

## Ohio News Watch



**LAY 'EM DOWN:** Jerry Branstrator, a business partner with Trellis Growing Systems, shows how the entire row of blackberries falls over when the pins are pulled from the reinforced fiberglass trellis system.



**CANE CARE:** Richard Barnes, president of TGS, shows how three canes are allowed to grow from each plant to establish the high-yielding blackberry trellises.

# Blackberry partners

By TIM WHITE

**B**RETT Rhoads met Richard Barnes at the National Bramble Growers meeting in California last February. The two just happened to sit together at a session and began talking about blackberries. Rhoads, Circleville, had several years of experience growing blackberries the traditional way on wooden trellises. While the crop brings a good return, he didn't have plans to expand until he heard Barnes' story and business proposal.

"There is basically no commercial blackberry production in the Midwest," Barnes says. "The big production comes from California, North Carolina and Georgia. The season is over in June. So after that, a few come here from places like Guatemala or Mexico or Washington state. As a result, the prices in the summer can be twice as high. There is a great opportunity for production in the Midwest which could fill that void."

## Production consistency

However, Midwestern growers face the problem of inconsistent production. Barnes has grown blackberries on his home acreage near Fort Wayne, Ind., since 1990, and knows about the challenges. As freezing winds blow through the stands, the canes become desiccated and the crop is lost.

"Half the years you end up with no crop," he says.

He went looking for answers and found a USDA researcher who had spent 12 years working on a system of rotating cross-arm trellises. Barnes recognized how valuable the researcher's ideas were and started creating some crude prototypes in conjunction with USDA. He then applied to USDA for a small-fruit research grant. He worked with USDA to develop the system further using



**BERRY BUDDIES:** Richard Barnes, Brett Rhoads and Brent Rhoads have formed a partnership to share costs and profits from growing blackberries on 10 acres.

## Key Points

- The Rhoadses and TGS have a blackberry partnership.
- Midwestern blackberry production offers opportunities.
- TGS is starting slowly, but is looking for new customers.

the grant. He has since used a series of feasibility grants from the state of Indiana to develop the model and commercialize the process. All told, Barnes has used more than \$500,000 in grants to develop the system.

"It would be a lot of money to risk on your own, even though I really believe in the product," he admits. "But the return is tremendous. It's a great opportunity."

That return, according to Barnes, can be \$45,000 per acre gross revenue selling into a wholesale market. With total expenses running about \$26,000, that is a gross margin of more than \$19,000 an acre. He says a well-cared for planting can last up to 25 years.

## Put to the test

Barnes then engaged a number of farmers to be beta testers to compare their traditional growing systems with his. Although the tests were successful, he realized he was missing a large-scale commercial operation to serve as

an appropriate business model. That's where Rhoads came in.

"What we wanted was a larger-scale operation where we could show other growers how the system works," Barnes says.

The arrangement with Rhoads is unique in that Barnes' company, Trellis Growing Systems, is sharing some of the initial expenses to help establish a larger-scale operation. The partners planted 10 acres of blackberries in June. They hope to add another 10 acres this year.

"That's not much berry production, but it's a lot for the Midwest," Barnes says. "There are farms in Georgia that have 50 to 100 acres of berries. But we want to get started slowly and make sure we work closely with the producers so they will succeed. Eventually, this is something that could add some profit to a traditional corn and soybean farm."



Barnes is also working with growers in Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky and Indiana with the intention of establishing a total of about 80 acres this spring. He is looking for more producers in northern Ohio, too.

TGS is a turnkey operation that helps with every aspect of development, including site selection, raised beds with landscape fabric, trellising, drip irrigation, winter fabric, disease management, weed control and maintenance. It also markets the crop.

"We have a marketing contract with a national distributor to take 100% of the fruit," Barnes says.

The Rhoadses see that as a big advantage. "I'm a grower," says Brett Rhoads. "They are the marketer. And that's fine by me."

His father, Brent Rhoads, agrees. "This is an expensive investment. If we couldn't do it as a partnership, we might be a little more reluctant to try it."

However, Brett has the last word. "Vegetable production is a tough and competitive life. I am always looking for the hot new crop to give us an edge."

For now the trellises are lying down, and the canes are covered with a fabric that will protect them to negative 23 degrees F. When the frost threat is over and the blossoms begin to open, the trellises will be raised in the spring sunshine, and the Midwestern blackberries can show their stuff.

## COVER UP:

Employees spread heavy-gauge polypropylene cover material over a row of trellises that has been laid down to be protected from winter weather. The edges are held down with orange sand bags.

## Kasich asks for teamwork

By TIM WHITE

**G**OV. John Kasich addressed the delegates to the Ohio Farm Bureau annual meeting by telling them he admires what farmers do. "And never more so than when I was asked to help put up hay," he added.

The new governor then introduced his new director of agriculture, Jim Zehringer.

"He's a farmer, businessman, entrepreneur — and he just represents common sense," Kasich said. "And frankly, if there's anything we need returned to our government, and if there's anything we need returned to our country, it's a little bit of common sense."

"Jim is going to be the guy, and you are going to be part of the team," he added.

Kasich urged farmers to tell Zehringer what regulations are frustrating them from a business point of view. "We have clogged up Ohio with too many regulations. We have to take down the barriers that get in your way."

He also asked farmers for help bringing more agricultural



GOV. JOHN KASICH

business to Ohio. "Whether it is a fertilizer manufacturer, a seed company or people involved in the implement business, let's open up Ohio and bring those companies into the state," Kasich said.

He asked the Ohio Farm Bureau for help with a project to introduce more schoolchildren to agriculture.

Kasich also called for new markets to expand agriculture trade. "Why not find some new places to sell our goods? More trade helps sell more stuff and creates more jobs."

He offered support for the Ohio Livestock Care Standards Board, but noted he did not support "mission creep." He added that he did not want "outside forces" trying to influence farming operations in Ohio.

Kasich also asked farmers for their help as the state attempts to fix a projected \$8 billion budget shortfall. "When we go and we reform this budget, we are going to make decisions on the basis of rational, businesslike thinking," he said.

"I ran for this job because I want to get Ohio moving again," Kasich concluded. "I need your help. Let's do it together."