



# Westberry Farms

Abbotsford BC



# Come together

The world market is a scary thing. It's huge. It's competitive. It requires fast thinking, and it requires strategy.

The Bains' blueberry farm in Abbotsford has shown that it's got what it takes to operate on such a level. To compete in the world market, the Bains' strategy since 1996 has been to work together with other farms. Under the name "Westberry Farms," four Lower Mainland farms have come together to pool their efforts, and their berries.

The numbers look good. On their farm alone, the Bains have an impressive 30 acres of blueberries and 50 seasonal employees. But together with the three other farms, they have an astonishing 350 acres of blueberries and 400 seasonal employees. With their combined resources, Westberry Farms was also able to construct a packing plant on the Bains' farmland. This plant allows them to grade, inspect, package, pre-cool, and ship their berries within 24 hours of picking.

The results are good too. Westberry Farms is now the largest exporter of blueberries from British Columbia to Japan. The company contributes over three million pounds annually to BC's enormous blueberry market, which, in the year 2000, was the second largest in North America.

Parm Bains explains that the high demand for blueberries is due in great part to the research that has been done on the fruit. "Blueberries have become such a popular fruit because of all the health benefits," says Parm. "The Japanese really like them because their studies say that they improve your eyesight. They've

been told that a cup of blueberries a day will keep the eye doctor away."

Other research has shown that the pigments that make the berries blue may help to prevent cancer and slow the effects of aging. The berries are also high in vitamin C, vitamin A, and dietary fibre, and low in sodium.

After growing up in New Westminster and completing a degree in agriculture at UBC, Parm worked in the agriculture industry for several years before starting to farm. The Bains got into the blueberry business in 1989 when they purchased farmland with several berry bushes already in place. Parm comments, "At that time, we didn't envision doing what we've done to this stage. It was more about a way of life. We wanted to be out of the urban area, into a rural setting—a place to bring our kids, raise our family. But slowly we got into the farm more and more."

In 1992, the Bains ventured into cranberries and by 1997, things were so busy that Parm had to stop any off-farm work and focus solely on the farm. After clearing land on their property for two years, the Bains now have a total of 15 acres of cranberries in production. The berries are sold directly to Ocean Spray, the well-known maker of juices and foods.

Parm and his wife, Satwinder, work on the farm as a team. While Parm looks after the operations, management, and marketing duties; Satwinder takes care of all paperwork, staff, and general administration duties. In addition to her work on the farm, Satwinder also holds a fulltime position as the executive director of a local association that promotes healthy aging. She takes time off from late July through early September, the height of blueberry season, in order to help Parm with the harvest.

During harvest time, both work extraordinarily long days. Up at 5 am, they work anywhere from 18 to 20 hours every day. "We're putting little band-aids everywhere, putting out fires wherever needed. It's go, go, go," comments Satwinder. This work, as well as the growing and maintenance done throughout the year, is subject to weather and Mother Nature's whims, as well as to fluctuating markets.

When asked what keeps them going, given all this, Parm laughs, "We're crazy." Later, Satwinder explains, "At our age where we are with our children, I really think it's the best kind of lifestyle. With the children—living out in the open, having a bit of a buffer from the pressures of city life, having a little bit more control over what your kids are doing outside the door—it works well."

## FARM FACTS

**Employed –**  
*seasonal: 50*  
*year-round: 2*  
**Gross Farm Sales –**  
*\$1 million*  
**Land Owned –**  
*50 acres*  
**Land Leased –**  
*0 acres*

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And, believe it or not, the Bains do manage to take time off in order to rest, relax, and travel. They have also made a point of taking all three of their children back to India to the town where Satwinder grew up. “Our purpose in taking them home is to show them to be proud of their heritage and to feel good about who they are,” explains Satwinder. “We’re living in a Western world, coming with Eastern cultural values—you need to find that nice balance, that middle ground.”

In short, what the Bains have proven to be a successful strategy for farming can also be a successful strategy for life: To achieve success, we must come together.