Tar Heel People

Sustainable Living

Raising organic, eco-friendly crops and livestock on his farm outside Asheville, Walter Harrill continues a family tradition that began five generations before him.

BY LYDIALYLE GIBSON

On Walter Harrill's farm in Fairview — 16 knotty, half-wild acres of forest and fields in the Blue Ridge Mountains — a story has been unfolding for nearly 200 years. Five generations of Harrill's ancestors subsisted here, raising a couple of cows, a few pigs, and a garden full of vegetables. Off the farm, they worked as mechanics or mill hands or doing whatever else to bring in extra money. Harrill's great-grandfather, Fred Marlowe, was a roofer and a shade-tree mechanic who fixed cars in a garage off the driveway. Harrill's maternal grandfather, Burgin Marlowe, supplemented the harvest with a contractor's paycheck. "Just whatever worked at the moment," Harrill says. "This is the history of this whole area."

Harrill found his place in that history in 1997, when he took over the farm and reinvented it as an organic, environmentally sustainable enterprise. Since then, he's been asked to speak about his experience at conferences across the state, and he's become a mentor and teacher to other farmers.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM BARNWELL

More than 10 years ago, Walter Harrill traded his lab coat for farming equipment.

Bringing order

An electrical engineer's son who grew up 20 minutes away in a middle-class Asheville suburb, Harrill studied zoology at North Carolina State University and married Wendy, a girl he met in the laundry room during his freshman year. For a decade, the couple worked as medical technologists. Harrill kept bouncing from private labs to public hospitals, never satisfied at either and never quite sure why. Then his mother decided to grant him an early inheritance — she parceled off some

Flexibility is key for Harrill, who keeps his farm well-rounded by raising chickens and goats as well as rabbits.

of the family land for him.

By then, the farm had been abandoned for 20 years; pine trees, poplars, poison ivy, and wild rhododendrons had overtaken the pastures, and the old farmhouse had begun to crumble. Harrill came anyway. He and Wendy bought a modular house and placed it on the mountainside. Harrill started spending weekends hoeing, planting, and stringing up fences. After a few years, he became a full-time farmer.

Today, the property once again hums with agricultural order. Chickens patrol a lush, mowed lawn, while raspberry and blackberry canes stretch out along wire trellises. An 11-foot-high rabbit hutch stands across from a century-old post-and-beam barn. Goats graze nearby. Meanwhile, Harrill uses his great-grandfather's old garage as a toolshed, and he's fixing up the stone springhouse his great-grandparents built 60 years ago. Someday, he says, he'll tear down the decaying farmhouse and put up a stick-built home or log cabin in its place. "We just started bringing the farm back, recreating what was here."

Harrill and his wife are also remaking it. They christened Harrill's inheritance Imladris Farm (after the Elven paradise in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*) and worked toward ensuring that it would last another 200 years. Rabbit manure fertilizes the berries, which are irrigated by a spring, eliminating the need for water pumps or sprinkler systems. A handful of goats clear the woods to make room for pastures. After they devour the underbrush, the goats kill the trees by stripping away the bark. Then Harrill hauls the dead trunks away. The whole process, he says, takes about three years; bulldozers and chainsaws could finish the job in two weeks but at a price: "The next rain storm that comes along, you'll lose all your topsoil," he says, "and then you spend the next five years rebuilding it." The goats get rid of the foliage, but leave the roots to hold the dirt. "We can go through and plant raspberries right away, and the moment they hit the ground, they just take off."

Riding out each winter in the barn, the goats also produce their own heat: Instead of washable concrete floors, they sleep on dirt floors covered with thick hay. Each week, Harrill throws down a layer of lime and dry hay, "and it just keeps building and composting and getting warm," he says. During nights when the temperature drops to 15 degrees, the goats are "absorbing that heat, just as comfortable as can be." The following fall, the hay-and-litter compost provides rich, black fertilizer for Harrill's blueberries. "What is a waste for other farmers is not a waste for us," he says. "It's something we can use."

