

Beech Hill Farm in Hopkinton prepares its annual corn mazes

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An ancient tradition is alive in the corn fields of Hopkinton.

This week, the Kimball family put the finishing touches on Beech Hill Farm's annual mazes. The theme of this year's biggest maze is Greek mythology: its corn corridors are filled with facts and clues about ancient Greek gods that direct participants through the maze, designed to resemble a labyrinth.

For the past 10 years, three generations of the Kimball family have worked together to design and craft the farm's corn mazes. And the attraction has become a boon for the farm – owned by Donna and Robert Kimball – drawing hundreds of visitors from across the region each season. A few years ago, 10,000 people walked through the farm's mazes.

"It is becoming one of those fall traditions," said Holly Kimball, Donna and Robert's daughter and a longtime teacher, who comes up with the maze's educational themes.

On Wednesday, 20-year-old Nate Kimball, a member of the family's youngest generation and Holly Kimball's son, finished hammering in the large maze's final signposts alongside corn stocks that now stand 6 feet tall in some places.

The 4-acre Greek mythology maze and two smaller mazes will open to the public Friday.

But work on the mazes began almost six months ago, when Holly Kimball picked the education theme and came up with the associated clues and word games.

"That's my winter work," she said.

The focus on learning can be traced to the origins of the Beech Hill Farm corn maze 10 years ago. It was a single maze, but it drew many school groups with dozens of students who couldn't all fit through the maze at one time. The farm started tailoring its mazes to school field trips, by installing more and designing educational scavenger hunts to go along with them.

"Teachers can't just go on a field trip without absolutely being accountable for it being a learning experience," Holly Kimball said. The word games and informational signs help fill that requirement, and families and children like it, she said. "People really get into it and that is what makes our mazes different."

Once the themes are decided, the next step is actually designing the maze. That is when the entire family gets together: Holly Kimball; David Kimball, who grows the corn; and Nate Kimball and Cooper Kimball, Holly's 14-year-old son, who creates the design in the corn.

"We all work together," Cooper Kimball said. For instance, one of this year's mazes, Snack Attack, is shaped like an ice cream cone. Originally, though, the idea was to make a lollipop, he said. But the group decided that would be too hard because the field would have to be mowed in a spiral shape, which could make the corn walls too thin.

When the family picks a shape, Cooper and Nate Kimball transfer it onto graph paper representing the family's fields: a quarter inch on the paper is about 7½ feet in the corn field. That transfer is the easy part; the difficult one is getting that blueprint into the field.

Once the corn is knee high – which was about three weeks ago – the boys stake out the designs in the fields, mapping out each turn the mower needs to take. Then, they cut it.

"It's a two-man team: One person drives the mower, the other goes post to post," Nate Kimball said. "It's kind of connect the dots."

After the initial mow, they will go over it three or four more times, Nate Kimball said. The corn mazes are open through Halloween. Once they close, David Kimball cuts and harvests the corn as feed for the farm's cows.

"We have always grown corn and fed it to the cows, we just never had people walk through it," Holly Kimball said. "It's a really unique-to-farming way to develop our business."