



JODY CLEMMONS has been working in tobacco since he was 6 years old. He runs a 45-acre family farm in Supply. STAFF PHOTOS BY DOUG RUTTER



SUMMER WORKERS Keith Ludlum (left) and Travis Hewett slide another rack of tobacco into the barn. It takes about seven days for the green leaves to cure.

THE GOLDEN LEAF

Tobacco Remains Brunswick County's High-Dollar Crop

BY DOUG RUTTER

Jody Clemmons has worked in tobacco fields for 16 of his 22 years. It's hard work, especially under August's scorching sun, but he likes it just the same.

"I was raised on my daddy's farm. I don't know no better," said Clemmons, who runs a 45-acre farm in Supply.

"I wonder about it sometimes. Am I doing the right thing? If you're happy doing something I guess the best thing is to stick with it."

Clemmons, a graduate of N.C. State University's agriculture business management program, is among the Brunswick County growers who will produce 3.15 million pounds of tobacco this year.

David Nash of the Brunswick County Cooperative Extension Service said there are 1,573 acres of tobacco in the county. Based on a price of \$1.74 per pound and 2,000 pounds per acre, local growers should generate about \$5.47 million in revenues.

"It's still a major, major economic crop in Brunswick County. Of the field crops, it's still the high dollar crop in the county," Nash said last week during a visit to Clemmons' farm.

The sweet smell of flue-cured tobacco filled the air last Friday as Clemmons and three teenagers hired for the summer busily "barned" loads of green leaf brought in fresh from the fields.

"It's hard work but there's nothing that compares to the consistency of the outcome of it," Clemmons said of tobacco. "Out of all the crops it is the most consistent year in and year out."

Clemmons started working tobacco at age 6 and basically took over his family's operation at age 15 after his father had back surgery. "That's when I really took hold of it, and I haven't really slowed down," he said.

For Clemmons, tobacco season began in February with the planting of seeds in a greenhouse. Starting the plants in a greenhouse improves the quality and uniformity of the leaf.

"With the greenhouse that's when your season starts. It's a crop you just have to spend a lot of time with," Clemmons said.

After 8 to 10 weeks, it's time to move the plants into the fields. Many growers start setting their fields

the Monday after Easter, while others use April 15 as the starting date.

"The main thing is trying to prevent any frost," Clemmons explained. "After we set, we plow three or four times and apply fertilizer two times."

During the summer, it's imperative that growers break off the flowers that blossom on the plants. The flowers use energy to produce seeds—energy that is needed to produce better leaves.

"If you let that big flower stay there it's using all the energy. Every day the flowers stay out there in the fields you're losing money," Clemmons said.

"You try to take the energy that plant would put into seed production and put it into leaf production," added Nash.

The tobacco harvest and curing starts around the Fourth of July and lasts 10 to 12 weeks. Between 20 and 22 leaves are stripped from each plant and brought in for racking, barning and curing.

After seven days in the barn, the product is ready for bundling and delivery to tobacco warehouses.

Clemmons and other local growers take their leaf to Tabor City and Whiteville for sale.

Despite problems in the tobacco industry, Clemmons says he has faith that North Carolina legislators will help him and other growers.

Politicians are well aware that tobacco is North Carolina's largest farm commodity and cash crop and is responsible for one out of every 11 jobs in the state.

They know 18,000 farm families grow tobacco in

89 of North Carolina's 100 counties. They know that more than 50 percent of all cigarettes made in the United States are made right here in North Carolina.

Tobacco is not known as "the golden leaf" because of its color alone. It generates nearly \$6 billion in income for North Carolinians, creates more than 280,000 jobs and accounts for \$700 million in state and local taxes.

"It's a tremendous income for this state," Nash said. "If you go back and look at our history, tobacco probably paid for most of the universities and hospitals in this state."

Clemmons said the federal tobacco program, which is funded entirely by growers and buyers and hasn't cost American taxpayers a dime since 1983, is in good shape.

"Our politics in North Carolina are pretty strong. The guys we have are backing it. I think deep down they have enough power to keep it from changing drastically," he said.

One of the industry's biggest problems is competition from foreign growers who don't pay the same wages or follow the same regulations that have been placed on U.S. growers.

Also, Clemmons said recent media attention on the dangers of tobacco use have resulted in a decline in cigarette and tobacco sales in the United States.

"It's the backbone of everything in this state. It's disappointing that people have turned against it. This is what put North Carolina on its feet," Clemmons said.

While tobacco consumption in the U.S. is decreasing,

worldwide tobacco use is expected to increase 2 percent per year through the end of the century.

"That's going to have to be our goal to get back strong in the world market and export," Clemmons said.

Clemmons said he has no plans of giving up tobacco despite its uncertain future.

"My intentions are to stay in it. The situation in tobacco right now is in turmoil. We don't know which way we're gonna go. We're gonna grow tobacco as long as we can."

Master Gardener Program To Be Offered In Evenings

An evening "Master Gardeners" program will be available this fall in Brunswick County.

The Master Gardener program in North Carolina is a joint endeavor of the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service and volunteers who wish to learn how to be better gardeners and help other gardeners by sharing their knowledge.

Classes for the Brunswick County Cooperative Extension Service Master Gardener Program will begin on Sept. 13. Class will meet on consecutive Tuesdays from 6:30 p.m. until 9:30 p.m. at the Cooperative Extension Office in the Brunswick County Government Complex in Bolivia.

Participants in the Master Gardener program will receive 30 to 40 hours of training in many aspects of horticulture and home gardening. Upon completion of the training, participants are expected to give back volunteer time working on the telephone hotline, the plant clinic or other extension horticultural education projects.

Those interested in becoming Master Gardeners should call the Brunswick County Cooperative Extension Office at 253-4425 for an application and additional information.

Class size is limited and applications must be returned by Sept. 6, said David L. Nash, agricultural extension agent.

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'Seagull, Seagull, Sitting On The Sand'

BY BILL FAVER

I have always been fascinated by some of the rhymes or "sayings" having to do with weather conditions—not only the words themselves, but some of the explanations of why they are likely to be true and how they came to be used.

One good example has to do with the activity of sheep when the barometric pressure is falling:

*When sheep collect and huddle,
Tomorrow will become a puddle.*

Sheep become unsettled because of the low pressure and collect close together for security. This is taken to be a sign of impending rain, which usually happens when the pressure drops, whether sheep are present or not.

Another one having to do with predicting rain is based on honey bees being sensitive to humidity and air pressure: "Bees stay close to

hive, rain close by."

Low barometric pressure and high humidity also irritate flies, and they seem to bite more. This is supposed to be a sign of rain as well. Sometimes animals with ears are very sensitive to changes in air pressure and, in the case of some birds, like swallows, they tend to fly closer to the ground. "When swallows fly low" you can be pretty sure it is going to rain sometime soon.

One of the sure signs for the beach has to do with gulls sitting on the sand. Drops in barometric pressure and thinned air updrafts make flying hard for some birds. You can be sure of rain when you see them and recall:

Seagull, seagull, sitting on the sand;



SOMETIMES seagulls on the sand are a sign of rain. PHOTO BY BILL FAVER