



**LITTLE JUSTICE** — A black and white photograph doesn't do justice for these tomatoes which are a deep red in colour. Sue Hilborn says meeting the needs of customers make her family business near Woodstock work.

## Customers come first at Hilborn's

By Jeffrey Carter

With the right combination of soil, marketing, and agricultural know-how, a successful farm can be established on a relatively small land base. Sue and Don Hilborn have proven the point at their 52 acre farm in East Zorra Township along County Road 17. Their greenhouse and strawberry operation involves just a small portion of that acreage.

Sue Hilborn is involved with the marketing end of business and runs its day-to-day operation. She says she and her husband make a good team.

"We're both visionaries but he has more of the technical and production expertise and I'm the extrovert... Together we click," Sue Hilborn says. "It's a good opportunity to still be at home and have some flexible hours to be available for the family."

The main crop in the 7,000 square foot greenhouse are tomatoes. The Hilborns grow the "Trust" tomato variety which produces a large, red fruit which, when vine-ripened, rivals summer garden varieties for taste. Because they sell most of the tomatoes right from the operation, they're able to offer this premium product.

The tomatoes, along with the smaller number of English cucumber plants, are rooted right in the soil under the greenhouse and are drip-fed water and nutrients. This is not the latest in greenhouse technology. Most producers have moved to growing greenhouse vegetables hydroponically or in a material called "rock-wool". But the Hilborns believe that the older-style method they employ enhances the taste of the vegetables. And in the event of a mechanical breakdown, the Hilborn's system also provides more breathing room. Hydroponically-grown plants will die quickly if their water and nutrient source is cut off.

Tomatoes are produced in the spring and fall. That works in well with the strawberry season and should fit in with the new asparagus planting which will begin producing in a couple years.

There are nine strawberry varieties available at the Hilborn's Red Barn Berries operation. Sue Hilborn works hard to educate her customers about their various attributes.

The Sparkle variety, for instance, was introduced back in 1942 and is considered to be one of the best for taste. It can also be made into jam without the addition of pectin. Other varieties are Veestar (early/good taste), Annapolis (large fruit/early), Cavendish (large fruit), Vantage and Bounty (good for freezing whole), Settler (very large/tart taste), Startyme (de-caps in field/good freezer) and Honey Eye (large fruit).

About a one-fifth of the berries are sold ready-picked. The rest are picked by the customers themselves.

Don and Sue Hilborn have three children, Torrie, Rich and Andrew, aged 11, 9 and 4, respectively. The family moved in 1990 to Oxford County from Haldimand where they also operated a greenhouse. Don Hilborn an agricultural engineer with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.



**LABOUR INTENSIVE** — Sue and Don Hilborn run a labour-intensive business. During the strawberry season as many as seven workers are employed full time. University student Megan Hart of the Embro-area, daughter of Graham Hart, works through the summer. "We try to be friendly, knowledgeable and reasonably priced," says Sue Hilborn.