Catching their stride

With wire-rimmed glasses, hair past his shoulders, and an unruly wisp of beard, Harrill looks like a naturalist philosopher — John Muir relocated to the Appalachians. He talks like one, too, quoting agrarian poet Wendell Berry, environmental journalist Michael Pollan, and alternative farming guru Joel Salatin. During free moments, Harrill devours whole shelves of books on small-scale agriculture, researching how to farm without using pesticides or wasting water or overworking the soil. He consults with other farmers trying to tread lightly on the environment. "This is a really interconnected network of people,"

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM BARNWELL

Harrill says. "We learn a lot from each other's mistakes."

He wasn't always so devoted to eco-friendly agriculture. "I used to look at it from a nostalgic standpoint: If Sevin dust was good enough for my grandparents, then it was good enough for me." His change of heart was less ecological than economical. "Taking what you've got and using it to grow things that fit into the environment with as little intrusion as possible sounds like a really nice hippie statement — and it is," he says, "but it's also pretty practical. If we grow things that fit the environment, we have to do a lot less work fighting off pests and diseases. We don't have to work as hard to make things bloom and produce and stay alive. The plant takes care of itself."

Harrill raises shiitake mushrooms, which he sells to local restaurants and grocers.

Harrill isn't the first person to reach that conclusion. In North Carolina the demand for organic fruits, vegetables, and meat still outstrips supply, even though some small farmers around Asheville have been producing food without pesticides, hormones, or artificial fertilizers for more than two decades. Local organic and sustainable farmers are "just in the last 10 years catching their stride," Harrill says. "They're finding they have a large customer base."

And not a moment too soon. Near Harrill's property, which lies 11 miles outside of Asheville, vanishing profits in the dairy and tobacco industries are forcing tough choices on longtime landowners. Subsistence farming and minimum-wage millwork no longer pay the bills, and after a century or more on the same few dozen acres, some families see no alternative to selling their property to developers. Harrill, who's built a stable income peddling jams and jellies, rabbit meat, and shiitake mushrooms online and at local restaurants, shops, and grocery stores, hopes to show them another way. "One of our goals," he says, "is to set this up as a prototype that says to people, 'O.K., you may not make a killing, but if your land is important to you, here's how you can keep it.'"

Recently he's been taking that message to other farmers. Last spring he taught a crowded class on bramble production at Hendersonville's Organic Growers School and led a similar seminar last November at the Sustainable Agriculture Conference in Durham. He also teaches blueberry and bramble classes at his own farm and takes part in western North Carolina's farmer-to-farmer mentoring program for those interested in sustainable agriculture.

'A good life'

Eco-friendly farming in Harrill's family has a longer legacy than he first realized. A few hills over from his home are another 150 acres, handed down to him through his paternal family. Most of the property remains densely wooded, but stretching out across a four-acre plateau stand several rows of shoulder-high blueberry bushes. Harrill's grandfather, C.B. Harrill, planted them half a century ago in favorably acidic soil. Until he died in 2000, the elder Harrill ran a pick-your-own operation and lived in a one-room cabin off of the earnings from the berry patch. "Granddaddy was organic, although he didn't know what the word was," Harrill says. "What he told his customers was, 'We don't use any sprays.' "

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Smithson Mills, a former agribusiness developer for the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, says Harrill and others like him are thriving in a situation many consider impossible. "Economists say that in order to make a living at farming, you've got to make it a commodity," he says. "You've got to do large-scale agricultural production. [But] a niche has opened, and that niche is getting wider. ... People are buying local. They want to know where their food comes from." Mills helped found Blue Ridge Food Ventures, a commercial kitchen where small farmers like Harrill can make and package jams, juices, honey, and dried fruit at an affordable rate.

"Walter's made a good life for

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM BARNWELL

himself and his family," says Mills, "and he's done it on his terms." That good life requires constant flexibility. "You don't ever let yourself be pinned down," Harrill says. "In a year that's too wet for our shiitake mushrooms, the raspberries and blueberries will be going nuts. You always have to have something to handle whatever environment you're handed. That way, my kids and grandkids will be able to say, 'I'm part of a multigenerational farm.'" Harrill's 6-year-old son, Andy, already roams the property on a miniature, pedal-powered John Deere.

Last year, Harrill's berry bushes churned out 15,000 jars of jam and jelly. Some 300 shiitake logs are actively producing mushrooms, and Harrill slaughters about 350 rabbits annually. And every season, Harrill says, yields a crop of new customers.

Lydialyle Gibson lives in Illinois but spent much of her childhood on her grandparents' farm in Sampson County.

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