

Family has a berry tradition

BY REBECCA KALAJIAN

Record-Eagle staff writer

TRAVERSE CITY — It's strawberry fields forever for the Urkas in Kingsley, a third generation farming couple whose love of the luscious fruit has kept them plowing and planting for over 40 years together.

Joy Urka and her husband, John, acknowledge they could sell their acreage 10 miles south of the Grand

Traverse Mall on U.S. 37 "right away" for a great deal of money, but shy away from the prospect.

"We stay in business because we have a love for farming and its preservation," said the active 68-year-old. "We don't want to sell it all into houses."

Instead, the Urkas share their bounty with the public, offering up five different varieties of strawberries for picking alongside a

wholesale business which caters to local restaurants and farmers' markets.

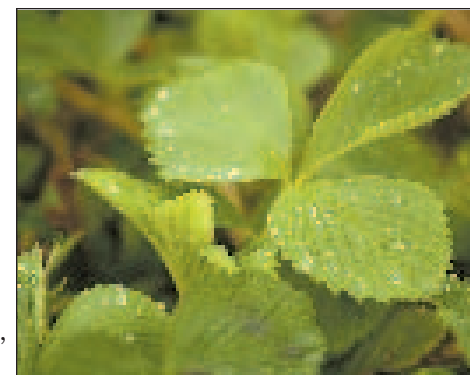
This year they are expecting the picking to be at its peak starting on June 15, give or take a day.

As with all fruit crops, each year's crop can be dicey in terms of weather. Urka is nonetheless positive about her fruit, citing the lack of a late freeze so far.

The U-pick competition is stiff in the Grand Traverse

region. Urka said that because strawberries ripen so quickly, each fruit farmer vies for as many customers as possible. Otherwise, the fruit can go soft on the vine, eventually rotting.

The Urkas have about 20 acres, split evenly between two farms: the one in Kingsley and one in



Record-Eagle/Lara Neel

Strawberry plants collect rain drops at Urka Farms in Kingsley

Brethren. They steer most of their U-pick customers to their Kingsley place, because the directions to their farm near Brethren are "too complicated — people get lost," said Joy. Mostly locals and wholesale customers frequent that one, she said.

During peak picking time, the Urkas don't see much of each other. Joy mans the Brethren location and John keeps the Kingsley farm going. Each year, more than 1,000 U-pickers come to harvest the red jewels, keeping the couple busy as well as in good company.

It's an extremely busy time, however. When the strawberries come in, don't expect to see either Urka lollygagging around.

"When strawberries start, we don't count on anything else, that's just all we do," said Joy, a teacher who retired from the Kaleva-Norman-Dixon school district a few years ago.

It's so busy that Joy's 98-year-old mother, Gladys Grossnickle, helps keep her two "kids" fed and taken care of. Grossnickle lives alone, about two miles away from her daughter and son-in-law. It is her job to prepare casseroles for the evening meal during the harvesting season.

"It's great takeout service," said Urka of her mother, who was voted the Brethren Centennial Queen

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