

# Tour spotlights local farmers

35 farms showcased at annual event

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STAFF WRITER

Located nine miles outside Chapel Hill is a place where a pet pig named Vernon roams, shiitake mushrooms grow in the shade and a house stands with a peace sign and the Woodstock '69 logo painted on the side.

This is Eco Farm, one of the 35 local farms showcased by the 13th annual Piedmont Farm Tour.

It's been the home of aging hippies John and Cindy Soehner for the past 15 years, although they have been farming for only four.

John Soehner used to help his wife sell her art at the local farmers' market. After seeing the farmers sell their produce, he decided to convert his property — formerly a tobacco farm — into a place where things would grow again.

"I just always seemed to step into something," said John Soehner, who was previously an occupational therapy assistant and a fisherman.

Eco Farm grows crops such as tomatoes, bok choy and garlic year-round. It also raises turkeys and hogs during the year and uses them to help fertilize its land and eat weeds. Eventually, the hogs are slaughtered for their meat.

"I have got a small farm, so I've got to make use of the whole place," John Soehner said.

The couple works on the farm with their two sons, in addition to one part-time and one full-time employee. And there's always a rotating variety of people who help so they can learn how to farm.

Cindy Soehner said she's encouraged by the younger workers who volunteer at the farm and learn from her husband. While her husband loves to teach them, it's bittersweet when they leave.

"When they leave, many of them go and start their own farm," she said.

More and more people are

*"I want to have something to offer my boys. Then it could continue into the 10th generation."*

ROB HOGAN, MAGNOLIA VIEW FARM OWNER

becoming interested in organic farming, they said.

"We have about 1 million hippies coming out here all the time," John Soehner said.

Hogan's Magnolia View Farm has a much deeper history with the community.

The connection of the Hogans to UNC goes back to 1795, the year the University opened, when the family donated 200 acres to the University.

The connection has continued until now; their farm has been the home of Rameses the UNC ram for 84 years.

"I was raised here on the farm," current owner Rob Hogan said. "This is all I knew; I never knew anything else."

In addition to housing the famous ram, the 180-acre farm, now run by Hogan and Ann Leonard, has 45 cows used for beef. They also grow grains for livestock.

After attending N.C. State University, Hogan came back to help run the family dairy.

But in 1995, the Hogans decided it was time to sell their dairy, which caused Hogan anxiety about his future, his family's future and the future of the farm. So he decided to start raising beef, which he said has been profitable.

But when the drought hit this past season, Hogan said it was the first time in seven years that he has really struggled.

"I barely squeaked by with enough hay to feed the cows in the winter," Hogan said.

Because of the drought he lost 50 percent to 60 percent of his hay crop. He had to keep it all for his own livestock.

"I didn't sell one bale of hay this season," he said.

But with the recent rains, Hogan said things are looking up.

"I want to have something to offer my boys," Hogan said. "Then it could continue into the 10th generation."



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Local farmer John Soehner speaks to visitors Sunday during the 13th annual Piedmont Farm Tour at his Eco Farm outside Chapel Hill.

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