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Supporting Sustainable Agriculture  
in the Southern Appalachians through  
Educational Programs and Outreach



...e-news

## 5th annual True Nature Country Fair

true nature  
country fair

Celebrating our heritage • Cultivating our future

Organic Growers School



The fifth annual [True Nature Country Fair](#) will be held **October 8, 2011 at Highland Lake in Flat Rock, North Carolina**. The farmers, homebuilders, craftspeople, restaurateurs, social and political activists and alternative health care practitioners of the southern Appalachians invite you to join us for a celebration of our heritage and the harvest during a jam-packed, one day event! Highland Lake is a lovely, wooded site, 25 minutes from Asheville and two miles off of I-26.



**This year, we're taking a whole new approach that is experiential and celebratory.**

To that end, we are looking for teachers with a style that fits a fair venue: hands-on education where one learns by doing or watching

someone demonstrate the process. We are encouraging vendors to offer learning experiences at their booth. The entrance fee of \$10 will include all fair activities, except the One Bowl dinner. The new venue offers a great opportunity for animal exhibits. Goats, chickens, a turkey and a peacock already live there. Part of the goat pasture will be fenced off for our use and we hope to fill it with draft horses or oxen, the family cow, piglets, sheep, rabbits, working dogs, etc.

We will continue the tradition of the **Old Time Music contest**, **'SPROUTS'** our children's program, the silent auction and the farm-to-table dinner, **One Bowl**. Some of that dinner will be grown in the garden and greenhouse on the site!

**There are tons of ways to get involved! Which one is for you?**

[Teach](#) [Exhibit](#) [Sponsor](#) [Donate](#) [Volunteer](#)

Not sure what kinds of things we are looking for? Here are some ideas: Piglets, gardening, medicinal herbs, health and healing, pottery, rabbits, homesteading, honoring our elders, goats, green building, renewable energy, permaculture, chickens, nature walks, social and political action, crafts, folk arts and Native American arts, energy and shelter, old time music contest, farm and homestead products and equipment, farmers

market, fresh, yummy food, health and healing, teach your children well, sheep, jewelry and body care products, low impact forestry, small livestock, draft horses, food preservation, working dogs, tool sharpening, felting, weaving, canoes and kayaks, music, spoon making, basket making, cooking and eating, and much more!

Check out the details at [www.organicgrowersschool.org](http://www.organicgrowersschool.org)

**Ideas? Questions?** Contact Karen Vizzina, [earthstarnc@earthlink.net](mailto:earthstarnc@earthlink.net) or 828.342.1849.

## Farmer's Corner: Ask Tom



Dear Tom –

I am interested in getting certified as an organic producer. How do I select a USDA accredited certification organization? Thanks

-- Perplexed

Dear Perplexed:

You have 94 choices for a certifying organization which is accredited by USDA. About half of those are located outside the US, so if you are in North Carolina it may make sense to pick a domestic organization. A state-by-state list is available on-line at

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateJ&page=NOPACAs>

Some states offer certification at a very affordable rate but North Carolina chose to offer a cost share program instead. <http://www.ncagr.gov/markets/commodit/horticul/ncorganics/Organic%20Cost%20Share%20info.pdf>

That program pays 75% of the cost of certification up to \$750. Be sure and apply for this financial assistance if you do chose to become certified. They will need a receipt from your certifier.

When the National Organic Program (NOP) was passed in 1990 the USDA began the process of adopting a common set of organic standards intended to apply across the US. They also required all organizations interested in issuing certifications under those standards to apply for accreditation by the USDA. In North Carolina the most popular certifier at the time was the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA) They chose not to continue certifying under the NOP so many of us were left with the choice that you are now facing.

My main criteria are competence and affordability. Presumably an accredited organization has demonstrated some level of competence in order to be approved by USDA. I suggest also looking at the number of years that they have been certifying and how long their staff has been working for the organization. It might also be helpful to know how many farms that they certify annually.

