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Publisher
Mandy Hathcock

Managing Editor
Heather Ruppe

Editorial
Vicki Brown

Office Manager
Susan Hiott

Production
Amanda Mosley

Advertising
Kami Merritt
Tiffany Thigpen

Classifieds & Legals
Amanda Mosley



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LONGTIME FARMER SAID HIS LOVE FOR HIS LAND NEVER STOPS

By HEATHER RUPPE

Phillip Rizer stands in the middle of a large green field, takes in a deep breath and smiles. For Rizer, he is standing in his favorite vacation spot, which just so happens to be the same place where he toils day after day farming produce and raising hogs.

Rizer and his brother, Marion, both share ownership of Rizer's Pork and Produce. The brothers have owned the family farm since taking it over in 1975 from their

dad, I.N. Rizer, who started the farm in 1951. Marion came back to the family from Clemson, and Phillip joined his brother's efforts in the family farming business in 1987, after he also graduated from Clemson University and then ran a business before returning to the farm.

"I loved the land. I had to come back to the farm," said Phillip.

Their longtime farming empire now includes several businesses and a restaurant. It's all broken down into two operations:



Photo By VICTORIA RIZER
LOVING WHAT YOU DO. Longtime Colleton County farmer and business owner Phillip Rizer said he loves the land and the farming that he does, making each day of work feel like a vacation.

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a farm with row crops, corn, small grains and soybeans and the restaurant, Rizer's Pork and Produce. Marion manages the farm and Phillip oversees the farm-to-table restaurant.

"Sometimes we plant peanuts, depending on the price of everything," said Phillip. "At the restaurant, we raise hogs and process our animals and sell the meat from the store."

In the summer, the brothers also grow green and speckled butterbeans, a variety of peas, and sweet corn. In the fall, they grow pumpkins, cabbage, collards and broccoli.

All of their produce, no matter the season, is sold fresh in their restaurant/retail space. The restaurant has been open for 21 years. Phillip said it is successful because of the quality of the vegetables and meat they sell. "We're not opening a can of beans and putting it on a buffet," he said. "Everything we serve in the restaurant is fresh from our farm and from our animals. And people can buy directly from retail, too. We make our own sausage, and we have several varieties of that. We cook anything dealing with pork, from crackling to pork chops to ribs and hams."

The farm-to-table movement has benefitted the Rizers' farming business, helping to push the retail side and its wholesale buyers into new markets. The actual farm surrounds the restaurant, so patrons can see the

actual farm-to-table movement in process. "We've had very high success with the fresh veggies, being served from the restaurant. The farm to table movement has been good for us," he said.

Together, the brothers also manage their catering business, which serves clients from across the entire Lowcountry, especially Summerville, Charleston, Beaufort and Walterboro.

When asked what his favorite thing is about farming, Phillip's answer was quick.

"The freedom that I enjoy," he said. "When you're in the country, you have fresh air. It's a great place to raise your children, and it's freedom being who you are."

The father of three has been married to his wife, Janet, for 36 years. She retired this year from the Colleton County School District. "It's a good life, that we have. It really is," he said. "Farming and living like this have given us so much, like enjoying our family and friends. It's a whole different mindset. It's a good life in the country."

Now at 60 years old, Phillip said he cannot imagine not farming.

"I'll continue forward until the grave," he said, with a laugh. "When you work all your life, you just can't stop. It's just in us — we work. It's what we do. And we enjoy our work. Working, for us, is kind of like a vacation for us."





FAITH, FAMILY, AND FARMING

By HEATHER RUPPE

Jerry Breland has been a man in transition for more than a decade, taking his family's large and rural farm in Ruffin from a once massive tobacco operation to a statewide power house for fruits and vegetables — and he has done it all while seeking guidance on his knees.

"My faith means more to me than this farm. We need to count on Jesus first, and then everything else falls in line," he said. Breland said the plan for his family's legacy and farm, which he co-owns with his brother, Richard, all comes from guidance he gets from getting on his knees and praying to God. "Farming is tough ... the high stress, the mental exhaustion, the physical work. But the way I react to things is a lot different, because of my faith. I trust God and you have to grow through your trials. You develop endurance."

Jerry and his brother, Richard, inherited the farm from their father. Jerry is preparing to give his equal

portion of the farm to his two sons, Jeremy and Cameron: this means that the farm will have been passed down through five generations.

"Daddy and my mother started farming in 1960," he said.

