

Charlie O'Dell, Extension Horticulturist Emeritus, Virginia Tech and retired berry grower at Crows Nest Farm, Blacksburg, VA, was the featured speaker at the Annual Meeting luncheon. After his talk, he received NARBA's 2016 Distinguished Service Award. presented by NARBA Executive Secretary Debby Wechsler Below is the text of his talk, which was re-printed in the Spring 2015 issue of *The Bramble*, NARBA's newsletter, with the addition of these pictures

A Lifetime in Berries

By Charlie O'Dell

What could be better than being at this conference with berry growers! I can honestly say I have never met a berry grower I did not like, so in my experience, you are all good people! What you do for others is amazing to me: You provide your community and surrounding communities with delicious, healthy berries to eat, to freeze, to process, and to just enjoy! While you do all this, don't forget: Nobody has a better chance to eat healthy than you, nobody! Raise your hand if you eat berries every day when possible. If we could help convince more of our customers to do this, we could create way more demand for berries!

Yes, I have spent a lifetime in berries, and owe my love of all things berries to my grandmother. I came along way back in the mid-1930s when most folks lived on farms. I loved the outdoors from the start and spent much time on my grandmother's farm. She loved to garden, including blackberries and raspberries. Back in those days, tractors were just getting rubber tires instead of steel cleats, and there were lots of Model A Fords on the roads along with mid-30s Chevrolets. I expect my grandmother's blackberries were the old Loganberry, a mutation from a wild blackberry, and I remember it had lots of thorns! Her black



Charlie O'Dell, recipient of NARBA's 2016 Distinguished Service Award.

raspberries were probably the variety Bristol that came into the nursery trade about 1934, according to what I could find out in a recent search. If she had red raspberries, likely they were the variety Taylor, first available to growers in 1935, the year I was born.

We had a small farm in West Virginia, and we grew vegetables and

berries. There were no home freezers back then, so canning was how food was put by and used in the winter months; berries went into canned juice, jellies and jams. We never had much money, but we ate well and got by just fine. I wanted to go to college and study berries and vegetables production, and was so fortunate to be admitted to Berea College in Kentucky, to study agriculture and specifically, horticulture, all I could! I loved the horticulture gardens and was able to have part-time student employment there. I even got to use their one-row strawberry transplanter pulled by a small tractor.

Back home for Easter break my first year, I was bound to plant strawberries, about one-fourth of an acre, all by hand. This was in 1954, and probably was the old variety Tennessee Beauty. All weeding and grass pulling I did by hand and hoe in the following summer months -- no herbicides were yet available back in those days! Back then colleges did not finish their spring semesters until early June, whereas now it is early May, but my strawberry patch ripened the year after planting before I could get



PYO berry picking at Charlie's farm, just after he sold it. It is now operated as 3 Birds Berry Farm by NARBA member Bill Sembello.

home from school! My parents and sister worked hard to save the crop and even let friends and neighbors come to pick their berries – the word spread, and the crop was saved. Small farmers with small families had to use U-Pick, it was a necessity!

Down the road about four miles was the best strawberry grower around, so I went to visit him. Also, a photo of his youngest daughter caught my eye when I looked through my sister's high-school yearbook. I arranged to meet her, with the help of my sister, but when I knocked at their door, her dad came so I introduced myself. He asked me to come out back and see his strawberry patch with him, and during the checking of the field, he asked me a lot of berry growing questions that I answered the best I knew how, so then he finally let me meet his daughter! We were married the following year and this is the year of our 60th wedding anniversary come June 24th.

After college I received a research assistantship at the University of Maryland, where I studied berries and vegetables and made many visits to the USDA Beltsville Hort. Research Station not far from the campus. Dr.

George Darrow was still living and operating his U-Pick strawberry patch far into his retirement years. I learned more and more, and graduated with a Masters in Horticulture in 1960. Since we were expecting our first child, I felt I needed to get to work so worked for USDA, then for NC Cooperative Extension Service as Extension Agent for berries and vegetable crops at Hendersonville, in western NC, then was so very fortunate to become Virginia's State Extension Specialist for Berries and Commercial Vegetable Crops Production in early 1968, where I served for 33.5 years. During those years my good wife, Wilmoth, was a mother to our two daughters, grew U-Pick strawberries, operated her small retail greenhouses plant business, and for several of those years was also Music Director at our church where she directed adult, youth and children's choirs. To me it seems she invented multi-tasking! Meanwhile, I "escaped" to travel the state and region with my Extension career, and helped her on week-ends, working long hours.

In 2001 I retired from Virginia Tech to become a full-time berry farmer for the next ten years. Wilmoth said she was ready to retire from so much

work, it was my turn to take over our berry work and business. I soon decided to grow "stand up" berry crops, ended our two acres of U-Pick strawberries, increased our blue-berry plantings from one to about five acres, added an acre of thornless blackberries, over two acres of primocane raspberries (still new at the turn of this century), and about an acre of asparagus. I shifted from being active with North American Strawberry Growers Association (NASGA) over to being involved with NARBA.

In 2011, I ran out of the energy needed to grow multiple berry crops, so we sold our 12-acre berries farm to a younger family who have successfully maintained this berries business. They allow me to mentor them along as we all continue to learn more each year. I continue to make small, home-garden plantings of new berry varieties, and I encourage you berry growers to test new varieties for your location. Times and technology are changing so fast these days. Thank you, NARBA, for helping us berry growers, young and old, to keep up and continue to learn!