The cost of certification has five components – base fee, inspection fee, travel fee, annual assessment, and your time involved in the process. When you submit an application for organic certification (a few dozen pages usually) staff at the certification organization review your materials and then contact an inspector to come to your farm for an on-site inspection. That inspector is either an employee of the certifier or an independent inspector. All organic inspectors have been trained and licensed to conduct inspections.

The certification organization's in-house staff cost is covered by the base fee (usually several hundred dollars), the inspection fee is usually around \$100 unless your farm is complicated or you are seeking additional approvals like on-farm organic processing. In most cases they will assess a travel fee to get the inspector to your farm – either mileage or the cost of the trip divided by the number of farms inspected on the trip.

Another possible cost component is an assessment by the certifier which is a share of your gross income from organic sales. Not all certifiers use an assessment but if you have large sales annually, it can be a significant cost. It's usually a fraction of one percent of your sales but it also requires that you disclose your annual gross income and some farmers would rather not share that information.

We have used three certifiers and were pleased with each. After CFSA withdrew from certification we went with Quality Certification Services (QCS) which is a sister organization of Florida Organic Growers. FOG has been around for many years. Two years ago I left QCS because of uncertainty about the travel cost related to inspections and switched to Clemson University Department of Plant Industry. Since we are outside South Carolina they charge mileage from the state line but that is a fixed cost that we can know in advance. The NC Crop Improvement Association did inspections for a while but they stopped a few years ago. International Certification Services in North Dakota picked up some of their former clients so they may be worth considering too.

The "your time" cost varies with each farm I'm sure, but it takes me 20-40 hours each year. I keep the application in electronic form so the annual update is mainly just updating the field histories and adding any new materials that I intend to use or new crops that I intend to explore. Showing the inspector around and

correspondence is the rest of the time. Since the NC cost share program mentioned above covers most of the cash cost, my time is the main component of our certification expense.

I know of no "consumer reports" for certification agencies. My direct experience is limited so there are probably many fine organizations that I did not mention. I hope my experience is useful as you make your choice. Thanks for your inquiry.

-- Tom

**Commercial Farmers: Got a Question for Tom? [Email it to us!](#)**

## Meet CRAFT: Sweet Earth Flower Farm

by Andrea Van Gunst

We managed to avoid the thunderstorms and hail and had a great tour at Sweet Earth Flower Farm on Saturday, May 14th. CRAFT members traveled all the way from Charlotte, Celo and Spring Creek to make the tour..thanks to everyone for making the drive and taking the time to come out and learn! Meredith McKissick operates Sweet Earth Flower Farm and she gave a great tour. She spent some time talking about how she and her husband Casey got started on their farm. Their main farmland is separate from their house and they have had to move their farm operation 3 times since they bought their house. They're now settled onto a 3-acre parcel that they share with several other growers.

Meredith explained that she actually got into farming as a vegetable grower but soon realized that she was working pretty hard without much profit. She started to experiment with growing flowers and realized that she was good at it and loved it – a pretty perfect combo. She now mainly sells through wholesale accounts, a small flower CSA, tailgate market and weddings. While weddings require a lot of one-on-one communication, Meredith said that this is by far the most lucrative arm of her business.

We spent some time in the greenhouse – understanding the sowing system and pest management challenges for flowers. It turns out that the learning curve for flowers is pretty steep – germination rates are very low, perennial flowers take a long time to establish and pests are as much an issue with flowers as they are for veggies. We caravanned down to the main farm field to see what was growing...a lot! Sweet Earth is a 1/2 acre operation and all the flowers are grown pretty tightly together, making the best use of the space. It would seem that the learning curve for the field work involved with flowers is also high: Meredith harvests everyday and has to take a lot of care for disease outbreak in her post-harvest handling. After that work is done, it's off to the workshop for hours of bouquet design and creation. We finished up in the field with a tour through the equipment line up and a quick but interesting conversation on marital harmony for full-time farming couples. Many such couples were in attendance and we got to hear some good perspectives! Last but not least – a delicious potluck and lots of great talking to round out the evening.

Thanks Meredith for hosting and thanks to all the CRAFT-ers that came.  
Stay tuned for the next CRAFT Tour: June 11 at Thatchmore Farm.

