

Helping Virginia's Small Farmers Make Big Impacts

Virginia State University and Cooperative Extension Small Farm Outreach Program Provide Education from the Ground Up

Small, limited-resource and beginning farmers and U.S. military veterans who want to make improvements that offer big impacts on their farm productivity and profitability can benefit from the resources available from VSU's Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP).

Program instructors and agents start from the ground up by sharing business tools and strategies for financial management that include information on loan and grant funds from both state and federal government agencies. An approved USDA FSA Borrower Training Vendor, the SFOP's financial and business management programs and its Agribusiness and Financial Management course are innovative, culturally sensitive, level-appropriate and practical.

From there, farmers get expert advice and hands-on demonstrations to help improve their growing and marketing practices during field days at VSU's Randolph Farm or at local and regional farm tours. Local groups can receive assistance to develop community gardens that will have positive impacts in their neighborhoods, especially in areas without easy access to fresh, local produce. Finally, the SFOP can provide resources for farm transition and estate planning to help aging farmers plan for a successful retirement.

Small Farm Outreach Program education, training and technical support are designed to help farmers grow and sustain successful farm businesses. Contact the SFOP office at (804) 524-5626 or your area agent (see a list on page 7) to learn more about how you can get connected.

Retirees Find Reward in "New-Style" Farming

According to a 2014 USDA Economic Research Service report, 20 percent of principal farm operators in the United States are retirees.

Of the approximate 1,800 small Virginia farmers being assisted by VSU's Small Farm Outreach Program, almost 40 percent are retired, said SFOP Director William Crutchfield.

Meet two of them—Susan Hill of Hill Farm in Louisa and Thomas Roberson of Botanical Bites Provisions in Spotsylvania.

Hill Farm

An accountant by profession and former high school teacher, Susan Hill is a Montana native who grew up on a cattle, horse and sheep farm. Following retirement, Susan and her husband Scott, a military retiree, opted to forgo her classroom lesson plans to delve full-time into tilling the land in 2011.

Excited to be part of ushering in what she calls a new-style farming movement, Susan explains, "Robbing the land of nutrients, old-style farmers spent dollars

upon dollars to combat pests and diseases. Now, we speak of compost and nutrients—treating soil with molasses, trace minerals, rock phosphate and worm castings to grow tasty, nutrient-dense vegetables."

In four high tunnels, they apply natural solutions to control pests and fertilize seasonal produce, which is grown year-round.

The Hills participate in a small CSA (community-supported agriculture) arrangement whereby community residents subscribe for direct access to fresh, local produce; and in a 70-farmer local food hub organization that supplies local produce to restaurants.

Even as she maintains a busy production schedule, Susan still finds time to teach business planning classes for VSU's SFOP.

Botanical Bites

"Souls rooted to the soil" is how Thomas Roberson and his wife Anita describe their affinity for farming. On their 10-acre farm, they produce and sell fresh cut flowers and naturally grown, pesticide-free vegetables.

After retiring as a physician's assistant and Army medical officer, Thomas returned



Susan Hill

to his agronomic beginnings. The Lynchburg native was reared on a farm under his grandparents' tutelage. Anita, whose grandparents also were Virginia farmers, retired from the federal government.

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(l. to r.) The Roberson family (Anita, Julian and Thomas) with SFOP Agent Roland Terrell and Director William Crutchfield at the Small Farm Family Conference in November.

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Having purchased their farmland in 1988, but realizing they were only paying taxes on it, the Robersons decided to give full-time farming a go in 2014. Now in its third year of operation, Botanical Bites is being touted as an upscale, eco-friendly enterprise.

"In the future, we'd like to expand from traditional production into beekeeping, value-added products and maybe even raise small animals," adds Anita.

Recognized last year by VSU's SFOP for their efforts, the Robersons were named Small Farmer of the Year. Their son Julian, a 2013 Bluefield College business graduate, assists with family farm operations and owns a videography business.