

Local farm carries on family tradition

Welcomes locals for pumpkin picking this fall

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For Jane Iseley, working a 500-acre farm in Burlington is more than just a profession — it's a family tradition.

Since 1790, the "home farm" has been in continuous production by the Iseley family. Iseley said the farm was originally a land grant that a couple bought. A decade later, her family member bought it and it's been in the family ever since, only getting as distant as a second cousin.

"In today's society, most people, if they live in the same community that their parents were raised in, it's very unusual," Iseley said. "So there is a bond there with the land, and you feel the responsibility and stewardship of your generation."

Iseley hasn't always been a farmer. She first worked as an architectural photographer and has published at least 35 books during her lifetime.

"All of that is important because it's given me people who are familiar with the books and the name, so they would come buy the vegetables," she said.

Because Iseley doesn't have any children or family members who will likely leave their professions to work the farm, she put the land into an agriculture conservation easement, so the development rights are down.

"The price of the land is down to an agriculture price where someone young can afford to buy it if they wanted to farm it," she said.

Because some of the land borders the Haw River, Iseley said the farm feels it's responsible to make sure the runoff is clean. About two-thirds of the land is forest.

"We're growing your clean air and water," Iseley said.

The three main crops sold on the farm are beef herd, organic tobacco and fruits and vegetables, which include strawberries, tomatoes and apples.

Besides the commercial cow-calf operation, the farm has been growing organic tobacco for 14 years under contract with the Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company.

"We decided the handwriting was on the wall for the tobacco program and if we were going to diversify, we needed to start," Iseley said.

Iseley said the farm also works with neighbors who grow crops not always available on the Iseley farm.

"We had over 30 people this year and in recent years bring things in," she said.



"People bring it in and we sell it for them. It helps them and it helps us."

Though Iseley has no family members of her own, she said she relies on help from local high school students and retirees to run the farm on a day-to-day basis. She also hires workers from Mexico through a federal program.

"They're hard-working folks," she said. "The guys have left their families, come 3,000 miles for six months to work and they're excellent."

According to their website, Iseley Farms welcome community groups to pick strawberries in the spring and visit the pumpkin patch and hayride in October, but Iseley said the farm is not focused on agro-tourism.

"We invite kids to take tours, but we don't do anything to entertain anybody while they're here," she said. "We just try to educate them about what we're doing"

Iseley said she most enjoys the contact and interactions with customers who visit the farm and market.

"Over the last three years, we've learned how important it is to know where your food is coming from," she said. "The last two years, 'know your farmer' has become very important to people."

Sandy Russell, produce manager at the farm, said she has fond memories of a young student from Elon University who, a few years ago, came to the farm and asked for help cooking with different crops.

A few years later, he called her and wanted to talk about life after



PHOTOS BY WILL ANDERSON

Above: The Iseley family grows vegetables, fruits, organic tobacco and raises cattle at their local farm.

graduation.

"He said he was working outside of Washington, D.C. in a chain of whole-food markets and I was his inspiration," Russell said. "You always hope that some grown-up will come and say 'you meant the world to me and changed my life.'"

Though Iseley said the flow of customers is slow this time of year, and she expects it will pick up after the pumpkins are cut and the mums begin to blossom in the coming weeks.

"It's not as if you own the land," Iseley said. "I think the land owns us, really."