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## News Bits

News Bits are reader-submitted news, events, and opinion. [Submit your bit via email](#) by the 15th of each month for inclusion in that month's issue.

### **POSITION OPEN ANNOUNCEMENT**

**Position:** Instructor, Horticulture Technology and Sustainable Agriculture

**Proposed Hire Date:** August 15, 2011

CRAFT is a season-long farmer training program wherein farmers are the teachers and farms are the classrooms. Membership is rolling, and we still have lots of learning to do this season. [Sign up online today!](#)



## HELP WANTED

### **NEEDED: Coordinator for the Sprouts program at the True Nature Country Fair**

The True Nature Country Fair is the Fall event of the Organic Growers School and will take place on October 8, 2011 at Highland Lake in Flat Rock. Our mission is to celebrate our heritage and cultivate our future and we seek to offer an event that provides experiential education on all aspects of sustainable living in a celebratory atmosphere. We are looking for someone to coordinate **Sprouts**, the children's program at the fair. The program will have self-guided, parent guided and teacher-led components. Children will make peanut butter birdfeeders, experience working farm animals, create worm composting bins, do some yoga, etc. Are you an educator? Do you believe that children hold the key to the future of our planet? This project is for you! Please send your resume to Karen Vizzina, Program Coordinator, [earthstarnc@earthlink.net](mailto:earthstarnc@earthlink.net) by June 20, 2011. Thanks for your interest.

### **For First Consideration, Applications Must Be Received By: June 20, 2011**

**Brief Description of Position:** Under the direction of the Dean of Science, Engineering and Mathematics, the instructor will be responsible for developing and teaching classes in Horticulture, Sustainable Agriculture and related disciplines. The instructor will also be required to maintain related facilities and help manage the programs.

### **Minimum Qualifications:**

1. Bachelor's Degree in Horticulture, Sustainable Agriculture or related field required. Master's degree preferred.
2. Minimum of three years of related industry/field experience required.
3. Teaching experience at the community college level or higher preferred.
4. Experience and/or training in Horticulture and Sustainable Agriculture, Animal Science and Alternative Energy preferred.

**Application Procedure:** Applications must be submitted online at [www.wpcc.edu](http://www.wpcc.edu).

### **For More Information Contact:**

Ms. Anita Berry  
Human Resources Assistant  
Western Piedmont Community College  
1001 Burkemont Avenue  
Morganton, NC 28655  
(828) 448-3127

**Western Piedmont Community College, an equal opportunity employer, values and encourages campus diversity in students, faculty, and staff.**

## Gardener's Corner: Ask Ruth



*Dear Ruth,*

*Please give me the true dirt on straw bale gardening. I have read info online about this method of gardening and it sounds like it would cut down on a lot of work and cost. Straw Bales vs. making a new set of raised beds.*

*Much Thanks and Happy Gardens,  
Lynne Michael*

Dear Lynne,

I have never actually had a straw bale garden. Once I gardened on the beach by utilizing straw bales to frame the edge and floor of the garden (essentially walling in some imported soil). So...I researched the basics of straw bale gardening online and found lots of material, including Youtube videos. I also interviewed three knowledgeable local gardeners who often teach at the Organic

Growers School ~ Jeff Ashton, Andrew Goodheart Brown, and Chuck Marsh.

**One of the main advantages of the straw bale approach** is that you can set a garden up almost anywhere and quickly ~ even on a concrete driveway, a patio, or a balcony that can support the weight of a wet straw bale. The straw bale will provide a relatively weed-free and disease-free garden area, and makes a great alternative when you have uncooperative hard-to-work soil, an awkward/steep location, or limited space. It will also be easier to work for those who are disabled or have trouble bending. Most garden plants can be successfully grown in a straw bale garden.

#### **The Straw Bales:**

Straw bales are available for purchase at most garden centers and feed-type stores. Buy wheat (or grain) straw, not pine straw or hay. These bales typically measure about 18" x 14" x 36" and weigh about 50 pounds. Choose bales that are in good condition and are mold-free. Avoid bales that are starting to fall apart, and keep in mind that straw is pretty messy (if you plan to haul the bales in your car, bring along a tarp or old blanket to contain the mess).

