

# North Carolina's small farmers

*Dwindling in numbers and struggling to sustain a living*



BRYAN ANDERSON | News Editor

Redbud Farm uses its organic certification to differentiate from competitors. Clay Smith, 70, works about 50 hours a week harvesting his crops in preparation for local farmers markets.

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Nearly every day for the past several decades, Clay Smith of Redbud Farm has awakened at sunrise eager to plant, tend and market his crops. He's 70 now and has witnessed massive changes in farming methods and economics. He's typical in many ways of the farmers who are the foundation of a strong country.

He and others like him are the exception to the rule today — small farmers who believe it is worth the struggle to continue in an agriculture industry in which government, corporations and societal demands are constantly creating new hurdles to overcome.

It is becoming more difficult to recruit young people to meet these challenges. The lack of profits and high start-up costs associated with modern-day farming have contributed to a declining interest in farming for younger generations, according to Smith.

"The average age of a farmer in North Carolina is up in the high 50s," he said. "How much longer do I have? Maybe another 10 years. We'll see. Nobody could do it forever. We need to have more young people coming into farming."

## Dwindling interest in small-scale farming

North Carolina agriculture is a

\$78 billion industry that employs 16 percent of the state's work force. However, much of the profits are generated by large-scale farmers. Most individual and family farmers are not reaping the benefits.

The most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture census, reported in 2012, showed a 5 percent decrease in the number of North Carolina farms between 2007 and 2012. Only 43 percent of those farms recorded net economic gains in 2007 and 2012.

Within the last couple decades, the number of North Carolina farms has stabilized around 60,000 after a dramatic decline between the 1960s and 1980s.

Smith's Redbud Farm has been one of the few farms to consistently record net gains. But Smith said his real success is limited by a number of factors.

"Last year, on about three acres of land, we had gross sales of \$62,000," Smith explained. "The operational expenses in terms of seed, fertilizer, pesticide, fuel for the tractor, the irrigation line and infrastructure and the electricity to run the cooler is about \$30,000. So we made about \$30,000. That's not a lot of money."

If you take into account the fact that two full-time workers — Smith and his wife Nancy Joyner — were the "paid labor," their annual salaries add up to just \$16,000 each. That places them firmly below the poverty line.

Yet in terms of total farm revenue they are considered one of the

wealthier North Carolina farms by comparison.

The 2012 Census of Agriculture noted 79 percent of farms recorded less than \$50,000 in revenue.

Ralph Noble, chair of the department of animal science at North Carolina A&T State University, works at the university's farm and offers assistance to small and aspiring farmers. Like Smith, he has witnessed a steady decline in emerging farmers.

"When I started school back in the 1960s, 90 percent of my friends had parents or grandparents who came from farms," Noble said. "Now you can probably go back generations and you won't find them there."

A lack of government programs encouraging young people to get into agriculture is partly to blame, according to Smith.

"There should be more grants and low-interest loans for young people who want to go into farming," he said. "A person coming out of college, tech school or high school is just beginning and doesn't really have a financial nest egg or anything to go out and buy land or buy the minimal amount of equipment that they need."

## Cost-share and rebate programs

There are some government rebates and cost-share programs available to small farmers. North Carolina's Small and Minority Farm Program offers assistance direct-

ly to farms with limited resources through outreach and education. It also offers cost-share programs for good agricultural practices, certification and water analysis.

Smith, for example, received two-thirds of the cost of high tunnels for Redbud Farm thanks to a grant issued by the Natural Resources Conservation Services. High tunnels are used as an irrigation system for crop production. This grant helped Smith make improvements to his farm to increase efficiency in growing tomatoes.

But cost-share programs generally require farmers to put up a significant portion of the money. Smith, for instance, provided a third of the cost of building high tunnels. Farmers who can't cover a portion of the costs are unable to install new equipment, which allows wealthier farms to grow much faster than smaller farms.

## Universities share best practices

Agricultural colleges and state universities throughout the United States have been offering supportive instructional programs for small farmers for hundreds of years.

North Carolina A&T was founded as a land-grant institution in 1890. The school started on land made available by the federal government for the purpose of making farming accessible to the masses.

"There was a time in this country when most of the education in this

country was for the rich and affluent people," Noble said. "Then there came a point where the government said, 'For us to go forward, we've got to educate the masses.' And so there designated some money and some land for each state to get 30,000 acres of land per congressman in Washington."

N.C. A&T has offered valuable resources to farmers since its early days. One of its primary programs today is demonstration farming.

Small farmers meet with N.C. A&T instructors at demonstration farms to learn how to maximize the potential of their own land. As their farms improve and become exemplary, neighboring farmers can visit their farms and learn about best farming practices. This has allowed the practices taught by N.C. A&T to be shared across all 100 North Carolina counties.

"When people trained by us share with their neighbors, all their results improve," Noble said. "We're located in the middle of 100 counties. You can't expect people outside of the neighboring three or four counties to take the time to come here."

While N.C. A&T tries to reach a larger target, it remains focused on supporting its surrounding communities through its three to four annual field day workshops. The workshops at its farm help relay information to the state's farmers about how to become more profitable.