Pender County couple wins 2008 Gilmer L. and Clara Y. Dudley Small Farmer of the Year Award

Nelson and Mary James

The Small Farmer of the Year Award recognizes the intrepid couple for — among other things — their creative and innovative farm-production methods, including pastured poultry, pesticide-free production and the design of their own mobile chicken tractor, which helps chickens roost and feed, while the land is simultaneously being fertilized by chicken droppings. Extension staff worked with the James on those farm enterprises, as well as with their ventures growing mushrooms on logs, developing a farm Web site and joining farm-market organizations.

“They have worked thoughtfully and creatively to keep their family farm and to be a good example of success to all small farmers,” says James Hartsfield, the Cooperative Extension area agent for Sampson, Duplin and parts of Pender County, who nominated the couple.

Nelson James handles the demanding herd of 90 pigs, some used for breeding, the others sold for meat. Mary James tends the other animals and also grows romaine lettuce, carrots and cabbage transplanted from her greenhouse to the fields. She also grows loofah, mushrooms, eggplant, garlic, watermelon, onions, tomatoes and several other assorted vegetables, herbs and fruits. She has learned by working in Community Supported Agriculture organizations, cooperatives, and with retail customers that include a four-star restaurant in Wilmington and with Whole Foods, how to meet the demands of the marketplace.

“Niche marketing is what it’s all about,” Nelson James says. “That’s what small farming is going to come to: a pick-a-pack here and a pick-a-pack there. You just cannot have one thing and survive.”

Nelson James retired four years ago after 39 years as a carpenter at Camp Lejeune Marine Corps Base; Mary James left the local school system a decade ago after working as a reading tutor and coordinator of parent volunteers. Yet, the couple farmed the entire span of their other jobs, having taught their six children and now their five grandchildren along the way.

During their most profitable years of farming an acre of tobacco the James estimate making $500 to $1,200 a year; In 2007, since working with Extension, the James’ made $13,000 just on niche marketing. Mary James says it’s great to see more fruit from their hard and steady labors. The additional income also has meaning for Nelson James, who has a more earthy perspective.

“It’s a whole lot better than when you had to crop tobacco all day in the rain,” says Nelson James. “With this niche marketing you can at least come out of the rain.”

The sun dips in and out of the clouds above Dogwood Nursery Farm, making an already nippy day feel even cooler. Recent rains have turned parts of the farm into a bog. The guinea hens are running wild, all 90 pigs and hogs have to be fed, and the mobile chicken tractor needs to be rotated again.

And Nelson James couldn’t be happier.

Nelson and Mary James of Pender County are this year’s Small Farmers of the Year, so honored by The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T for enthusiastically delving into niche markets, for their community outreach and for their willingness to try new techniques and approaches on their 20 acres of Dogwood Nursery Farm.

James, 62, a lanky, laid-back third generation farmer, was born to this career. On a brisk February day that has James layered for the cold, from his thermals to his coveralls, he offers this theory of his relationship to the land.

“I say I’m going to change,” says James, who is feeding his pastured Duroc hogs from one of his farm’s four pastures. “I don’t mean to keep doing this every year. But then the spring comes and I’m right back in the field turning ground again. I’m just like that alcoholic; I go right back to it.”

Mary James might have been able to help her husband quit — back, she says, when “I thought I was too cute” to farm. These days, she is too busy tending her gardens, her hens, turkeys, rabbits, the heifer and the bull to try to talk her husband out of anything.

“When a person loves what they do, it shows,” says Mary James who, with her husband, founded N.C. Willing Workers, the cooperative that helps other limited resource farmers navigate sustainable agriculture and marketing practices.
NC Biotech Center supporting SAES research

The North Carolina Biotechnology Center is helping SAES’s efforts to start a fungal biotechnology company in North Carolina with a $100,000 grant for research on truffle cultivation. The project will be led by Dr. Omon Isikhuemhen of SAES, with collaboration from scientists at Mycorrhiza Biotech, a Burlington company that provides soil, truffle and mycorrhiza monitoring services.

