 40-minute drive to spend a day at the farm.”

The final few hundred yards of driveway are gravel, ending in a small hill that, when crested, reveals the perfectly maintained orchards and rustic store with a wrap-around porch where rocking chairs give visitors a place to sit in the shade and enjoy the scene.

People are drawn to Reed Valley Orchard for the exceptional fruit, the peaceful country experience, and the couple who make it all happen. Customers “consider the Reeds friends and neighbors,” Thompson said.

In their late 60s, Trudie and Dana are doing what they want to do, what it seems they were meant to do. And they intend to keep doing it.

People who talk about retirement are often eager to leave work, said Dana, “but that’s not us; we’d do what we’re doing if we did it for free.”

“We love what we do,” Trudie agreed.

“We’re tired a lot, but we don’t want to retire; we just want to drop over here. That’s the way we want to go.” **KIM**

