

Holland Farms, *Santa Rosa County*



Holland Farms is a family owned and operated peanut, produce, and row crop farm. What makes Holland Farms unique is that they grow and sell directly from the farm to the public. Holland Farms is owned by Bruce and Diane Holland. Bruce and Diane have two children – Julie and B.J. Julie, a high school business teacher, helps out

with the farm’s bookkeeping and maintains their website (<http://hollandfarmsonline.com/>) and Facebook page. B.J. is the farm manager. Bruce’s brothers Charles and Melvin also assist in the daily operation of the farm. Holland Farms is a fifth generation family farm that dates back to 1873.

Bruce began farming while in high school during the early 1970’s. In the 10th grade he talked an uncle into letting him grow watermelons on a few acres to sell to stores in the Pensacola area. He said that first year he learned what consignment meant---“You aren’t going to get your money”. Not to be discouraged, the next year he planted soybeans with a cousin and they cleared \$4,000 each. He got a good start with his uncle and cousin, and then kept the family farm going when his uncle retired. In the beginning he grew peanuts, soybeans, and corn. Bruce got out of soybeans in 1980 due to nematode infestation on their property and moved into cotton. In 1985, Bruce and wife Diane decided to diversify their farm by growing and selling produce including watermelons, cantaloupes, peas, beans, and sweet corn.

Bruce says he got back into watermelons for “a little grocery money.” People started coming to the farm to buy watermelons that he stacked under a tree. He soon realized there was more money to be made by selling directly at the farm. When he hauled melons to stores he had to take whatever they would pay him. He thought “Why not bring the consumer to me and set my own price”. Holland Farms soon developed the reputation for growing some of the best tasting watermelons in the area.

In 1989 the Hollands started growing “green” peanuts to sell directly to the public for boiling. The first year they cleaned peanuts by hand on a small hardware cloth table. As the business grew they had to figure out better ways to do more with machines. A nephew helped them modify some used equipment, design and build whatever they needed. Today they have an elevator leg that moves peanuts to a large cleaner which removes foreign material and washes the nuts before they are bagged. The Hollands sell all their green peanuts at the farm for the same price whether retail or wholesale. Bruce says they have got to “back up with a semi to negotiate price.”

At first, Bruce only planned for green peanuts to be a small part of his operation. However, that would soon change. One day a local newspaper reporter came by the farm to do an article on crop harvest. Bruce had a big kettle of peanuts boiling in the barn. The delicious smell quickly drew the reporter to the kettle where he took several pictures. Instead of an article on harvest the paper ran a story highlighting their boiled peanuts. That day Bruce says he learned a valuable lesson about advertising and marketing.

As business has grown over the years so have the Holland’s customer service and people skills. They always strive to offer a consistent, quality product at a fair price. They go out of their way to be friendly and accommodate their customers. They know that when people drive up to the farm store they “came here for a reason.” They always give them a free cup of freshly boiled peanuts and invite them to visit and relax in the rocking chairs on the store porch.

Each year Holland Farms supplies green peanuts for the “World’s Largest Peanut Boil” in Luverne, Alabama. There the Crenshaw County Shriners, along with a host of volunteers, boil and sell over 25 tons of Holland peanuts as a fundraiser for Shriner’s Burn Centers. They also supply and boil peanuts for local high school band boosters, quarterback clubs, and raceways.

Bruce and his family always look for ways to expand and improve their operation. Two years ago they got into entertainment and agritourism with “Holland Farms Pumpkin Patch and Farm Hayride”. They planted a three acre pumpkin patch and gave families a tour of their farm on hay wagons as they rode out to the pumpkin patch to pick out their fall pumpkin. Pumpkin Patch activities now get started with a “Customer Appreciation Day” the first Saturday in October featuring free boiled peanuts and live music. Last year B.J. added the “Haunted Hay Ride” as a nighttime attraction.

The Hollands have diversified their operation over the years from traditional markets to where practically everything grown on their 500 acres today is sold directly at the farm. Their main crop is peanuts with 100 acres grown for the “green” market and 150 acres for the traditional market. They have around 200 acres of corn which is sold for livestock feed and to hunters for wildlife feed. They also grow 50 acres of peas and butterbeans, with the remainder in watermelons, cantaloupes, pumpkins, and apples.

