September 25, 2025 Vol. XLII Issue 1

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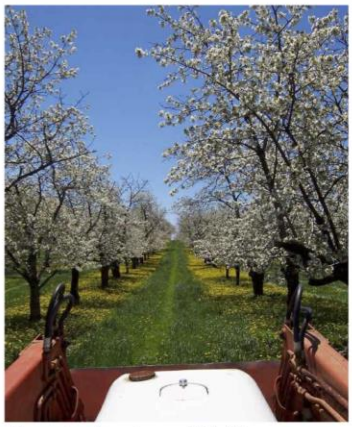
NORTHWESTERN MICHIGAN COLLEGE

WHITE PINE PRESS

We hew to the line; let the chips fall where they may.

Cherry shaker on Kabat farm

Cherry tree removed from the ground on Kabat farm



Blossoming cherry trees on Kabat farm

Photos provided by Mary Anne Kabat

Barren Rows

A Local Farmer's Story of Loss, Land, and Letting Go

Isabelle Plamondon
Staff Writer

In Leelanau County, where cherry farming is as much a heritage as it is a livelihood, one centennial farm is facing the challenges of a changing industry. Mary Anne Kabat is the fourth-generation owner of Kabat Farms in Cedar, a place she has tended for 26 years with pride. But this past spring, rising costs, shrinking markets, and relentless pests ultimately forced her to pull the trees that defined her life's work.

For Kabat, farming was never just about the fruit; it was about preserving a legacy that stretched back to her great-grandparents' arrival from the German state of Prussia in 1882. Though the farm cycled through potatoes and other crops, her father discovered a love for cherries, transforming the land into a 40-acre orchard–half sweet and half tart–that began Kabat Farms' 64-year journey into cherry farming.

Her father's colon cancer diagnosis led to the farm being passed on to Kabat in 1997. She recalled a moment when he was working in the basement, getting his tractors done for the winter. She said, "He would leave me little notes, because he knew in the spring he wouldn't be there to do it."

With tears in her eyes, she said that when her father handed her his will, he said, "You're going to be a better farmer than I ever was." And she did everything she could to live up to that.

She took great care in tending to Kabat Farms. She did this by following a seasonal rhythm: orchard shows in March, planting, fertilizing, and brush burning in April, and spraying from May to September. "You make yourself well educated on everything to watch for with the trees; it's like you're an adoptive parent," Kabat remarked.

Kabat has not paid for much farm labor because she said the operation was too small to really hire anyone aside from family friends. She said that these kids were often homeschooled and that it was the joy of her summer to work with them.

For the past 10 years, however, finding help for tasks such as fertilizing, pruning, brush clearing, spraying, and brining had become increasingly difficult, even after paying more than two times the minimum wage. She said, "The harvest was easy; it was the labor that was the biggest challenge." She explained that this was because people needed full-time work, not just a month or two.

Kabat said the biggest challenge keeping her orchard profitable is that "farmers used to have a choice of which processors to sell [to], for how much a pound, and what terms. [As well as] when they were going to get paid and their final payment.

And that all just went away." She noted that this "freedom of choice" was mostly present in the '60s and '70s, when her father ran the farm. In those times, the average price per pound for cherries in Michigan was about 70 cents, which is equivalent to about $5.80 today, and she stated that it wasn't hard for growers then to earn six-figure wages a year.

Now, the current average price per pound for cherries in Michigan is 40 cents. "[It's because] we are at the beck and call of whatever processors can find, companies downstate primarily, to purchase the cherries."

Kabat notes that with many companies choosing to import cherries for cheaper costs and to fill gaps in the loss of local cherries, the market has become more competitive for smaller family-owned orchards, "and the prices just keep getting lower."

"If you can't stop Turkey and other European countries from importing and undercutting your fruit, and you spent 10 years fighting them, there's nothing you can do."

Additionally, it wasn't uncommon for growers to have to wait a year to get paid. She clarified that this is because "There's no contracts, there's no union, so we [small mom and pop growers] have just absolutely no say."

But this wasn't the only problem that Kabat faced; there were also various pests and brown rot, as well as the high prices for spraying. She recalled how a 300-gallon spray tank, filled with substances like insecticides, would cost about $300-$400."I go out 15, 16 times in a season, and that's when you're not fighting brown rot or different bugs or all the invasive species that have been coming in and eating away at the trees."

Given all of these circumstances, Kabat had to make the difficult decision to pull her orchard. "The trees were getting older, the machinery was getting older, I was getting older."

"And when my mother passed, I decided, well, if I can let my mother go, I can let this go," she shared with a shaky voice.

It was a long process, one that she couldn't do herself, so she hired people to do it because she "couldn't take the chainsaw to a beautiful living tree."

Kabat noted that when others heard that she was pulling her orchard, the majority assumed she was lotting it off, or preparing land for construction and sale. She described that "all of a sudden, I felt like a wounded animal in a desert with vultures flying above." She never intended to sell her land, something that many other farmers have no choice but to do.

She noted, "The era of the cherry grower, especially the small mom and pop cherry grower, it's gone."

However, when you're not into cherries anymore, that doesn't mean that there's nothing on the horizon. Kabat commended the newer generations, saying, "I'm very impressed with these smaller farm markets, because I see that passion rejuvenating with what they have and more power to them."

As for the future of Kabat Farms, she plans on putting up some pasture for her neighbor's Angus cows. She is also currently growing a variety of fruit trees for her future grandkids to make memories with, as well as to put her 26 years of cherry growing to use. This fruit will not be for sale though, as it is strictly for her family and the future generations.

She said she was grateful because "I was able to raise my children in such an idyllic setting, knowing the love of a dear grandparent and the legacy which brought us to this point."

Kabat said that she could rest easy because "The fifth generation will bring a new perspective, a new face to farming, and continue on as stewards of the land."

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Judge's comments: "I enjoyed this story more than any other entry in this category. It explores an interesting and timely issue. and the reporter collected great quotes and background on the farmer. That the farmer's father told her when he was dying that she would be better farmer than her is one great, compelling and heartbreaking detail. (Honestly, it could have been the story's lede.) The only reason I gave this entry second place instead of first is because it only has one source and it is difficult to label a story "in-depth enterprise" if it only has one voice. I would have liked Isabelle to reach out to an agriculture expert, local offical or another farmer for more information on the overall trends in cherry farming and cherry farming in Northern Michigan. The story mentions in the first sentence that cherry farming is part of the area's heritage but does not explain that at all. Isabelle might have also talked to neighbors who thought the farmer was selling to a developer and other members of the family about what the farm means to them. I think it could use some description too of the farm itself. Overall, it is a good story that humanizes the difficulty of modern fruit farming. I also liked the headline."