



Perry-winkle Farm

“So what did you do before you were a farmer?”

I sat across from Cathy Jones on the screened-in porch at Perry-Winkle Farm. Pearl, the black dog had clambered up onto a wingback chair and settled her large head on top of her numerous paws. I expected Cathy to answer “schoolteacher” or “potter” or even “underwater welding specialist.” Instead she replied, “I was a volleyball

referee... softball and volleyball. I traveled a lot because we were nationally ranked. That’s how I met Mike.” Her husband, Mike Perry, is the other half of Perry-Winkle Farm.

“So then in 1991 you began selling at the Farmers’ Market—in Carrboro?”

“Oh, no,” she replied, “they were so big, I was far too nervous. I saw an ad, they were starting a Farmers’ Market at Fearington on Tuesday afternoons, so I went to a meeting. It was good—I just had a small table, and the customers were really appreciative. It had lots of supporters right from the start.”

Cathy began gardening in 1975 when she moved to this area. Her husband, Mike, was a Chapel Hill native—he used to watch his dad play softball on the field that’s now the site of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. With Mike’s support, Cathy began selling produce in 1991. She didn’t think she could get in to the big Carrboro market, but in 1994, the Hitts of Peregrine Farm encouraged her and she applied and was accepted. Mike began going



to market, too, and helping on the farm at night, after working all day at his masonry business. At first Cathy wanted to sell herbs, but sales were slow at a dollar a bag so she began to sell vegetables. She already grew some varieties since she pickled and canned for herself. She added potatoes and onions, a favorite to eat and to grow because they’re “fun to harvest.” And Perry-Winkle Farm added flowers—Cathy had

thought they'd wait until they had vegetable farming down, but they went ahead and planted flowers anyway.

Six or seven years ago, she and Mike got nine hens and a rooster as “practice chickens,” eating the eggs themselves. The chickens lived in a small pen but quickly ate all the grass and vegetation available, so Cathy and Mike opened the pen door and the chickens became free range. After learning how to care for the small flock, Cathy and Mike ordered 25 chicks; they now have 250 chickens who live in two fields on the farm, and they regularly sell eggs at market. (FYI, North Carolina is one of the few states



where it's legal for farmers to re-use egg cartons!! And Cathy is happy to take any you have, even if they didn't originally come from her.) Portable chicken houses help move the flocks from one field to another as crops come and go. (Mike built both houses: the original chicken house, and the 2007 Egg McMansion.) The chickens eat leftover vegetation (and ticks!) and add



nutrients to the soil. When the Animal Welfare Institute used several local farms for an inspector training session, the healthy, well-cared-for chickens of Perry-Winkle Farm impressed the group.

The Perry-Winkle hens live for two years; then they are sent to a local processor in Siler City, and the processed meat (a.k.a. “spent hens”) is sold at the farmers’ market. While it may not be good for chicken sandwiches, it’s useful in stocks, stews, and potpies and has a better flavor than that of chickens grown

solely for meat since the meat tastes better with age. In fact, the idea to sell spent hens came from a customer who missed the flavorful soups his mother used to make and asked if he could buy an old hen. In 2008, Perry-Winkle Farm added some meat chickens to their flocks. They bought 300 chicks—cheaper than buying only females—and about 100 turned out to be hens. The rest, the males, were processed for meat when they were 15 to 16 weeks old.

In addition to building their houses, Mike takes care of other chicken duties: opening the roosts in the morning and closing them at night, putting out food and water, and gathering the eggs at the end of the day (or midday if it's hot). In 2008, he also took care of two pigs, but wasn't sure if the enterprise actually made money: the pigs cost a



lot to buy, to feed, and to process, as well as the time it took to water and feed them. But pigs are good for the land, adding fertilizer and eating noxious weeds.

Another new enterprise for Perry-Winkle Farm is wedding flowers. After customers at market asked about ordering wedding flowers, Cathy realized some people value home-grown flowers over exotic varieties or that certain shade of orange. Some couples begin looking for local flowers a year ahead, so they can see what's

blooming in the month when they plan to marry. Others show up a month ahead and order whatever's in season. Cathy puts together bouquets and corsages or sells plain flowers in buckets (the "economy package"). A couple on a tight budget might get something simple, like bunches of colorful basil with a few zinnias added.

Perry-Winkle Farm grows over a hundred varieties of vegetables and just as many flowers. They have, for example, seven kinds of onion, six kinds of potato, and five or six kinds of tomato. Every summer they employ numerous helpers, another blessing of farming: the farm hands often become like family, gathering together for the annual Perry-Winkle Farm Dinner at Panzanella. Four have been married at the farm. Some have gone on to farm their own land, while some work in other aspects of farming—such as running a CSA program or working at SEEDS in Durham.



Cathy and Mike get a short break around the holidays, when the garlic and iris bulbs have been planted; Mike just has the chickens to tend, and Cathy watches over the seedlings in the greenhouse. There are still chores, but it's nice to have a "slow" season. Soon enough it's the first of February and time to plant the peas, and by summer, workdays will stretch to 16 or 17 hours, all to bring fresh vegetables, newly laid eggs, and bright garden flowers to you.

Look for Cathy and Mike at the Carrboro Farmers' Market and the Fearington Market. Learn more and take a virtual tour at the NC Cooperative Extension Agency's website. (<http://growingsmallfarms.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms-perrywinkle/>)