

# Apaches Taste Sweeter

## Ramona Blackberry Picking

If you're the resourceful type, you may be able to find wild blackberry patches in Julian. "But they'll be thorny," warns Dave Sossaman, "and they're going to be on somebody's private property." It's more prudent to pick the thornless ones at one of two pick-your-own places in Ramona, including Sossaman's. "People can run naked through them, and they don't have to worry. Plus, they're good for kids."

Sossaman and his wife, Donnie, are starting their third season as blackberry farmers. "We didn't know anything about farming," he says, "but we wanted to try something different. We bought ten acres out here, and then we did research on the Internet. We have 1000 feet of Highway 78, so we get all that Julian traffic coming by, and we wanted to use that access. My wife is a sheriff's deputy here in town, and I'm a former National City policeman, retired on an injury. I taught the anti-terrorist shooting course for the Navy until November, and I still do some of that part-time. So it's kind of a different thing for us. Instead of aiming at people... We planted two acres."

### LOCAL EVENTS

Sossaman makes farming sound easy. A drip-irrigation system waters the berries. The summer heat, even 120 degrees, is good for growth. "They get big — giant, like strawberries — and they taste like wine," he claims.

"The first year, the plants went like gangbusters. The second year, they didn't produce. This year it looks like we're going to have a bumper crop again. We have tried to get our neighbors to sell their lemons. They're falling off their trees, and in the store, they're three for a dollar. We had one guy come out with a load of watermelons. He said, 'Hey, I grew these; can I sell them here?' I said, 'Sure.' He made \$1000 on a Saturday. Everybody who bought blackberries from us went over and bought a watermelon from him."

This cultivator of Lake Sutherland Farms doesn't apologize for the weeds. "You see a perfect orchard, and rest assured they're spraying it with everything under the sun. We're not certified organic, because to me that's pretty much a scam. But we live here; our well is out here — it's the water we use as a family. So we do everything right. It's also because of the other line of work we're in."

Sossaman hasn't yet met Mike and



Blackberries

Theresa Adams, whose nine-acre Country Berry Farm is about 1000 feet below him and one and a half miles from Ramona's downtown. But their operations are similar, and so are their nonfarming origins and the way they began their you-pick operations.

"I'm a consultant in the computer business," says Mike Adams. "My wife is a homemaker. She is also a lifelong gardener and has always wanted to be a farmer. It's been her heart's desire. That's why we bought this place. So she works the farm, and on the weekends I help her. We researched it all on the Web. We opened up in the middle of May — this is our first season — and so far, they've been basically picking us clean, which is good. We haven't come on full yet." He predicts the peak will be the end of July or beginning of August and that over the course of the whole season their 1650 plants will produce 24,000 pounds of berries.

Two thornless varieties, shipped "bare root" from Arkansas, are growing in the Adamses' fields. "The Apaches are a little bit bigger and have a fruitier, sweeter taste. The Arapahos, which we're picking right now, are a much

tarter and firmer berry."

Thornless berries are not like declawed cats: they occur in the wild. "I didn't realize this, but there are thorned and thornless berries in nature. I've picked them in the wild, and they never seemed thornless to me! But you can find them. The researchers [from Arkansas State University] went out and pulled up by the roots every thornless one that they could and put them in groups, and that's how they created the hybrids. Now, out here, every once in a while, a thorned runner, a sucker, will come up, and Theresa pulls it out."

Like Sossaman, Adams welcomes entrants into the you-pick world. "We want to make a consortium of people in both Julian and Ramona," he says. "We want them to use their small family farms — because there are a lot of these here — to help us create a pick-your-own region. We have people coming from Los Angeles to pick, because I've been doing a lot of Internet advertising, since it's what I do for a living. People could specialize in raspberries, blueberries, strawberries, apples. I'll build a website for everybody. It's just like the car dealers. When you have a

bunch of car dealers together, everybody goes into that area to find a car."

— Jeanne Schinto

**Blackberry Picking**  
**Lake Sutherland Farms**  
**20625 Sutherland Dam Road,**  
**Ramona**  
**(Picking begins last week of July;**  
**goes through October)**  
**Friday–Sunday**  
**8:00 a.m. until dark**  
**Cost: blackberries: \$3/lb.**  
**Info and directions:**  
**760-788-9499**

**Country Berry Farm**  
**1798 Keyes Road**  
**Ramona**  
**Monday–Saturday and by**  
**appointment**  
**8:00 a.m. until noon**  
**(Ready for picking now;**  
**goes through September)**  
**Cost: \$5/lb. for first 2 lbs., \$3/lb.**  
**thereafter.**  
**Info and directions: 760-789-**  
**3257 or 788-9727 and**  
**www.countryberryfarm.com**

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