Improving Agriculture through Extension Involvement

Bruce has been a key supporter and advisor to Extension including many years of service on the Santa Rosa County Extension Alternative Crops Advisory Committee. The Hollands have been involved with numerous Extension educational programs and demonstrations over the years including:

- Sap testing of vegetable crops
- Cucurbit disease management
- Seedless watermelon trials and field days
- The establishment of a successful agro-tourism operation
- Online marketing
- A Low-Chill Apple Production Demonstration Orchard and Apple Field Day
- Nematode management in bean and pea production through crop rotation
- Food safety training and certification in order to market vegetables to high volume retailers
- New technology in the production of vegetables including plasticulture, trickle irrigation, prescription fertilizer injection, and pivot irrigation on high volume crops such as sweet corn and green peanuts
- Exploring the development of value added products
- Farm tours for various community groups, school classes, and 4-H youth.

Since 1997, the Hollands have played a major role in the Annual Santa Rosa County Farm Tour. Each year they host the tour, serve boiled peanuts and melons from the farm, and help educate citizens and community leaders about agriculture. During the 1987 Farm Tour they received the Outstanding Farm Family of the Year award.

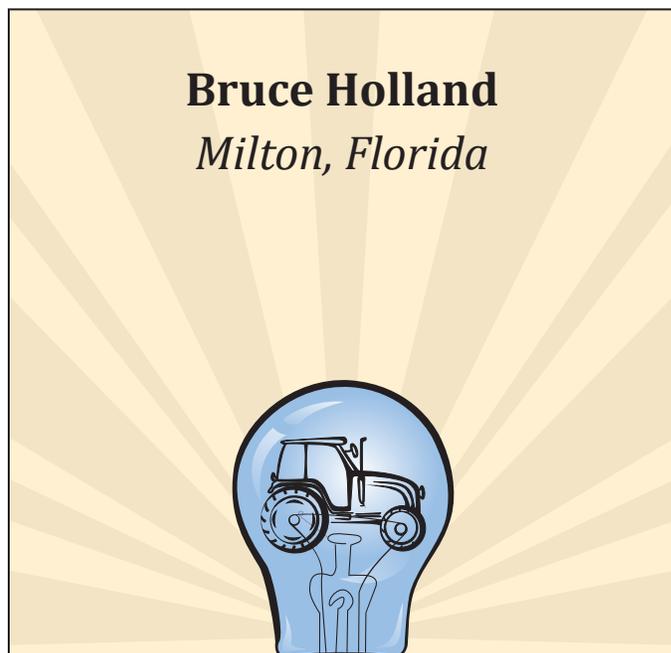
In 2000, local Extension agents met a television reporter with an agricultural background and together they developed the idea to follow a farmer throughout the growing season in the production of a crop. Television reporter Kathryn Daniels worked with the agents to follow production of an acre of cotton on the Holland Farm from the planning stage through market of the final product. Twelve segments of "Our Acre" were aired during the nightly news reaching over 471,000 households per broadcast and many more on the station's website. The program was so successful that the station decided to continue the following year with an acre of peanuts at the farm. The profit from "Our Acre of Peanuts" was donated by Bruce to the Communities Caring at Christmas charity. As a result of the two-year effort, the public greatly increased their awareness of agricultural issues and the many trials and struggles that farmers face on a daily basis.

Impacting Agriculture in the Northwest District

The Hollands give back to the community in many ways. They work with non-profit groups and help with fundraisers. Each year they donate peanuts for Relay for Life charity events and give produce to churches. Nothing goes to waste on the farm. After harvest they allow gleaning of fields. All the hulls and cleanings from their processing facility are given to others in the area to feed livestock and wildlife.

Bruce and his family are true agricultural pioneers in Santa Rosa County. Through the years they have shared their knowledge and shown others throughout the region how to succeed in developing alternative agricultural enterprises. Whether it be in producing, marketing, adding value to existing crops, developing agri-tourism venues, or promoting agriculture they have led the way. Bruce says the

key to their success is simply "we like people, I like visiting with folks. When they come to our farm we go out of our way to make sure they feel welcomed and have a good time. It's a long way out here to the farm and we want to make it worthwhile to the people who come." ■



Bruce Holland
Milton, Florida