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Scare tactic: Lee farm transforms into haunted house to help recover from poor harvest

By [Jason Claffey](#)

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Thursday, October 14, 2010

LEE — DeMeritt Hill Farm is trying to turn lemons into lemonade — or, so to speak, an abysmal apple crop into apple cider.

It was a scary harvest. The farm lost 90 percent of its apple crop from a killing frost in May, resulting in a huge hit to the bottom line.

To compensate, the farm is doing something even more frightening — hosting the "Haunted Overload," described as one of the best scare shows in New England. It's one of several events the farm is holding to attract visitors.

"Hopefully, it will help us out a little since we've lost so much," said owner Meg Wilson.

The farm will share the profits with the operators of "Haunted Overload," led by Eric Lowther, an Exeter resident who has been putting together scare shows his whole life.

"Haunted Overload" features giant monster-like trees, ghosts, scarecrows, and goblins as tall as 34 feet, and several live actors haunting a winding path on the farm.

"Its like no haunted attraction around," said Lowther. "It's extremely scary but artistic at the same time."

The show runs Oct. 22-31. Tickets are \$5-18.50.

Lowther started the show at his house then moved it to a local farm. He approached Wilson earlier this year, and she jumped at the idea. The farm is also holding a fundraiser for University of New Hampshire cheerleaders and the Oyster River High School senior class later this month. A portion of the proceeds will go to the farm.

The poor apple harvest took out a huge chunk of the farm's revenue, as it relies heavily on the pick-your-own apple season every fall. The farm was forced to cancel most of its pick-your-own season.



EJ Hersom/Staff photographer Wallace Valley explains how he expects people to react to the Haunted Overload attraction in Lee Tuesday.

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Other New England farms experienced similar misfortune.

The trouble began in April, when unusually warm temperatures caused apples to blossom early. A cold snap in mid-May encased the fruit in an icy coffin, scarring it or causing it to turn black and rot off entirely.

The hardest-hit farms were those in low-lying areas and northern parts of New Hampshire and Maine where the air was the coldest. Temperatures plunged to as low as 20 degrees.

"Some places had serious losses," said Russell Powell, executive director of the New England Apple Association.

He said the hardest-hit farmers such as Wilson who are coming up with unique ways to attract visitors represent a Yankee "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" mindset.

Powell said New England farmers have had to diversify in recent years as they face increased competition. There are now more varieties of fruit offered year-round and other states with bigger growing areas such as Washington and Michigan keep taking up more and more of the market.

Some farms have started renting out their land for weddings or selling parts of it for golf courses or breweries, Powell said.

"You're seeing a new generation of entrepreneurial farmers," he said.

In that same spirit, Wilson said she's banking on the "Haunted Overload."

For more information, visit www.demeritthillfarm.com or www.hauntedoverload.com.



EJ Hersom/Staff photographer Wallace Valley stands atop a ladder with a giant overhanging scarecrow at Haunted Overload in Lee Tuesday.

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EJ Hersom/Staff photographer One of many skeleton head props stands before Wallace Valley at Haunted Overload in Lee Tuesday. The human skeletons are hand made but the aged horse bones found in the attraction are made from real bones.

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EJ Hersom/Staff photographer Wallace Valley stands in a leaning house creating an optical illusion at Haunted Overload in Lee Tuesday. Parts of the house are sunken well below the ground to hold the leaning structure.

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EJ Hersom/Staff photographer A scary treat at Haunted Overload shows a handmade figure with a dangling eyeball Tuesday in Lee.

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EJ Hersom/Staff photographer Wallace Valley stands atop a ladder with a giant overhanging scarecrow at Haunted Overload in Lee Tuesday.

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EJ Hersom/Staff photographer Irene Lemire works in the eyes of a wooden beast at Haunted Overload in Lee Tuesday.

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