

Farmer plants hope in strawberry field



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—Paxton DeBusk*

Paxton DeBusk, an Irby on his mother's side, comes from a family that has been growing tobacco in Nottoway since 1781 when William Irby was given land here for his service in the Continental Army. That's 211 years of doing the same thing over and over, thinks DeBusk as he ploughs his tobacco fields.

But he knows nothing will grow from that thought.

"I need something new to keep me going," he said during an inspection of his latest attempt to break the hold of tobacco on his land and conventional thinking on his mind. It was time to plant 35,000 strawberry plants he had growing in a greenhouse. Nothing like this had ever been done in Nottoway Country.

Needless to say, strawberries have been grown here before, but always the matted two variety. DeBusk was planting a variety that would grow in plastic, produce bigger and better tasting berries, and lend themselves to people picking their own. "The plants grown on plastic hold the berries up. They are big solid berries with the best taste of any commercial berry," said DeBusk, who enjoys playing the tour guide of new ideas.

"It's very easy to pick these strawberries because you don't have to squat down," continue DeBusk, holding his hand at knee level to show where the berries will be. Another difference with this variety is that you have to plant every fall and plough up the old plants every summer. The more common variety you let grow for several years before you have to replant.

With the greenhouse, buying the new plants, and providing trickle and overhead irrigation, this idea was not without a considerable investment. But what makes it possible was that the equipment needed was already being used in tobacco farming. "If these strawberries work, you get a good return on your investment," he said. DeBusk knows that successful farming depends on successful research. "I'm taking this one step at a time," he said.

In April, when the strawberries will hang like red Christmas ornaments on plants, DeBusk hopes to see his two acres filled with people. “Everybody that has grown these berries says that people will leave the matted rows variety and come to you.”

DeBusk sees families coming here from Chesterfield so their children can ride on wagons of hay and get the feel of the earth and the roots that urban America will pay money to touch. And once the people start coming, he can see blueberries, blackberries, raspberries growing during the summer.

“We need farmers to think of ways to attract the public,” DeBusk said as his mind turned to the state of farming in this area, which in his lifetime has visible declined.

“There are a lot of farmers that can’t think of any other possible crop than tobacco...but you wouldn’t have a bit of trouble getting me to quit raising tobacco,” he said with a broad grin.

Two centuries of dependence on tobacco have passed and DeBusk seems determined to kick the habit.