



# Growing organic farms in Hoke County

Raft Swamp Farm is developing an incubator program to help organic farmers get started

*Text by Sidney Cruze  
Photos by Don McKenzie*

**A**cross the country, organics is the fastest growing segment of agriculture. In North Carolina, retailers' demand is outrunning production, and organic produce and dairy sales are the fastest growing sectors of our state's retail food industry. According to N.C. State University's Center for Environmental Farming Systems, North Carolina imports 90 percent of its organic food, even though much of it can be grown here. Fortunately for farmers, citizens are committed to buying local produce when it is available.

In the greater Fayetteville area alone, at least five local farmers' markets, four natural food stores and almost 10 restaurants are interested in buying organic produce grown on nearby farms. As more people move here, organic farming can become a way to make a good living by selling to them.

Now, anyone who wants to explore organic farming's opportunity before investing in land can find all they need to get started at Raft Swamp Farm in Hoke County. They can lease one of eight 3-acre incubator farms for less than \$200 a month. Or they can lease half a tract if they want to start smaller.

## **The incubator model**

This spring the fields at Raft Swamp Farm were blanketed by cover crops: crimson clover, browntop millet and cereal rye rippled in the breeze. By late summer, farm owners Jackie and Louie Hough harvest golden squash, French tarragon and heirloom sweet potatoes.

Once a collection of high-producing cotton fields, Raft Swamp comprises 190 acres sitting in the heart of Hoke County farm country. When the Houghs bought it in June 2005, it was nothing but dirt and stubble. Yet they knew it had potential. Located halfway between Fayetteville and Raeford, the farm is well situated to meet the area's growing demand for local organic produce.

The farm is named for Raft Swamp Creek, which runs a mile down its western border. At its core sits 24 acres that

anchor a not-for-profit organic farm incubator program where farmers can learn the art and craft of sustainable farming. The Houghs call this the Raft, which stands for Restoring Agriculture, Family and Tradition.

The Houghs plan to grow organic herbs and vegetables here. "And we want to create an opportunity for others to learn about sustainable farming," Jackie says. "We want to educate people on how to live in harmony with the environment and preserve North Carolina's agricultural traditions."

A former sergeant major in the Army's Special Forces, Louie spent his first 19 years on a 40-acre farm in Indiana. Jackie grew up in a small Wisconsin farm town, then joined the Army Nurse Corps before taking her job as a neonatal intensive care nurse. Both were looking for a return to their rural roots.

After purchasing Raft Swamp Farm, they set aside 40 acres for themselves, then talked to Tony Kleese at the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association about a wise use for the remaining land. When Kleese described an organic farm incubator program at The Intervale in Burlington, Vermont, they knew they wanted to create a similar model on their farm.

Much like the business incubator model formed by chambers of commerce and county governments, The Intervale's Farms Program helps organic farmers get started by giving them access to land, equipment and technical expertise. Thirteen farms now operate at The Intervale, where they provide organic produce for the Burlington community. Six farmers and more than 50 interns have graduated from the program. Many of them now own their own land and earn their livelihood by selling produce to Vermont citizens.

At Raft Swamp Farm, once growers commit to a lease, they have access to all the Houghs' equipment and facilities. Farmers will be responsible for buying their own seeds, and each incubator farm will have a small storage shed. Plants can be started in one of two greenhouses, while a lath house will give them space to harden off before they get planted. The Houghs have a wind-powered pump that will provide water for irrigation, plus a tractor, a cultivator and a disc.

“We still need a grain drill,” Jackie says. “Our goal is have all the equipment the farmers need right here on the farm.”

### **Hands-on training, home-grown skills**

So far, they have leased one tract to Philip McMillan, a Southern Pines man who works full-time and farms on the side. A native North Carolinian, his is the first generation in the family not to grow up on a farm. After moving back home from Atlanta and seeing the Houghs newsletter, he joined them in May.

“I’ve always wanted to farm, but never had the chance to acquire the skills,” he says. “The Houghs’ incubator program is just what I’m looking for.”

McMillan works most Saturdays and two evenings a week at the farm, where this summer he harvested cantaloupe, tomatoes, field peas and watermelon. He spends the time watering, weeding and cultivating the soil.

“Building the soil is the key to organic farming,” Jackie says. “It’s a living organism that supports the plants you grow.”

Every farmer knows productive land and good equipment are essential to success, yet access to the Houghs’ knowledge of organic farming may be Raft Swamp Farm’s biggest asset. After bringing their fields back to life, Jackie and Louie really know the land. They both will offer hands-on training to their farmers, including help with business plans and marketing. Together they are well connected with organic growers across the state, so if they can’t answer growers’ questions, they will find someone who can.

The Houghs plan has always been to protect the land at Raft Swamp Farm while involving the whole community. Folks interested in organics can gain gardening skills by volunteering on the farm, and the Houghs have relied on people like Shawn Hawkins—someone who likes working the land with his hands—for help with the heaviest labor. An Army major, Hawkins plans to take up organic farming when he retires. “Louie and I spend a lot of time talking about crops and how to get the most out of the land organically,” he says. “It’s like a free class in agriculture. I’m trying to learn as much from him as I can.”

The local Touchstone Energy cooperative, Lumbee River Electric Membership Corporation (LREMC), is partnering with Jackie and Louie as well. The fast pace of development in Hoke County is forcing LREMC to cut numerous new rights of way for power lines. Once LREMC cuts and shreds the trees, the cooperative must find some way to dispose of the debris. The Houghs agreed to use any material that hasn’t been sprayed with defoliant; they can add it to their compost or use it as mulch on paths throughout the farm.

“Disposing tree debris is a real issue,” says Walter White, LREMC vice president of customer service and community relations. “We don’t want to put it in the landfill, and we don’t want to leave it there. To have them take it works out well for us. And I think what they’re doing is wonderful.”

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*When Jackie and Louie Hough bought the farm in June 2005, it was nothing but dirt and stubble. Now it is a series of organic gardens brimming with crimson clover, lavender, browntop millet, golden squash, French Tarragon and heirloom sweet potatoes, among other crops.*


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*Every farmer knows productive land and good equipment are essential to success. Those who join Raft Swamp Farm also will have the benefit of the Houghs' knowledge of organic farming. Farmers will be responsible for buying their own seeds, and each incubator farm will have a small storage shed. Plants can be started in one of two greenhouses, while a lath house will give them space to harden off before they get planted. The Houghs have a wind-powered pump that will provide water for irrigation, plus a tractor, a cultivator, a disc and eventually a grain drill.*

The first year at Raft Swamp was busy for the Houghs; in addition to building the soil throughout the farm, they planted an herb garden, started a peach orchard, and established hives for beekeeping. Already they are adding blueberries, muscadines, strawberries and blackberries and planning for a small heritage breed livestock operation. Soon more than four miles of trails will meander along the farm's perimeter, making it an ideal spot for hiking and bird watching.

"We want to draw people into the farm and reconnect them with where their food comes from," Jackie says. "We want to connect them with the farms that sustain them." 

*Sidney Cruze is a Carolina Country contributor who works in Durham.*

### **Short course in organic farming**

To get more information about Raft Swamp Farm and the Houghs' farm incubator program, go to [www.raftswampfarms.org](http://www.raftswampfarms.org) or call (910) 977-0950.

This October, the Houghs will begin teaching an organic farming class called "Organic Growing: Raising a Sustainable, Healthy Harvest." The evening course includes two on-farm field days and is scheduled for Mondays in Southern Pines and Thursdays in Fayetteville. Go to the Web site for times, dates and locations.