

Farm tour celebrates 20 years, continued growth

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Two decades ago, a small group of farmers met in downtown Carrboro, debating ways to increase their visibility, encourage the farm-to-fork pipeline and open up their lands to customers constantly clamoring for a visit.

Suddenly struck by an idea, the group sent **Betsy Hitt** racing across the street to Weaver Street Market, and a partnership was born.

The two entities banded together to form the first Piedmont Farm Tour.

“It really started out as the farmers wanting to do this,” Leah Joyner, education coordinator with Carolina Farm Stewardship Association—which runs the tour—said. “They got together, were having a meeting, and [**Betsy**] just went across the street to Weaver Street and said, ‘We want to do this tour; can you help us?’ So Linda Fullwood at Weaver Street got on board and has been for the last 20 years.”

The tour essentially maps out a host of participating farms across Orange, Alamance, Chatham, Durham and Person counties, giving participants two days—Saturday, April 25, and Sunday, April 26—to visit as many as possible. A \$30-button in advance, or \$35 the day of, acts as a pass for an entire carload of people.

Celebrating 20 years in 2015, the Piedmont Farm Tour boasts 40 stops, a dramatic increase from the dozen that participated that first year. Four new farms joined the pack this time around.

Participation has also increased since the event’s beginnings. Cathy Jones of Perry-winkle Farm in Chapel Hill, one of the original members of the tour, said only a few people came by early on—mostly customers—whereas about 2,500 people signed up in 2014.



Piedmont Farm Tour

A farmer shows Piedmont Farm Tour participants a lamb during the event in 2012.

“In the first years, it was more your customers would come out, and also it seemed like there were more people that were wanting to get into farming, so they were coming out to kind of see how people’s farms ran,” Jones said. “It seems like that was more characteristic of who the people were in the beginning. Now it seems to be lots of families who really just want their kids to see where food comes from, families who maybe have multi-generations and maybe the parents have older young children who are wanting to go in this direction.”

An interesting piece for the CFSA is watching tour participants from the early years turn around and start farms of their own—and some now even have signed on as stops for the annual event.

“It’s really neat to see how it can be educational and have an impact like that,” Joyner said. “... It’s exciting to see that kind of stuff happen. It is fun. It is a family-oriented event, but there is so much to be learned.”

The farmers themselves have noticed people catching on to the wealth of knowledge they have to offer. Ben Bergmann of Fickle Creek Farm in Efland said, while he has noticed the increase in families coming out over the past 10 years he’s been a part of the tour, he has also seen a steady increase in the amount of meaningful questions.

“I think the overall awareness participation is really noticeable,” he said. “It’s kind of changed a bit from, ‘Oh, let’s go pet the lamb,’ to ‘What is your nitrogen input? How do the chickens interact with the tomato crop?’ It’s much more in-depth”

Whether after a farmer’s wisdom or not, however, Joyner said tour participants have a lot to gain from the event.

“Some people take it because they want their kids to get out and see a chicken for the first time or they’ve never been on a farm and they get there and there’s some education that takes place,” she said. “We hope it influences their purchasing decisions in the future. We do a follow-up survey after the tour, and we often have folks tell us that they do plan to take action like signing up for a [Community Supported Agriculture] or buying more local food or seeking that out when they’re in a restaurant. So we think that those kinds of connections are really important.”

On a broader level, some of the farmers said they see the tour as a way to help more urban residents look beyond their borders and realize the plethora of sustainable family homesteads right in their midst.

“I think it is a wonderful education piece for the community to understand what their neighbors are up to,” Jones said. “We live 9 miles from Chapel Hill, so I’m very aware of what people do on the road between us and town. If it’s not your typical commute, you don’t know that we’ve got dairy farms out here on White Cross Road. It gets people out to get to know their neighbors.”

And that side of the education piece has benefits for farmers, as well. Not only does the tour allow

producers to invite market customers over for a visit when they're not busy plowing or planting—and when the farm isn't overly messy to boot—the event also exposes different operations to potential future customers.

“We've always been really committed to small-scale farming in the area, and we think a critical part of that is to show the community what small-scale sustainable farms are and what those are and how the food is produced and to strengthen that connection,” Bergmann said. “... It gets the word out that we're here, we're here; we are producing responsibly raised and grown food. If people don't know it's an option, of course they're not going to buy it.

“It's also valuable to farmers, I think, at least for us, it's rewarding. This is where we work all day every day all year, and this is one time that we can just kind of celebrate this is why we do it. It's for you all; it's for our community. It's for our environment. It's kind of showing off, if you will. And we're proud of what we do and why we do it, so it's rewarding in that regard.”