#### **Siting your Garden:**

Like any garden, your straw bale garden will need 6-8 hours of sun, and access to water. Proximity to your house is always helpful. Make sure you are happy with the location of the bales before wetting them. Once the bales are wet they will be very heavy and prone to breakage should you try to move them to a different location. Theoretically, the size of your straw bale garden is limited only by the number of bales you obtain. I would not make the garden any wider than 2-3 bales so that you can comfortably reach your veggies for harvest. Most straw bale gardeners recommend setting the bale on its side (the cut edge) so that the strings are not in contact with the ground. Others (only if the strings were wire or synthetic) laid the bales down horizontally. *The bales that were laid down horizontally retained more water.* Regardless of orientation, if you are using more than one bale, push them tightly together to achieve better water retention. I might try banding the group of bales together with string or wire.

#### **Getting Started:**

Once you have the bales in place, wet them thoroughly. Water once or twice a day, and don't let the bales dry out for a week or two. It takes a lot of water. The bales will heat up and begin to decompose. It's optional, but you can jump-start the decomposition process by adding fertilizer. This will get things "cooking", however the addition of fertilizer will mean you should delay planting until the bale "cools down" enough. For instance, spread about 3 1/2 cups of organic fertilizer (like Harmony 5-4-3) across the top of the bale, or create a layer of 1/3 Blood Meal (12-0-0), 2/3 Bone Meal (0-12-0), and a Potassium source, and water thoroughly. Once the bales are a little decomposed, they hold water a little better. Ideally, you would start this process in the fall and your bales would be ready to plant in spring. If you wait until spring to get started, it will take at least a couple of weeks of attention before the bales are cool enough for planting.

#### **Planting:**

Transplants can be planted directly in the bale. Andrew suggested using a digging bar or heavy rebar to force a hole in the straw bale where you want to plant. Both Chuck and Jeff also recommended excavating a hole in the straw bale and adding some garden soil, compost, and fertilizer. Laid on their cut sides, each bale will accommodate about two large plants or three medium plants. If laying the bales horizontally, you could probably grow about six smallish plants (like lettuce or cucumbers) per bale. Trailing plants like cucumbers, beans, or winter squash could be planted more thickly. If you are planting seeds, add a 2" layer of compost to the top of the straw bale before planting the seeds. Transplants are more successful than seeds using the straw bale method. Tall plants like corn and okra are not well-suited to straw bale gardening.

#### **Ongoing:**

Your straw bale garden must be watered and fertilized on a regular basis. It takes a lot of water to keep the bale moist; particularly at first ~ once the bales are a little decomposed they become better at retaining water. Jeff watered his straw bale garden heavily before leaving for a four-day weekend...his garden was tottering on the edge of a grim fate when he returned. If you added fertilizer initially, remember that was simply to start the decomposition process. Now you will need to fertilize on a regular basis to provide the plants with nutrients so they can grow and fruit. Liquid fish fertilizer (or a fish/seaweed blend) once a week is a good choice. Chuck pointed out that the raw bale has no natural fertility, so you will have to be generous with fertilizer. If your plants look off-color, be ready to add supplemental fertilizer. Wheat may sprout up from seeds in the bale. Just trim it off with scissors (rather than pulling it out).

#### **Harvest and enjoy your vegetables!**

#### **Comments from the experts:**

**Jeff** was writing an article on straw bale gardening, so he wanted his straw bale garden to be a successful endeavor. His garden was a conversation piece in the neighborhood; neighbors and strangers would stop and chat about the oddity in the driveway. Jeff harvested cherry tomatoes and basil from his garden, but felt it was not that productive and that it used a lot of water. Even though a straw bale gave him more "real estate" on the surface than a pot, he felt that growing conditions in a pot were superior to those in his straw bales, and that the plants in his straw bale just did not thrive the way they would have in soil (either in a pot or in the ground). After the fact, he pulled the bale apart to examine the plant roots. The roots looked stunted ~ maybe because they were searching for nutrients (even though he had fertilized). Jeff also suggested putting plastic under the bale to prevent the bale from staining the driveway. Another upside...he had some really nice compost when he was done.