Jerry and Richard took over management of the farm when they both graduated college. The two then expanded it, adding hogs to the mix of what was being done. Then, they got out of the hog business and began to focus on having a "full-fledged family farm," said Jerry. They added strawberries, creating a large "You Pick, We Pick" operation that is still thriving.

The berries are sold retail from their headquarters in Ruffin and from their roadside retail market in Walterboro. Other vegetables are also sold, all of which are grown locally by the Breland family. These include peanuts, cabbage, watermelons and other crops.

Currently, the Breland Farm has about 1,250 acres of planted cotton; 250 acres of cabbage; about 500 acres of planted watermelons; and



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800 acres of peanuts. "It's taking the products directly from the farm, straight to the consumer," said Jerry.

Jerry no longer farms tobacco, a personal decision that he and his wife made from their faith. "Jesus has given us the liberty of following our own consciences, and that's what we have done," he said. "It's no judgement on anyone else. We just did what we felt was right for us, and God has supplied us with crops to take tobacco's place."

Even amid the new crops being planted and sold, Jerry has plans to branch out even further. The Breland brothers plan to begin selling home-made baked goods and to also begin offering more fresh vegetable services, such as blanching beans. "There is

definitely room for growth, and we are going to do it," he said.

The Breland farm has lived through many transitions, and thrived through many seasons, changing crops and the approach in selling their goods. In addition to supplying their crops directly from the farm, the Breland Farm also sells all of their produce via wholesale, to the larger markets in Columbia. This is done by both Richard and Jerry; Jerry's two sons; Jerry's wife, Cindy; and Richard and Jerry's mother, Becky, who is still involved in the decision-making at the farm.

"We all work together, as a family that farms together. But we each have our specialties and strengths."




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GARDEN AND GATHER AT DRAGONFLY CREEK

By VICKI BROWN

Dragonfly Creek is a new homestead and fresh vegetable market garden in Walterboro, but this market is unusual in that it not only produces herbs and veggies, but owners Miranda Saunders and Ryan O'Reilly will also teach you gardening techniques.

The owners aim to cultivate community through education, cultural events and skill sharing with workshops, farm tours and consultations.

"We want to host educational workshops, farm tours, and events for the local community," said Saunders. "We cultivate annual and perennial plants, including herbs, vegetables, native plants, pollinator plants, and trees. Eventually, we also plan to open a portion of the farm as a place

where people can stop in to buy plants and farm products and have access to educational materials. For now, we can offer private tours by appointment."

Saunders said their vision is to create a diversified and ecologically regenerative farm, as a model for "sustainable small-scale agriculture," she said.

According to Saunders, the farm uses permaculture-style farming practices to prioritize soil health and biodiversity, such as cultivating crops in permanent beds, reducing tillage, mulching, interplanting annuals and perennials, and establishing native and pollinator-friendly plantings.

They use all-natural fertilizers and soil amendments and do not use any pesticides or herbicides.

Currently, Dragonfly Creek is growing sage, thyme, rosemary,



Photo Courtesy of Dragonfly Creek Farm
SHOWING OFF. Dragonfly Creek Farm owner Ryan O'Reilly proudly shows off a small portion his harvest from the farm.



Courtesy of Dragonfly Creek Farm
FARMING TOGETHER. Ryan O'Reilly and Miranda Saunders own a farm in Colleton County. The two are also teaching farming techniques to anyone willing to learn.

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Besides all of the medicinal and culinary herbs, flowers and veggies, they are also inoculating logs for outdoor edible mushroom cultivation, and raising chickens for egg production. Next year they hope to add honeybee hives and rabbit colonies.

Why do Saunders and O'Reilly do all of this?

"I love the natural beauty of our farm and the joy and peace that I feel when I am working outdoors, tending the soil, and caring for plants and other creatures," said Saunders. "It is such a privilege to have access to land, and I love all of the responsibilities and rewards that come along with land stewardship."

But O'Reilly and Saunders are also concerned about the state of farms across the United States. According to Saunders, the U.S. food system is gravely ill and in danger of collapse. Less than one percent of our country's population works in farming and the average age of farmers is 57 years old. Small family farms are quickly disappearing as huge industrial farms that are a danger to the environment absorb much of the nation's farmland.

"I believe that a return to small-scale regenerative farming is the most viable solution for some of the greatest challenges

facing our society. All of our ancestors had valuable knowledge about growing, foraging, and preserving food that is necessary for a resilient and healthy lifestyle," said Saunders.