The SAES has been the driving force behind starting the shiitake mushroom industry in North Carolina, and is now branching out into other mushroom varieties, including truffles.

Truffles belong to a group of filamentous mycorrhizal fungi that grow on the roots of host trees. When they mature, they produce golf-ball size tubers that are dug up for use in gourmet cuisine. The three-year project will develop and perfect the technology for inoculating pecan and loblolly pine, Isikhuemhen said. These varieties can provide several advantages to growers who are interested in having an alternative source of income while minimizing risk, he explained.

Both pecan and loblolly pine are already commercially important trees in North Carolina and the Southeast. Furthermore, mycorrhiza serve as natural biofertilizers, scavenging nutrients from a wide zone, extending the root zone of the host plant and improving its value and vigor. Truffles could also aid the environment by providing an incentive for landowners to plant and maintain trees.

Cooperative Extension premiers new game plan for serving citizens of North Carolina

Dr. M. Ray McKinnie, chief administrator for The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T, summed up an overhaul of the organization’s long-range plan, an extensive new set of marketing tools and a streamlined reporting system by observing that the only missing ingredients are now the “heat, energy and synergy needed to move forward.”

McKinnie’s wrap up at three regional Extension meetings put the finishing touches on the unveiling of a new framework for educational program development that will be supported by updated organizational marketing. A new reporting system will ensure that programming impacts are in line with organizational goals, and organized for at-a-glance access by stakeholders as well as one-stop-shopping for Extension specialists, agents and paraprofessionals compiling the impacts of their work.

The new marketing tools, long-range plan goals and reporting system are the results of years of work by a number of task forces, departments and individuals. Guidance and input from advisory groups and partner agencies also played a major role in N.C. Cooperative Extension’s “Roadmap for Change.”

Extension’s state new long-range plan goals are:

1. Environmental Stewardship and Natural Resources Management
2. Sustainable, Profitable and Safe Plant, Animal and Food Systems
3. Youth and Adults Achieve Educational Success
4. Healthy Weight and Chronic Disease Prevention
5. Life Skills and Parenting
6. Energy Conservation and Alternatives
7. Community, Leader and Volunteer Development
8. Emergency and Disaster Preparedness
9. Guidance for county Extension centers to follow in using the new marketing materials as well as the materials themselves are now available online (www.cals.ncsu.edu/agcomm/resources).

The new electronic reporting system that will replace and integrate current impact collection systems with a “one-stop portal” was launched the day after it was introduced at the third and final regional Extension conference.

The University Farm

A&T’s largest classroom, the 490-acre University farm, now has an all-new and completely befitting Web presence at http://www.ag.ncat.edu/farm/index.html. The farm facilities listing undoubtedly has some surprises, even for those who haven’t ventured out McConnell Road in two or three years. The facilities lineup now includes:

- A Beef Cattle Unit that mirrors the small-scale grass-fed beef cattle operation that is typical in North Carolina.
- A Dairy Research Unit (built in 2008), that is set up to demonstrate the pasture-based system of dairy farming — a popular solution for small-scale dairy farmers in North Carolina who are seeking to lower their overhead.
- An Equine Unit that makes the SAES a player in North Carolina’s $700 million horse industries.
- A Horticulture Unit that serves as a laboratory for students learning about horticulture, natural resources conservation, soil science, biological engineering, landscape architecture.
- A Poultry Research Unit (constructed in 2004) where research into alternatives to antibiotics, breed improvement, production issues and poultry pathogens is now under way.
- A Small Ruminant Research Unit, tailored to the needs of students and North Carolina’s fastest growing livestock industry: meat goat production.
- A Swine Research Unit with infrastructure improvements that have made it possible for the unit to now accommodate more than 200 sows.
- Eight “Discover Agriculture!” stations, where elementary school children on educational tours of the farm get an introduction to environmental education, nutrition and insects, as well as plants, seeds and insects.
Dr. Velma Speight-Buford, chair of the University’s board of trustees, and Dr. Alton Thompson, dean of A&T’s School of Agriculture and Environmental Science, at the 2007 SAES Student Awards Banquet.