

# on the move

*Preparing. Finding. Implementing solutions.*

North Carolina A&T State University  
School of Agriculture and  
Environmental Sciences  
Newsletter

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## Watauga farmers win Dudley Award



**Kirby and Nathaniel Maram**

**Some** people are born and bred farmers. Watauga County couple Nathaniel and Kirby Maram, though, meandered into farming on a quest for simple living. They wanted to escape the hustle-bustle-and-traffic of Charlotte where she was an English professor and he owned a holistic health practice.

Their quest paid off in such idyllic fashion that eight years later the couple is celebrated statewide as the 2005 Small Farmers of the Year. The award was bestowed March 23 during The Cooperative Extension Program at N.C. A&T's 19th Annual Small Farms Week.

The Marams own the bustling What Fir! choose-and-cut Christmas tree farm outside Boone. They sell 1,300 to 1,500 trees annually, and they also have a retail shop where they sell wreaths and other Christmas accessories. They also offer a petting-zoo size herd of alpaca and maintain a Web site year-round — innovations that attract a varied customer base. A new greenhouse will soon add ornamental shrubs

to the What Fir! production mix.

In 1998, though, all the couple knew was that they wanted a less-hectic life. Their search took six months and a total of 13,000 miles, but the Marams finally found the Rich Mountain site that they now call home. The seller was giving up his tree farm but said he'd stay and teach them the business for a share of the proceeds.

"We didn't know anything about Christmas trees," Kirby Maram said.

But on the first day that they visited and fell in love with the property, Watauga County Extension Agent David Tucker was visiting too.

"He was the one who cinched it for us," Nathaniel Maram says. "He walked us around and showed us what could be done with the trees, that he and Extension would be there to help us with whatever we needed, and Extension has lived up to that."

From the beginning, the Marams were environmentally conscious. Fertilizer runoff had

destroyed so much natural flora and fauna on the farm's three ponds that they were all filled with clotting algae. The Marams trusted Extension enough to experiment with integrated pest management on their farm to control environmental challenges.

"I'm not preaching environmental correctness," Nathaniel Maram says, "but it just makes sense to be a good steward. This is where I live. This is where I earn my living. We'd like to see it kept nice. I don't think we need to be dumping fertilizers and chemicals in the creek and let it go on down."

In nominating the couple for the award, Watauga County Extension Agent Jim Hamilton says the Marams played a key role in promoting a choose-and-cut industry that brings \$6 million to Watauga County, annually. The Marams return the praise.

"Kirby and I are the face of the Small Farmers of the Year award," Nathaniel Maram says, "but the total county Extension is the body of it. We would never have had any kind of success without their guidance. A good relationship got built because we didn't have a clue what we were doing, so we colored outside the box all the time."

The Marams enthusiastically promote local agro-tourism through tours and demonstrations on their property.

"This life is really a wonderful life, having a small farm," Kirby Maram says. "I would encourage anyone to give it a shot. It's just fun. We love what we're doing."

## Dr. T's Moment

There's a TV commercial that I like. A guy in a gym is on the scale. It reads 249, I think. He gets off the scale, runs a lap around the gym and comes back and weighs again. The scale reads 249. The same weight he started with. He's expecting a big result with little effort.

This is perhaps a cautionary tale for the SAES. In the past five years, we've seen a lot of change. We haven't been just running around the gym, but using all the equipment to get our efforts focused and designed to provide impacts. As a result, our efforts are beginning to pay off.

I've written before about our landing one of three national technology centers from USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

In April, A&T will host USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service's Administrators' conference. We are the first historically black land-grant university to host this conference. Hundreds of Extension, research and teaching administrators from across the country will attend this event.

Also in April, we will host the first national Cooperative Extension Diversity Conference. Again, land-grant Extension administrators and those managers responsible for personnel will attend this event. We're hosting because we've been a pioneer state in diversity within the Extension ranks.

In October, A&T will host the national Small Farms Conference. Small farmers across the country and those who work with them will descend on Greensboro for an opportunity to discuss the latest trends and techniques to keep farmers on the cutting edge. This gives us the opportunity to showcase some of our research and Extension work designed primarily to help small farmers provide alternatives to tobacco.

All these activities are good for us and good for Greensboro.

None of these things happened without a lot of hard work. This is just the beginning for us. Keep watching. As I say, we are on the move.

— Dr. Alton Thompson  
Dean, SAES

## A&T pork project showing promise for farmers



*“Old-timey” pasture-raised pork is bringing newfound profit to Harold and Ann Wright — pictured here with restaurant owner Ed Mitchell — and other small-scale farmers.*

**Pasture-raised pork** is proving to be a promising alternative to tobacco for Harold and Ann Wright of Bladenboro.

Two years ago, the couple was introduced to the concept of upscale pork by the School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences.

Under a program funded by the Golden LEAF Foundation, agriculture researchers showed the couple how to produce a savory, hormone- and antibiotic-free

meat. Meanwhile, Cooperative Extension provided other advice that enabled them to sell to restaurants. So far, the Wrights have been able to gross \$25,000 a year in sales of natural pork from their Happy Land Farm. The product is still no match for the 60 acres of tobacco they once raised, but in time, and with careful management, the Wrights hope to regain the living they once enjoyed.

