

Fresh berries without all that pesky diggin'

By [Jodi Kerr](#)

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Alene and Mike Robertson are berry farmers with a sweet purpose. The environmentally conscious couple purchased their farm in 2005. Mike had grown up living on the farm and helping with the crops. When the owner was going to put it up for sale, Mike was ready.

Switching to a farm lifestyle was a transition for Alene. "I like it, once I got used to it. I enjoy the customers and I enjoy selling at the market. I enjoy working with the seasonal workers. Most are teachers and college students and a lot of them come back year after year," Alene said.

The farm earned the Food Alliance Certification one year ago, and have been making even more improvements this year. The Food Alliance Certification was important to the Robertson's because it is a third-party certification. "We are a very high quality vendor. When you see that third party verification you know someone has checked their work."

The Robertson's have worked hard to earn the certification. "We work very hard to provide quality produce; we are very into taking care of the environment and our soil."

Soon the farm will be organic-certified. "But I believe it is black and white. Until we are certified we won't call ourselves in transition. But we are working towards that. Our long term goal is to have the dual certification."

"Just saying you are organic is one thing, but that is lacking in some of the social aspects that the Food Alliance Certification has. There are lots of aspects of it, more than what are you putting into it. It's about how you are treating your workers and how you are treating your environment," said Robertson.

The cannery side of the business is machine-picked, but the fresh market portion is handpicked, with great care. "We pay our hand pickers by the hour. We focus on quality, not quantity. We want individuals to be motivated to do quality work and pick the best. We require every harvester that is going to touch a berry to have a food handler's card, and we have washing stations throughout the entire farm. We wear food handling gloves; in general, most farmers don't go to that level of food handling," said Robertson. "So many of our customers walk away and eat them before washing them; it's important for us to go to the expense of doing that."

Farming with a conscience does cost more, but the market sets the price and customers appreciate the quality.

The certification has been around for ten years. "It makes you rethink your entire business. It's hard, but it depends on how you view testing. We got high ratings and did better than we expected," said Robertson. "The Alliance does re-checks and asks you to improve every year. This year our goal was to have different transitional crops and we came up with some more safety training. It's a whole lot more than just environmental issues."

“We are diverse in the population that we employ. I have a manager who is fluent in Spanish, and I am fluent in American Sign language and Mike speaks English and some Spanish. It allows people to be joyful in their jobs,” she said. “I am deaf, and it opens up a place of employment for people who are hearing impaired. It’s nice to have a job where you are understood and people appreciate you for the skills you have.”

“It was an established raspberry farm but we have replaced all the crops. We wanted to put in a large variety of small crops for fresh markets,” said Alene. The 49 acres are split between ninety percent cannery and ten percent fresh market crops. “We grow five different types of strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, golden raspberries, loganberries and a small melon crop with several unique melons,” said Robertson.

Where to buy ultra clean berries?

Saturday Salem 9 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Winter & Union Streets NE Booth Space #133

Monday Salem Hospital 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.

890 Oak St. Plaza between buildings A & C

Wednesday Salem 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Chemeketa & High Streets NE Booth Space #22

Certification Standards

Why Food Alliance is the most comprehensive certification program for sustainable food in North America.

Certified Producer Standards (Farms & Ranches):

Produce Food Alliance Certified products

Provide safe and fair working conditions

Practice integrated pest management to minimize pesticide use and toxicity

Conserve soil and water resources

Protect biodiversity and wildlife habitat

Continually improve practices