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Apple picking season begins at Smith Orchard in Belmont



ROB RICHTER, owner of Smith Orchard at 184 Leavitt Road in Belmont, stands at the entrance to the shed during the first day of apple picking season on Friday. Smith Orchard has been designed a "Farm of Distinction" by the New Hampshire Department of Agriculture. (JIM CLARK/CITIZEN)



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BELMONT—With September now in its second week, already you can see some of the leaves on the trees starting to turn yellow and red. September is also the start of the apple harvest season in New England with people flocking to orchards to pick apples, savor their taste and aroma, and be part of an authentic autumn experience.

Friday was the first day of the apple picking season at Smith Orchard, 184 Leavitt Road in Belmont. Rob Richter and his wife Wende are the owners of the property which contains about 30 acres of apple trees.

Rob was on hand during the afternoon in the main shed where various products are sold. He said a number of people turned out to pick apples during the morning but activity slackened during the early and mid-afternoon. He hoped that it would pick up again by the close of the business day at 5 p.m.

By the second week of September the first cool-down of the autumn season usually can be felt. However, the weather on Friday was definitely in mid-summer mode with the temperature topping at about 90 degrees. There's an iron stove in Richter's shed and it's used during chilly days, but wasn't needed on Friday.

Apple picking, a tradition in the northern climes, is one of the great joys of the autumn and fall season.

Richter said the apple harvest months are September and October. When Nov. 1 arrives the season is definitely over.

Rob said that when the weather is cool, people turn out. When the weather is warm—as was the case on Friday—business is not so good. However, as soon as the daytime temperature cools a bit—and it will shortly, people will start to show up at Smith Orchard and other apple orchards in the Lakes Region and throughout the state.

Richter said his business is a "pick your own" operation and does not involve the shipment of apples. The orchard has many big and bountiful trees bearing fruit as well as smaller ones. Richter said it's impossible to determine the exact number, but a big tree can produce hundreds of apples each year.

In an enclosed area with netting on top there are blueberry bushes, with blueberries sold during the late summer and early autumn.

Smith Orchard was named after Charlie Smith, who planted the big apple trees on the property while a college student in 1928. The smaller trees were planted by the Richters about 15 years ago. The Richters bought the property from Smith in late 1985, but kept the name of Smith Orchard. This will be their 30th harvest. The Richters live in a house on the property.

The Richters own Quik Cleaners on South Main Street in Laconia, which is their main business and primary source of income.

Richter said last year was a record season for apple production locally, but this year the lack of summer rain has reduced the yield and size of apples, not just in his orchard but all across the state. Because apples contain mostly water, proper rainfall before harvest is critical. He said it's still not too late for ample rain this month to aid in the growth of apples before the season ends.

McIntosh and Cortland apples are the staples at Smith Orchard along with some trees containing

Macoun and Ginger Gold apples. Late season apples which ripen in October and become available are red and yellow Delicious, and Jonagold.

Cortland apples are favored for apple pie making, with Ginger Golds and Jonagolds good for desserts. Macoun apples are mostly used for other types of cooking.

Richter sells apples by the bushel and half-bushel. A bushel, consisting of 40 pounds, of any type of apple sells for \$36. A half-bushel costs \$18.

He said at one time a cider press was part of his operation, but an assortment of government regulations forced him to give it up. However, he does have cider for sale, provided by Vickery Orchards of Rochester. A gallon sells for \$6 while a half-gallon goes for \$3.50. For cider lovers, the sweet liquid—unlike any other— may be the best part of what apples have to offer.

Richter produces and sells about five gallons of cider vinegar each season—which he described as "very intense." He said his cider vinegar is full-bore and of a higher acidic concentration than the store-bought brand, and can be diluted for cooking and other purposes. The cider vinegar is placed in wooden barrels and sold in the shed.

Also for sale are containers of maple syrup and maple candy from "Just Maple" in Tilton. Jars of raw and unprocessed honey are for sale and provided by Ben Chadwick of Alton, whom Richter calls "the finest beekeeper in the state."

Also for sale are jams and jellies, ordered from Concord, and Apple Drop Cookie and Crisp, made from an outside source but with the Smith Orchard packaging brand.

Richter said families going back three and even four generations turn out at the orchard every season to pick apples. The orchard regularly hosts school groups with hundreds of students. He said apple picking is great fun for families, and kids in particular love it.

Smith Orchard has been named a "Farm of Distinction" by the New Hampshire Department of Agriculture.

The orchard is located just three miles from downtown Laconia, making it very convenient to reach. Those heading south from Laconia on Route 106 should take a left at Plummer Hill Road, go up the hill to Leavitt Road, take a left, and the Smith Orchard is a short distance away on the right.

The orchard is open seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the apple picking season through Columbus Day on Monday, Oct. 10. Those wanting to pick apples at Smith Orchard after Oct. 10 should contact Richter. More information can be obtained at smithorchard.com or by calling 524-1674.

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