Dudley Award lands happily at Happy Land Farms

Harold Wright could have dug ditches for a living and Ann Wright would have been down in the trenches with him if that’s what it took.

As it turned out though, the Bladen County couple made a career of farming and has done so well they have won recognition as the 2006 Gilmer L. and Clara Y. Dudley Small Farmers of the Year in North Carolina. Their aptly named Happy Land Farms is a thriving 600-acre spread comprising 500 pasture-raised hogs, pasture-raised chickens and turkeys, and 500 acres of soybeans and corn. The Cooperative Extension Program at N.C. A&T, which issues the Small Farmer of the Year Award, supports the Wrights in many of their farm endeavors, including their first-time venture this year in planting strawberries on black plastic and drip irrigation. The Wrights also own a fleet of flat-bed trucks and operate a day care center.

All five of their adult children work in the family businesses, which are operated from the family home. Daughters Candice and Brenda Wright and Edrissa Wright Williams help their mother with management of Happy Land Farms, work in the family Big Bird Day Care, or work as dispatchers in the trucking business. Sons Russell and Michael Wright help farm and drive the trucks.

Even though Ann Wright administers the businesses with a precision and organization that could withstand a military inspection, the family’s manner is anything but rigid. Entering their home and business, is to encounter immaculate comfort, ease, hospitality and — just as soon as Harold Wright walks through the door — lots of humor.

“I’ve always wanted a family business,” Harold Wright says. “It makes you proud. It also takes some of the responsibility off of me. When we decide to go somewhere, we don’t have to worry about whether things are being done.”

On a day when both sons are away trucking and Harold Wright can’t leave the farm, in a seamless shift of duty, daughter Brenda Wright takes over — easing behind the wheel of a pickup to drive eight hogs to a slaughterhouse in Kingstree, S.C.

“They’re all like that,” says Bladen-Robeson Farm Management Agent Nelson Brownlee, who nominated the Wrights for the award. “Each one of them can fill in for the other.”

The family unity is a legacy fulfilled for Harold Wright, whose father and grandfather farmed on the same land his sons now tend. Although many of his peers left Bladen County for big cities, Wright remained and at 17 was farming full time.

“I saw the opportunity right here in North Carolina to make a living, so that’s where I stayed,” says Wright, 55.

When they met in 1970, Ann Wright was a teacher’s assistant who had no intention of marrying a farmer, but says: “I fell in love with the person so it didn’t matter what he was doing. He could have been digging a ditch.”

Today, Harold and Ann Wright are ambassadors for family farms and regularly travel — most recently to Washington — to lobby for agricultural funding. They are just as passionate about farming, though, back in their Bladenboro enclave. Whether it’s Harold Wright lamenting how the United States imports produce treated with pesticides that are banned on American farms; or whether Ann Wright explains that she once gave away meat rather than sell it, because the meat-packing company (which she no longer uses) didn’t meet the “vacuum sealed” guarantee they advertised — the Wrights are strict about standards and their reputation.

Editor’s Note: Dr. Thompson didn’t mention it, but the University has named him the Administrator of the Year.
Many farmers in Southeast Asia who are living on less than a dollar a day could improve their living standards, under a new grant being administered by a researcher in the Agricultural Research Program (ARP).

Dr. Manuel Reyes is the recipient of a $1.2 million grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for a vegetable-agroforestry project in Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Reyes, a biological engineer, is leading an international team of researchers from universities in the United States, Southeast Asia, and Australia who will introduce sustainable vegetable production to small-scale farmers in the three countries. Other participants are from the World Agroforestry Center headquartered in Kenya, the World Vegetable Center based in Taiwan, and Mars Incorporated, a United States candy and food company. The project will continue through September 2009.

Many of the farmers who stand to benefit are desperately poor, and are farming on small hillside patches that are susceptible to erosion, Reyes said. The team will present a menu of sustainable options to farmers, including agroforestry — which is the practice of encouraging tree varieties that prevent soil degradation while also producing products for home consumption or sale. Other technologies farmers can select from include conservation tillage (including no-till or minimal till), drip irrigation; and the introduction of native vegetable varieties. The development of markets will also be a critical component of the project, Reyes said.

The intent is to help farmers become more self-sufficient and also give them alternatives to the “chemical treadmill” that accompanies many commercial vegetable varieties, he said. Although markets exist for the commercial varieties, they also tend to be dependent on chemical inputs, which cause harm to health and ecosystems. However, it remains to be seen if market can be developed for such products, or if sustainable techniques will be accepted.

Reyes said the project would not set out to address environmental issues unless it also addressed underlying cultural, gender, economic and social aspects of the problem. As a result, he recruited several social scientists to the project team, who will be critical to its success, he said.

“Many of the values that I hold dear, I know came about by working on that small farm with my father, my brother, my uncles and cousins.”

Jim Deal, Chairman of the Watauga County Board of Commissioners, at the Small Farms Week Kickoff in Boone.

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Blake Brown, N.C. State University associate professor of agriculture and resource economics, at the Small Farms Week Kickoff.

“Every week during the season on our farm, I have people asking if I can help them find some land. The potential out there to increase small farming in North Carolina is just tremendous. People want to do it.”

Kirk Maram, 2003 Small Farmer of the Year, at the Small Farms Week Kickoff.

“We feel so strongly about our commitment to small farmers that we use as one of our themes, ‘ensuring the viability of small-scale agriculture.’ Since the beginning days of the University this has been our work. Over 100 years later, things have not changed. We are committed to helping this state’s small farmers.”

Donald McDowell, Associate Dean for Academic Programs, School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences at A&T, Small Farmers Appreciation Day Luncheon.

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on the move

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Mark Your Calendar

• SAES Student Awards Banquet: April 28
• Research Apprentice Program (RAP): June 18–30 and July 9–21

Dr. Allen Cannedy, a veterinarian and professor at N.C. State University, prepares to demonstrate proper injection techniques for goats during the 2006 Small Farms Week Goat and Cattle Field Day at the University Farm.

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