

Pick of the crop It's yours at The King's Orchard

By Christine Stephenson
Eagle staff writer

Autumn weekends find cars creeping like a vine down FM 1774 in Plantersville, winding toward the grounds of the Texas Renaissance Festival. But it's another crop of visitors who take the same trip in spring and summer, and these folks are looking for an experience that not only recalls an earlier era, but also crosses all ages and age groups.

This time of year, thousands of visitors take the trek to The King's Orchard, a 47-acre pick-your-own fruit orchard next to the Renaissance Festival grounds. What they set out for is a chance to bring home crimson strawberries and blushing peaches that have ripened on the plant, blueberries as big as a quarter and blackberries that are larger and sweeter than anything you've ever tasted from a store.

What they discover when they get there is that the feel of the earth under their feet, of ladybugs tickling their necks and of juice dribbling down their chins somehow brings them closer to the people they've traveled there with — their children, grandparents, best friends and true loves.

Quality fruit is not all The King's Orchard offers its customers, says Dan Copeland, a Bryan resident who serves as horticulturist at the orchard. The folks there like to think they foster a family atmosphere.

"We try to do everything for the customer, and we do a lot of things that are unnecessary, to make this the best possible picking experience they can have," Copeland says. "We like to brag that once we get people out to the orchard once, they don't want to go anywhere else."

The orchard is laid out on a grid with well-marked

rows of plants bearing strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, apples, peaches, plums, nectarines, Asian pears and figs. Wide, grassy rows allow for leisurely picking; stone benches sit at the ends of some rows; and picnic tables wait outside the orchard for afternoon breaks. Portable toilets and an outdoor sink are on-site.

Customers get free boxes to fill, plus a map outlining those areas with currently ripe fruit (which now include blackberries, blueberries, peaches and apples) and a little red wagon to pull along their booty. Strawberry beds are raised a foot so pickers don't have to stoop; raspberries and blackberries are trellised to keep thorns at bay; and fruit trees are trained to continuous Y-shaped wire trellises to create a solid wall of fruiting limbs so clients don't have to circle the trees.

What is now a large, organized operation with diverse crops started out five years ago when the first fruit trees were planted, Copeland says. The owner of the Texas

Renaissance Festival, George Coulam, decided to plant an orchard on his property next to the festival grounds after he had experimented with growing his own fruit trees about eight years ago. More crops were planted in 1989 and 1990, the year some of the fruit trees and plants such as strawberries started bearing fruit.

Fully productive, the orchard was able to support 18,000 customers last year and hopes to attract 20,000 this year. It also harvests 600 pounds of blueberries a day, which, along with selected other crops, it picks and delivers the same day to Randall's Food Markets Inc. in Houston.

The orchard's plans include more plantings soon,



Pick of the crop

(cont.)

ultimately providing 350 acres of crops for customers to pick by the year 2002.

“It could be a long way off, but we’re not going to be satisfied with just an orchard,” says Copeland, who with Coulam has started planning for a tram ride and tour for customers. After a sweep through the orchard, the tour will end by passing a glass-fronted tissue-culture lab, greenhouse, cleaning plant, processing plant for jams and other products, and an insectory for growing beneficial insects, all of which will eventually will be built on the property.

“We think this is a very good educational trip for youngsters,” Copeland says. “We’re going to try to teach people about how plants start, how they grow, how they’re harvested.

“We want to let those kids who don’t have access to a farm, or even a big backyard, come out and see how an apple tree does grow — let them see that you don’t need ladders to pick strawberries.”

Already, agricultural practices that were rare 10 years ago are visible at The King’s Orchard. Copeland and Coulam have traveled to farms in the United States and abroad to get new ideas, and they look to agricultural and horticultural journals and professional organizations for new ways to improve their methods.

The cornerstone of their program is integrated pest management, a way to control harmful insects, weeds and diseases using as few chemicals as possible.

Copeland releases predator insects such as the ladybug, praying mantis and predatory spider mite into the orchard to attack the aphids and other pests that attack the crops; this year he has released half a million lady bugs and 200,000 mites. Instead of using synthetic pesticides to control worms, he uses *Bacillus thuringensis*, a bacterium that is harmless to people but destroys the digestive systems of the worms that munch on leaves and stems.

