

That's not a vineyard



The fields at Stone Mountain Farm in Belmont appear to the casual observer to be planted with grapevines. What people are seeing are actually dwarf apples trees which are supported by trellises. (Roger Amsden/for The Laconia Daily Sun)

Those are dwarf apple trees in Belmont field

By ROGER AMSDEN, for THE LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — From a distance, the plantings at Stone Mountain Farm on Route 106 resemble a vineyard because they are supported by trellises. Many people driving by the field actually think they are looking at grapevines surrounding a farm wagon full of pumpkins.

But what people are seeing is actually an apple orchard filled with 6,000 dwarf trees, a sight which owner Joe Rolfe says will become more common in the future as the more traditional orchards give way to the fast-growing dwarf trees which start producing a year after being planted and actually yield more bushels per acre than standard-size apple trees.

"It's the future of apple growing. They've been doing this in upstate New York for years. And you see a lot of orchards in this state that are replacing their older trees with dwarf trees," said Rolfe.

He said the dwarf trees provide a quicker return on investment for apple farmers, who realize the benefits of growing apples more quickly on dwarf trees compared to standard apple trees, which take six to eight years to begin

producing.

He has seven varieties of Macintosh apples, several varieties of Cortlands, along with Honey Crisp, McCouns, Empire, Ginger Gold, Jonathan, Golden Delicious, Fuji and Granny Smith. "We have early-season apples, mid-season and late-season varieties, and expect to be harvesting them right through the end of October."

Rolfe said the 72-acre farm has been in transition ever since he purchased it from his parents, Nelson and Theresa Rolfe in 2009.

"My parents bought the farm in 1963, the year I was born, and I grew up here. It used to be a dairy farm with a small herd of 20 or so milking cows before they bought it. They kept the fields in production and have been selling hay for years," he said. His parents were the grand marshals for this year's Old Home Day parade in Belmont. Rolfe is a mason and runs his own business, Stone Mountain Masonry, which he says still occupies most of his time, and said he and his wife, Cindy, who is a nurse, weren't quite sure what to do with the fields when they bought the property.

He thought it was obvious that a hay crop wouldn't produce enough income to maintain the property, so he worked with the Belknap County Conservation District and the Belknap County Cooperative Extension Service to develop a plan for the property. The idea for growing apples came from Bill Lord of the Extension Service, who at first suggested that the most remote field become the location of the orchard.

"I told him that was my best hay field and he said, all right, use the field closer to the highway," said Rolfe. "I didn't know anything about apples but one of the first things I did was start to plant cover crops like pumpkins and clover to create diverse organic matter that would make a good medium to grow things in. And the soil had to be limed heavily to get the right pH balance."

He said he got a lot of advice from Hardy family of Brookdale Fruit Farm in Hollis about starting an orchard and also spoke with local apple growers like Steve Surowiec of Surowiec Farm in Sanbornton who told him "Don't give up your day job."

The first apple trees were planted in 2013 and Rolfe has been adding several thousand trees each year since then. He said an irrigation pond which he dug last year has proved very beneficial in the dry summer this year. A drip-irrigation system allows him to irrigate different sections of the orchard with the water pumped from the pond. He says that in the first year the apple trees are located next to metal poles which help provide support, but after they produce fruit in the second year, a stronger trellis support system is needed, which involves 109-foot-high wooden posts and a wire support system which is anchored into the ground.

Rolfe and his wife are looking forward to starting a pick-your-own operation next year once they have been able to label all of the rows with the varieties which are available and whether they are ready to be picked.

Currently they sell apples and pumpkins from the front yard of their parents' home and use an honor system which enables people to pick out their own apples and pumpkins when it is most convenient for them.



Stone Mountain Farm on Route 106 in Belmont is producing a wide variety of apples from its dwarf trees and sells them by the honor system from a wagon at the farm. (Roger Amsden/for The Laconia Daily Sun)



Stone Mountain Farm irrigates its apple orchard with water from a man-made pond and a drip irrigation system in its fields. (Roger Amsden/for The Laconia Daily Sun)



Stone Mountain Farm owner Joe Rolfe says that the trellis system at the farm is needed to support the heavy yields from the dwarf trees, which begin producing the year after being planted. (Roger Amsden/for The Laconia Daily Sun)

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