

Food & Nutrition:

Published: Apr 09, 2008 12:00 AM

Modified: Apr 09, 2008 06:49 AM

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## Carefully tending the future

### New generation of Triangle farmers raises crops and awareness

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The Carrboro Farmers' Market turning 30 this year and a smattering of markets opening this spring got us wondering about the next generation of Triangle farmers.

Who will sell us heirloom tomatoes in Carrboro 30 years from now? Who will continue their family's farm stand at the State Farmers Market in Raleigh? Where will the local food movement spread next: Wendell? Smithfield?

Farming has long been a graying business. The average age of the American farmer is 55. But North Carolina has a growing crop of younger farmers. While the aging of the farming population has been a concern, agricultural economists believe market forces will attract people to the business if shortages raise prices.

Younger farmers generally fall into one of two categories, says Blake Brown, a professor at N.C. State University and an agricultural economist. The majority are from families who have farmland. A much smaller, emerging group does small-scale sustainable farming, selling directly to consumers at local farmers markets. Sustainable farmers aim to use chemicals sparingly, if at all, in an attempt to maintain balance in the ecosystem and keep from harming the environment.

The latter is becoming more popular as the Triangle sees four new farmers markets start this spring. (See Page 12E for a list of Triangle farmers markets.) Farmers markets are on the rise nationally -- between 1994 and 2006, their number more than doubled to 4,385, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This trend is likely in response to growing concerns about the industrial food supply and the reaction to try to eat local fruits, vegetables, meats and dairy products.

#### A passion for the work

Regardless of whether today's young farmers are continuing conventional farms or starting small sustainable farms, they share the same drive.

Growing up watching his father and grandfather farm almost 3,000 acres in Harnett County, Charles Tart Jr., 20, believed farming was his destiny. "I knew I was going to," he says.

The other young farmers we found didn't grow up around farming. They went to college and interned on farms. Stuart White, 30, of Bluebird Meadows graduated from the New York Film Academy. Elizabeth Haarer, 30, of Wild Onion Farms earned a comparative religion degree from Duke University.

Political, personal or environmental reasons drew them to the land.

"It's sort of in opposition to the way things are done," says George O'Neal, 26, of Lil' Farm. "It's sort of a protest. ... I don't know where fast food comes from." (O'Neal claims to be the only farmer who listens to both rap music and old Metallica.)

Haarer became a farmer because fruits and vegetables at the grocery store didn't taste as good to her. "I'm just a slave to my stomach," she says.

And then there is Alice White, 28, who runs Bluebird Meadows with her husband, Stuart. Several years ago, she spent a month in the hospital facing near death. Afterward, she says, there was no time to waste: "I'm going to grow flowers."

They all face challenges, whether their farms cover thousands of acres or three.

The elder Tart worries about his son's future. Rising costs -- tractor fuel has gone from 79 cents to \$3.64 a gallon -- are squeezing them, while what they can charge for produce remains the same. About his son's generation of conventional farmers, Tart says, "They have to come up with better ways to do things to be more profitable with what they've got."

Tart expects his son and other farmers will have to find better technologies and work together to survive.

#### Buying land isn't easy

Farms such as the Tarts' are dwindling. North Carolina has lost more than 11,000 farms and about half a million acres of farmland in the past 20 years, according to state agriculture officials. As farmers sell their land, the value of North Carolina farmland has jumped 58 percent in the past five years. In developing urban areas such as the Triangle, land is even more at a premium. Finding reasonably priced land can be a challenge for young organic farmers because

many local farmers markets require chickens to be raised or carrots to be grown no more than 50 or 70 miles from the market.

"I think their single biggest hurdle is finding a piece of land to work on," says Alex Hitt, who along with his wife, Betsy, has been farming for 26 years at Peregrine Farms in Graham in Alamance County.

Consider O'Neal's situation. He calls himself a "commuting farmer." He cannot afford to buy land. So he rents a house on a bit of land, where he raises some of his 280 or so chickens and uses about an acre to cultivate vegetables. He leases about 14 acres in two other locations.

"It's almost impossible to own land unless you have an off-the-farm job, family loan or go way rural," O'Neal says. That's what some of O'Neal's peers have had to do.

Family financing helped Elise Margoles, 32, owner of Elysian Fields Farm in Cedar Grove, and Joann and Brian Gallagher, 30 and 31 respectively, owners of Castlemaine Farms in Liberty, buy their farms. Until last week, Brian Gallagher held a full-time job at UNC to help support the farm. It's the same for Haarer, whose Wild Onion Farms is in northern Johnston County. Her husband, Andrew, works at Home Depot and is in the U.S. Air Force Reserves. The couple's long-term plan is for Andrew to work at the farm, but that hasn't been financially feasible yet.

Nor in the case of the Whites, who moved out a bit farther, 25 miles north of Durham to Hurdle Mills. They wrote a business plan to get a loan from the Farm Bureau to buy 30 acres. A neighbor is letting them live rent-free in a house down the road from their farm until they can build their own house.

### **No longer alone**

Three decades ago, hippie farmers who were considered the agricultural fringe paved the way for this generation of young farmers.

"When we were starting out, there really were no models for us to look at," says Ken Dawson, who with his wife, Libby, runs Maple Spring Gardens. He has been farming for 27 years.

Adds Cathy Jones of Perry-winkle Farm in Chatham County, who has been farming for 18 years: "I started out with a subscription to Organic Farming Magazine. That was really my only resource."

Most of these young farmers have had internships, been mentored or loaned equipment by the Hitts, the Dawsons, Jones or John Soehner of Eco Farms in Chapel Hill. Unlike their predecessors who felt isolated and misunderstood by the agricultural establishment, they have one another and the older generation to ask for help.

"They are really fortunate. There are a lot of us now. ... A lot of them are able to hit the ground running much faster than we were," Alex Hitt says.

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