

α-MAIZE-ing

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY *Laura Jean Whitcomb*



You're surrounded by corn stalks; they loom up over your head and almost block out the bright summer sun. You continue to follow the narrow, dirt path and soon you must choose: left or right. A right turn takes you to a sign: The Pyramid of Khufu at Giza is the largest Egyptian pyramid. You look at the yellow sheet of paper in your hand, and see that the sign answers clue #5: only one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World still in existence. Only nine more clues to go!

"Unsolved Mysteries" was only one of the three mazes offered at Beech Hill Farm in Hopkinton last fall. Holly Kimball, an elementary school teacher and 8th generation of the family-owned farm, determines the maze theme for the season. "We always provide a brochure with some sort of scavenger hunt for each maze. This is how I weave in the educational content," she says. "Inside each maze we place sign posts with information on them that pertains to the maze theme. People then have a purpose for exploring the mazes."

The feedback has been terrific. Last fall, more than 10,000 people visited the farm between August 1 and October 31 and tried one of three mazes: Unsolved Mysteries, Hawaiian Vacation or Alaskan Iditarod Challenge. This is a big change from the hundred or so folks who came to the farm 10 years ago. "When we started getting interest from schools bringing 100 children at a time, we realized that it would be better to offer three smaller mazes (3 to 4 acres) so that we could rotate groups through them. This has worked out extremely well," Holly says.

Although it's only open for three months in the fall, the corn mazes are a year-long endeavor. Holly plans the themes in the winter. Her husband, Peter Rhines, figures out a maze design to go with each theme. Robert Kimball, Holly's father, selects the corn seed — varieties that grow quickly and have extra sturdy stalks — and cross plants the fields (so the corn rows are dense) in mid-May.

When the corn is about knee high — the first week of July — it is time to cut the maze. Peter draws the plan out on graph paper to scale, then sets out stakes that mark where to cut the paths. Peter and Robert work together to cut the corn with a riding lawn mower with Peter walking ahead of the mower, holding his design in hand. "This is tricky because it is difficult to visualize what the maze looks like from above when you are cutting it," Holly says.

Once the paths have been established, then they need to be cut and recut a few times until there are no corn stalks left growing in the paths. Holly and Peter's three children — Nate, Cooper and Megan — hang the signs in the maze. When the corn is about 10 feet tall, it's time to open the mazes. Each maze is about 4 acres, and it takes about 40 minutes to find all the answers.

In April, Holly was still working



Test your navigating skills at the Beech Hill Farm corn mazes

on the mazes for fall 2011. "So far I have two of them completed: Extreme Animals and Medieval Maze," she says. Here's a hint for the Extreme Animals maze: start researching animals that have set world records.

WHAT: Corn mazes at Beech Hill Farm

WHERE: 107 Beech Hill Road, Hopkinton

WHEN: Aug. 1 to Oct. 31

HOW MUCH: \$5 per person per day (children 3 and under, free)

WHY: It may sound corny, but the mazes are great fun for the whole family

WEB: www.beechhillfarm.com