

Switzer's Farm tilling new ground to sell their produce



By MIKE RILEY Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

With the COVID-19 pandemic and the initiation of government mandated closures to ensure everyone's safety, few have been harder hit than farmers. With traditional farmers' markets sidelined by the virus this year, many have sought alternate ways to market and sell their produce. One of these farmers is Switzer's Farm, who have turned to selling their wares directly from their farm on Clear Lake Road, just east of Bancroft. Jarrett and Dannielle Switzer and father Conrad run the family business now, a 200 acre farm that's been going for over five generations. Jarrett's grandfather Alfred started the farmers' market in Bancroft, and they have been selling fruits and vegetables in town since the mid 1970's. With this year's pivot to selling their produce from their farm, Dannielle reveals that at first, they didn't know what to do. "Jarrett was on the fence. We have the little one to consider too (their toddler Kurt). And they said we could be out there, but it's hard to know. You could put fibreglass around if you want but it's hard. You have all kinds of people coming at you, and there's no way for him to wash his hands. You can have hand sanitizer, but it's not as good. This way, you can run right into the house and wash your hands and it's done. And there's no washrooms open either so it would have been an awfully long day. And being outside here at the farm, it really gives people a chance to see where their produce is coming from too, which is a great thing," she says. While Dannielle thinks that this new initiative is kind of exciting, it is also a learning curve. "We've got order forms, trying to advertise, advertise, advertise. But so far it seems, we had our first day last Friday and it went over very well actually. We had well over 30 people and a lot of them ordered the bags," she says. Dannielle is referring to the produce bags they have on sale through their Facebook page at www.facebook.com/switzersfarmbancroft. The bags come in three sizes; Seniors/Singles, Couples and Families. They retail for \$20, \$25 and \$30 respectively and the contents vary week by week, for whatever is in season when you buy the bag. For the week of July 6, the contents included mini potatoes, radishes, leaf lettuce, green onions, mushrooms, hot house tomatoes, English cucumbers and red peppers. "Our produce bags we're doing, we switched them to brown paper bags, write the customers' name on them, hand them over and away they go. It's contactless and a safer way to go," she says. In addition to the bags, they also have strawberries, peas, grape tomatoes and rhubarb that can be added on to your order. Customers are advised to order by calling or texting 613-334-1746 or by email at jswitzer655@gmail.com by Tuesdays at 7 p.m. for pickup on Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. or Monday from 9 a.m. to noon. Payment is by e-transfer or by cash at the farm. Dannielle says the produce bags are not too labour intensive, and she has folders she keeps for each day to keep everything organized. "Thursday night we go out and pick everything for Friday and that's done. Takes a couple of hours or so depending on how much you have. It's not too bad and then you write out whatever they got on the bag. Extra stuff you write on there as well, and it works out all right. And the green onions we run and pick them fresh in the morning and put them in the bags so they stay nice. Lettuce is the same way. But it's all coming along," she says. The mini potatoes are new to the bags this week, and Dannielle says they haven't even had any yet. "A customer came in this morning and asked if the potatoes were ready. We hadn't dug any but you dig them fresh, and she just wanted a small container. She's the first one to have them, even before the farmer," she says. So far, Dannielle says it's really going over well with their customers, and people really like the bags. They have been

advertising on their Facebook page and have run an ad on the radio. Everybody says they love the idea and they say they like the safeness of it, not having to venture into town with everything going on, she says. According to the Switzers, some customer favourites include tomatoes, corn, raspberries, strawberries and little pickling cucumbers. Jarrett thinks having people come to them is nice because it frees him up. I can go pick stuff and not be in town all the time. I can go do hay, prune trees, I can get firewood delivered. I can do other stuff too, he says. He also points out that it precludes food waste, as people order exactly what they want and pick it up. With the market, he would usually bring an assortment of products into town, and whatever he didn't sell that day would go to waste, as it would sit in the hot sun all day. While most of the Switzer's fields are planted with cash crops to be sold throughout the season, some of it has buckwheat planted on it, which gives the field a rest in between crops. Jarrett Switzer says that if you plant buckwheat and till it into the ground it's good for it. It's a natural way of building the ground up, better than using fertilizer and stuff, he says. With the success of their initiative, the Switzers are thinking of having different sales strategies for each season, as they sell a multitude of crops. For instance, in the fall they have pumpkins and in the winter they have maple syrup and Christmas trees. Terry Woodrow is a local who comes by to get a bag of produce, and she thinks it's amazing to be able to pick up something locally like this. I was in last week and I picked up strawberries, and they were so good. So, I'm pretty well finished. I made jam, rhubarb strawberry crisp and just froze some. So, I'm here today to get my vegetables and they should be awesome, she says. Gwen Coish, who works for Bancroft Community Transit, comes by to pick up some strawberries and some asparagus, and thinks the whole idea is fantastic. I love it. Fresh strawberries, typically I pick, but with COVID-19 I haven't been able to do that. This is actually more convenient. As a working mom, it's way more convenient. So, I appreciate the convenience of this and I appreciate being able to pop out here. I called yesterday and it was ready today. With all this stuff going on, I wasn't sure how I was going to get my fresh berries this year. I'm very appreciative of it, she says. And asparagus is my husband's favourite, so he'll love that.