

A Visit with Lil' Farm



George O'Neal is a first generation farmer with a long-term lease. "Forty years... I figure by the time I'm seventy, if I'm still doing this, there's problems." So why does he keep farming? "For the money and the girls," he jokes. "And the yachts." George's Lil' Farm is on several acres north of Durham in Timberlake.

George calls farming "a hobby that got ridiculously out of control." He started with a garden that grew bigger and bigger. He planted fruit trees and got some chickens at his residence in downtown Carrboro. He interned on established local farms like Perry-winkle Farm and EcoFarm. Those farmers helped him (and many others) get started, loaning tools and acting as inspiration and help. "John Soehner ... is more responsible for me farming than me. You know, cause he made it possible. He loaned me every piece of equipment, held my hand through every step, and was like [mimicking a phone call], Hey, it's Thursday, plant your f-ing strawberries." John even named his dog

"O'Neal" after George, but you'll have to ask one of them why.

George and his girlfriend, Kelly wrote a grant proposal and got money from RAFI, the Rural Advancement Foundation International, to start a tool co-op for ten small farms. Each farm has a pickup truck and a tractor. They share the tractor attachments, including a manure spreader, a vacuum sealer, a harrow, a plastic mulch layer, a bush hog, a tiller, a hiller, and a bedder, as well as the trailer to haul the tools from farm to farm, and a power washer that stops the spread of disease from one farm to the next. The co-op allows farmers to get started without the initial expense of all those tools.





Some beginners try to plan things out. George seems to have jumped right in. His fields were pasture until last year. “The grasshoppers, the squash beetles were insane. The pest load... well, it was bad this year, but it was really bad the first year out here. Once you get your soil up and get your beneficials [insects] up” it gets better. George points to the rows of perennials that he cuts for flowers; they also serve as beneficial insect habitat. He tills under old plants to break weed and pest lifecycles,

and uses chickens on old fields to eat bugs and provide fertilizer before planting a cover crop. Row covers keep the weeds down and keep roots warm in the spring, and are a new, sustainable alternative to the usual black plastic. “It’s 100 percent corn, and it’s from Italy, so it’s not even GMO!” George says. (Certified organic farmers are sometimes unable to switch to the new material because of the unknown origins of the corn.) “This is like some decrepit white clay,” George says, kicking the gray dirt of Person County. “This is the sorriest soil I’ve ever seen in my life. But every year it’ll get better, and every cover crop will add tons and tons of organic matter to it. So hopefully, one day, probably around the time I’m seventy, this soil will be good enough.”



Farming with chemicals was never an option at Lil’ Farm. “Never would I ever,” George states. It’s not just about the customers. “It’s for me, for my two workers, for my girlfriend who’s going to eat the stuff. I don’t want to stand in it.” In Person County, George is surrounded by conventional farms. “At what point is it no longer food?” he wonders.

“At some point, you’re not really farming, you’re just sitting on a tractor pushing buttons and dispersing chemicals. You’re more of like a chemist-slash-driver than a farmer.” George doesn’t spray, even though some sprays are considered organic. There are still potential problems, like harming bees. “Mostly I hate standing out here with a sprayer, it’s like a punishment.”

Instead, George is taking an integrated, long term approach, caring for the soil and reducing pests with chickens, compost, and cover crops.

“Radishes were the first thing I ever broke 100 dollars on, I thought I was a millionaire. We were ready to buy a keg and have a party,” George laughs, remembering how easy it was to grow radishes his first year. “You just pile ‘em up and they’re really pretty, I was like, Man, I’m so good at this farming thing. But then you realize, if you can’t grow radishes, you should probably get into something different.”



Now, in addition to radishes, his farm produces three- to five-thousand pounds of potatoes, of which he’ll sell out by the fall. His tomatoes come in colors from blaze orange to striped green to burgundy, from cherry sized to larger than two fists. He was between flocks of chickens during our visit, but usually he has several hundred laying eggs. He also sells flowers and dozens of smaller crops, from garlic to melons to salad mix spiced with fennel and tiny flowers. And he’s famous for the sweetness

of his strawberries. “It’s just neglect... I don’t have enough water,” he jokes. He waters the plants when he first puts them in the ground in the fall, but they are well established by spring and don’t need to be watered. Watering increases the weight of berries (and the profit) but results in a watered-down taste.

The worst thing he’s ever grown? “Artichokes, my second year farming. I grew maybe 350 of them and I thought, This is genius! How is no one else doing this? And they were so astringent, it was like putting witch hazel in your mouth, it was awful.... I was going to badmouth kohlrabi, but only cause no one buys it, it’s really not that bad.”



George is now the farmer helping the new beginners. “Farming is not like a singular profession. You have to be a soil scientist, entomologist, electrician, plumber, carpenter, mechanic.... There has to be a better word for it; when you think ‘farmer’ you think ‘overalls,’ you’re not thinking about things like, working out personal relations between your employees, or fixing a tractor having never grown up with

a tractor. There's some minor catastrophe every day, like a plague of locusts." Will he do it for the rest of his life? "I never want to do anything for the rest of my life! I want to do something new like every fifteen minutes," he exclaims.

"No, once I master it, then I'll switch careers, cause it'll be boring then, but it's fun for now." This time I don't know if he's joking. He seems pretty tied to what he's doing, but the way he plunged into farming makes me think he could handle a plunge out of it. Are there other things he'd like to do besides farm? "Oh yeah! Like, coke dealer, stripper, there's like a whole list."

Visit George at the Durham Farmer's Market on Saturdays, the Carrboro Wednesday market, or online at lilfarmnc.com. Watch a video of our visit.

<http://youtu.be/Gwy6GuBQY5M>