“My father always raised hogs, and I did too, up until 1995, when the prices dropped so low that we got out of it,” said Harold Wright. “But then we got involved with the Golden LEAF project and come to find out there was a little money to be made in it, so we got back into it, and have never regretted it.”

Much of the venture’s success is owing to new demand from consumers and chefs who are willing to pay extra for a more traditional taste from drug-free animals. Among them: Ed Mitchell owner of Mitchell’s Ribs, Chicken & BBQ of Wilson, one of the Wrights’ regular customers. Mitchell’s traditional hickory and oak-fired technique has earned him the title of “Pitmaster” from the Southern Foodways Alliance, an organization dedicated to preserving and promoting Southern fare. According to Mitchell, the pork the Wrights produce has the traditional flavor and texture of pork that his customers appreciate.

## Small Farms Week Quotes

*“If you don’t have a marketing plan [for a crop], you shouldn’t put it in the ground. A direct-marketing plan is a way to put money in your pocket.”*

Dr. Keith Baldwin, Extension Program Leader, during SFW Kickoff

*“Don’t try to make a product for everybody; that’s a product for nobody. The ‘everybody’ products are all taken.”*

Charles Gupton, Franklin County small farmer, at SFW Kickoff

*“Extension, I’ve been there so much I need to put in a time sheet.”*

Stanley Hughes, 2004 Small Farmer of the Year, SFW Kickoff

*“We need to find a way to raise crops and as much as possible sell to the end user.”*

Ken Dawson, Orange County farmer at SFW Kickoff

*“This is a huge day for us. We aspire to have the best facilities for the best people to do their best work.”*

Chancellor James C. Renick, Reid Greenhouse Ribbon Cutting

*“Show your support for our small farmers. Hug a small farmer today; start right now. Better yet, buy from a small farmer and he or she will be hugging you.”*

Dr. M. Ray McKinnie, associate dean and administrator for Cooperative Extension, at the Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon

*“Small farming got me where I am today: standing before you as commissioner of agriculture.”*

Steve Troxler, N.C. Commissioner of Agriculture

Governor Easley has named Dr. Valerie Jarvis McMillan of the Department of Human Environment and Family Sciences to the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC), an advisory group that works to ensure that “all children have access to high quality early childhood education and development services.” The 25 members of the board serve three-year terms, and McMillan was one of 10 new additions named by Easley. The governor fills 12 of the 25 board slots by appointment.

In naming McMillan to the NCPC board, the governor’s office noted that her qualifications included membership on the N.C. Interagency Coordinating Council and the Policy Council of the Regional Child Care Resource and Referral Services at Guilford Child Development.

Dr. Stacy Branch has joined the Department of Animal Sciences. Branch has a D.V.M. from Tuskegee University and a Ph.D. in Comparative Biomedical Sciences (formerly Veterinary Medical Sciences) with a pharmacology concentration from North Carolina State University. Prior to joining the SAES faculty, Branch was associate professor of toxicology at North Carolina State. Her background also includes private practice and regulatory medicine. Branch’s research interests include the biochemical and molecular mechanisms involved in human and animal birth defects, and reproductive and developmental toxicology.

Alexandra Lindsey Wofford became the manager of the new Reid Greenhouse in February. An Atlanta native, Wofford received her B. S. in Horticulture from A&T in December, but before becoming a full-time student Wofford worked for more than six years in retail and wholesale nursery operations.



Small Farms Week ended on a high note, with the opening of a new, state-of-the-art greenhouse replaces the old SAES

number one agricultural product, with an estimated farm gate value of \$900 million a year.

“This facility will enable SAES to attract students who are seeking hands-on experience in a modern greenhouse setting,” observed Dr. Marihelen Glass, professor of horticulture.

The space is also important for research and Extension. Several research projects are already under way, including two seed trials, a soil remediation study, and plant biotechnology research on ornamental plants and guava. Next summer’s demonstration crops for the University Farm are now taking root in preparation for planting this month.

The space has automated temperature, lighting and shade controls, as well as rolling benches to maximize usable space.

since 1954.

Students taking plant propagation and greenhouse management and other horticulture classes stand to benefit from the modern tools and techniques that the new space affords. The North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services reports that horticulture is the state’s



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## on the *move*/flip side



*Ricky Lewis, a student in Dr. Lizzette Sanchez-Lugo's community nutrition class, shows Anice Hagler, a freshman from Largo, MD, her body mass index assessment at a nutritional educational booth the class set up in the Memorial Student Union recently.*

**Dr. Lizzette Sanchez-Lugo's** community nutrition class presented a special National Nutrition Month activity for A&T faculty, staff and students in the lobby of the Memorial Student Union recently. Students from the upper-level nutrition class offered body mass index (BMI) assessments, and provided recipes, samples of healthy snacks, and advice on body fat and portion size. Students informed participants who scored higher than 25 that they could be at an increased risk of developing diseases associated with overweight and obesity, including such things as hypertension, heart disease and diabetes. (BMI is calculated by dividing weight in pounds by height in inches squared, and multiplying the result by 703.)

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