

PA Preferred™ Member Sugartown Strawberries Blends Conservation, Education, Marketing in Chester County

For more than a century, the Willisbrook Farm of Malvern has provided fresh, local produce for Chester County. The man who tills the soil and picks the berries is a fourth generation farmer, Robert Lange, known as Farmer Bob. He grows the Sugartown strawberry, his own branded Chandler variety, on part of the 230 acre farm. The strawberries are sold alongside other produce at the farm's Sugartown Country Store.

In 1996, Gov. Ridge honored Willisbrook Farm, established in 1896 as a Pennsylvania Century Farm. Part of the farm is certified as a Natural Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation. An additional 112 acres has been preserved as open space for Willistown Township.

Farmer Bob was recognized with the Distinguished Service Award in 1996 and then named 2014 Farmer of the Year by the Chester County Commissioners. While Bob is the primary operator on the farm, friends swing by to assist him with tasks that require more than one person.

"There's just something about planting a seed and seeing the end result," said Bob.

His partner Lisa Bennett markets the farm, driving consumer interest and helping educate the next generation about agriculture. Other members of the Sugartown Strawberries team help in the store, picking produce or driving hayrides.

Fall is one of the busiest times of the year for Bob, between harvesting crops and sharing the story of agriculture with more than 5,000 school students who tour the farm each year.

"I love providing the tours to the students because they are not only learning but having fun," he said. "I think it is very important for the children to understand where their food comes from and the farmers who grow it."

Tours include a hayride and allow the kids to pick out their favorite pumpkin. As the children tour the farm, they stop along the way at educational stations learning about Native American and Quaker history, agriculture, nutrition, conservation, land preservation, weather, pollination and technology.

"Lisa and I invite all visitors to stop by the Sugartown Country Store," said Bob. "Be sure to pick up a bag of homegrown popcorn, a jar of freshly harvested honey, or our fresh fruit jams and jellies to top off your toast."

"Our customers keep coming back, after they get hooked on the freshness of our fruits and vegetables," he said. "We not only sell strawberries but also asparagus, sweet corn, sunflowers, tomatoes, eggplants, watermelon and cucumbers."

The top selling item is their wide variety of pumpkins, used for carvings and decorating in the fall season and for baking for the holidays.

Sugartown Strawberries is a jumping place that leverages nearby historic Sugartown village, stewardship practices and the interest of area residents for buying locally grown, PA Preferred products. The store also features local smoked meats, cheeses, country relishes, salad dressings and old-fashioned candy, and is open through November.

Find it on Sugartown Road in Malvern, Chester County, or online at www.sugartownstrawberries.com.