Frequent mowing keeps the rows of trees and vines at the orchard almost weed-free, and heavy plastic mulch — rather than chemical herbicides — discourages weeds under the fruit plants. The mulch also conserves moisture, prevents soil erosion and makes the plants more accessible to pickers.

Yet diseases and fungi, which thrive in hot, humid weather, pose the biggest threat to crops in this part of the state. Copeland must use sprays to control such diseases as peach scab, but some plants, such as blueberries, are so resistant to insects and disease that they require no spraying at all.

Despite the reduced use of chemicals, the crops haven’t suffered. And the taste of tree-ripened and vine-ripened fruit puts supermarket produce to shame.

Most produce that ends up on store shelves has to be picked green or it would spoil before it could be sold. Some crops, such as citrus fruit and strawberries, won’t ripen further once they’ve left their parent plants. Peaches are the perfect example.

“Sure, they’re 39 cents a pound, but they’re green as a door and little bitty,” says Copeland of supermarket peaches.

That’s what pick-you-own farms offer beyond a day in the country: succulent fresh produce that you can choose for quality and ripeness. The cost may be higher, but you’ll find out why when you try it.

Maybe one day the cars heading to Plantersville in spring and summer will outnumber those in autumn.

How to find The King’s Orchard

Next to the Renaissance Festival grounds in Plantersville, The King’s Orchard offers 47 acres of fruit for the picking, including apples, peaches, blackberries and blueberries that are now producing.

To get to the orchard, take Texas 6 south from College Station to Navasota. Take Texas 105 West to Plantersville, then turn right at the flashing yellow light on FM 1774. You will see a sign directing you to the orchard 6½ miles farther. Turn right on the dirt road and park at the orchard’s main building, ¾ mile down on your left. The trip takes about 45 minutes from Bryan-College Station.

This year, peaches are selling for 80 cents a pound, blackberries for \$1.50 a pound, blueberries for \$1.30 a pound and apples for \$1 a pound.

The King’s Orchard is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, and will probably stay open until mid-July. To be safe, call (409) 894-2766 for operating hours and fruit availability.

Pick of the crop

Some pointers for pickers (sidebar)

By Christine Stephenson
Eagle staff writer

If you've never eaten a peach fresh off the tree, you don't know how a ripe peach is supposed to taste or look.

Dan Copeland, horticulturist at The King's Orchard in Plantersville, offers these tips for picking your own fruit.

Ripe makes right

Here are ways to recognize ripe, sweet fruit that are available now.

Apples: Of all tree fruit, apples are the hardest to distinguish when ripe. Commercial growers use two instruments to test the fruit's sugar content and firmness, but the best way to recognize ripe green or gold apples is to look for a red blush.

Blackberries: Berries will turn from red to completely black and shiny, and the clustered grouplets will start to plump out further.

Blueberries: The largest berries on the bush will be the sweetest. Berries turn completely dark blue with a dusty cast; avoid those with any red.

Peaches: Pick the fruit when the green ground color has turned a full yellow under a well-developed red blush. Choose those that are just slightly soft to the touch.

Tricks of the trade

Spending a couple of hours picking fruit with your friends or family can be a delight as long as you've planned around a few standard obstacles.

- Fire ants are everywhere! Orchards treat mounds individually when they can, but so far no products that will wipe out ants entirely have been approved for use around crops. Copeland's advice: "Don't stand in one place too long."

- Thorns shouldn't be a problem if blackberry or raspberry plants are trellised for easier picking, and The King's Orchard also has two varieties of thornless blackberries producing fruit now.

- The earliest pickers get the fruit from the near side of any row of trees or vines, so passers-by may think their efforts will be fruitless. Go to the middle or far end of the row to find abundant ripe fruit.

- As if the sun weren't hot enough, East Texas' high humidity has pushed the heat index close to 100 degrees in recent weeks. Keep your cool by wearing a hat, white or light colors and shorts. Wear sunscreen, and drink lots of water.

- If you can, go on a weekday, when you will have a more leisurely day and a better choice of fruit.

- Forty-seven acres is bigger than you think when you're on foot, so if you plan to pick fruit at The King's Orchard, wear sturdy shoes and use one of the little red wagons provided to pull along your harvest.