According to **Andrew**, straw bale gardening really shines in an urban setting. Sites without much potential for

gardening otherwise ~ pavement, super-compacted soil, toxic soil, etc. ~ make excellent locations for straw bale gardening. He also suggested locating straw bale gardens along the edge of ponds, theoretically making watering less of an issue as the bale would be watered from the bottom.

**Chuck** reported good results and mixed results with straw bale gardening (growing mostly collards and kale). "It's actually a fairly effective way to do things if you are dealing with concrete and hard surfaces...it works well on a rooftop because its relatively light compared to soil. If planting on a roof, put a piece of plastic under the straw bale and wrap it a few inches up the sides of the bale." Chuck obtained better results by setting a wood frame made with 1" x 4"s directly on the top of the bale. He filled the frame with good garden soil, compost, and 1/2 clay. If he was in the process of developing a new garden, Chuck thinks his resources (those same straw bales) would be better utilized by creating a sheet mulch (lasagna) garden, and that the sheet mulch garden would be more productive. "It's easy to create an instant [straw bale] garden with minimal labor, but it's not as maintenance-free as it's cracked up to be. The main challenges are adequate fertilizer and giving it enough water at first."

#### **Conclusion:**

**A straw bale garden** would be less expensive to set up than a raised bed garden (when using the soil recipe for Mel Bartholemew's square-foot gardening method). You *can* set a straw bale up anywhere, and it would be less complicated to set up and get started. It would require lots of water and fertilizer and more ongoing vigilance. It would be a great way to start upgrading a garden space over time, because you will be creating lots of awesome organic matter. I think the **raised bed** would be more expensive and more labor intensive to set up initially, but in the long run...a raised bed garden would probably produce a more bountiful harvest.

One bag of compost costs about the same amount as one bale of straw. If I had tools to turn the soil, I would probably choose to buy compost and turn it into my soil in a 50/50 native-soil:compost ratio. The resulting garden area would be about the same size growing area as your straw bale. The soil would retain water better than straw (therefore conserving a valuable resource), and the growing medium would be vastly superior to straw because your plants could draw on the wealth of nutrients and additional resources available in the garden soil. If you want to experiment with a fun technique or are confined to a site that dictates using straw bales (concrete, hard-packed soil) try using the straw bale method. At the very least, you will have some awesome compost material at the end of the season!

So Lynne, given all this information, I suggest that you weigh the pros and cons of straw bale gardening and decide what method would work best for you in your particular situation. If you do go ahead with a straw bale garden, I would love to hear about the results.

Happy Gardening,  
Ruth

*Special thanks to Jeff Ashton, Andrew Goodheart Brown (<http://permacultureasheville.com/>), and Chuck Marsh (<http://www.usefulplants.org/>).*

#### **Reader Comment on Hoes** (referring to Ask Ruth April 2011):

Hey Ruth- I'd like to let you know about my Moldovan hoe- It's half a circular saw blade filed down and then welded to a traditional hoe. If you think hoeing is easy now, just wait till you try this. I employ a family of Moldovans at my vineyard and veggie farm. They introduced my family to this "Moldovan Hoe" and it has changed our lives and our farm. I hope to pass this on to other organic gardeners. I don't have any pictures at this computer right now, but if you're ever in Concord, please stop by the farm at Dover vineyards and check it out! <http://thefarmatdovervineyards.blogspot.com/>

~ Elizabeth Dover

*Elizabeth, I would love to try your Moldovan hoe out. It sounds like a great tool. Thanks!*

~ Ruth

Gardeners: Got a question for Ruth? Email it to us  
[enews@organicgrowersschool.org](mailto:enews@organicgrowersschool.org)

**Ruth Gonzalez** is a former market farmer, avid gardener, local food advocate, and founder of the Tailgate Market Fan Club where she blogs at <http://tailgatemarketfanclub.wordpress.com>. In her job at Reems Creek Nursery, Ruth offers advice on all sorts of gardening questions, and benefits daily from the wisdom of local gardeners.

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