Following those beliefs, O'Reilly and Saunders are available for consultations to help locals produce their own gardens. For a fee, they will teach you techniques and even come to your future garden space, or personal flower or vegetable garden and offer advice and assistance. They even offer weekly or biweekly garden maintenance to help you enjoy the beauty and benefits your garden has to offer. "You can hire me to plant, weed, trellis, amend soils, prune, and harvest as necessary and leave your harvest bundle on your doorstep," Saunders said.

She is also available for an instructional workshop where she teaches how to make herbal preparations. "I will provide the materials and an engaging, hands-on learning experience for you or a small group of up to 6 participants. You will get to keep your creations and kindle a passion for connecting with herbal allies," she added.

Workshop options include making tinctures, oil infusions, salves and moisturizers, herbal smoke bundles, herbal vinegars, tea blends, smoking blends, or charms. Pricing varies depending on the topic and group size.

Dragonfly Creek Farm sells produce at the Colleton Farmers' Market on Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., and at the Root and Bloom Market in Bluffton on the third Sunday of each month from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. You can email them for more information at gardenandgather.dfc@gmail.com, or find them on Facebook.




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GOAT AND DAIRY FARM

By VICKI BROWN

Kim Balkom-Fox owns Lone Fox Farm located in Cottageville. But it's not your typical farm - it's a goat and dairy farm known for lotions and soaps.

Fox was raised in Florida and lived there until 2000.

"My parents were not farmers; however, my grandparents were before I was born, and I think it just skipped a generation because I was always dragging home an animal as a kid and was obsessed with horses and farms," said Fox. "I have 4 children who all grew up farming, they live locally and help when needed here. We now are raising 4 different breeds of dairy goats and show throughout the southeast," she added.

Her farm started with dairy goats in 1995. Fox's oldest son was lactose intolerant, and his formula was not agreeing

with him due to allergies to just about everything. The doctor suggested goat's milk. "We lived in a very rural area in Florida and already had a simple farm going. A neighbor was raising Nubian dairy goats so I was able to get milk for my son," said Fox. "I fell in love with that breed and ended up trading a pig for 2 female Nubians that gave milk. After that, I always had a couple of Nubians which provided milk and cheese for our family."

In 2009 Fox's granddaughter was born with severe allergies. She could not use any soaps on the market, so Fox started to research the soap making technique using goat milk. "I had already heard about the benefits of goat's milk with food allergies when I saw an episode on Martha Stewart about goat milk soap, and so I made some for my granddaughter to try. Her skin healed in a few days;



PHOTO by Vicki Brown
First day out. Just like children, the kids are outside to play for the first time and running everywhere. Fox and her daughters work hard to catch the little ones and take to the pen. These kids are just days old.



PHOTO by Vicki Brown
Great guard dogs. Fox has three Great Pyrenees that guard the herd from pests, rodents, coyotes, and intruders.



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it was amazing,” said Fox. She added a few more goats to the herd and started making it for some family that had skin conditions and suddenly, she was being asked to make more and more. At that time, she only made unscented, and could barely keep up with a supply demand along with working full time. When the farmers market opened up, Fox was asked to bring some to sell there. She also sells at the Little Cottage Gift Shop in Cottageville. She has expanded her soap selections to include scents and lotions.

The farm raises registered Nubians, Lamancha, Toggenburg and Experimental (recorded grade but purebred) dairy goats. They have about 35 does and seven bucks, as well as a supply of frozen semen that they use for artificial insemination. We hand breed, meaning the bucks are brought to the does to ensure conception and due dates. The breeding season starts in August, which puts the first kids born in January. Those kids are immediately separated from their moms and bottle fed.

“We have to do this to keep the goats from turning wild. They are domesticated and easy to handle when they are bottle fed their mother’s milk,” said Fox. She has a milking machine to make it easy to collect milk. Babies are sold to experienced homes as bottle fed babies, or weaned if desired. Some of the goats are purchased for meat. “I don’t do this, but there is an ethnic market for male goats after they are weaned,” said Fox.

“Our kidding season ends in April because we do not want kids born during the intense heat of summer,” she said. Also, show season begins in late April so they don’t want babies born during that time.

But the different breeds require a lot of maintenance with the climate in the south. Kidding season brings added stress with worry about predators, and things that can go wrong. Fox has three white Great Pyrenees who protect the goats’ kids and livestock, including piglets, from coyotes. The dogs are almost as big as the goats, and some of the males can weigh as much as 300 pounds. “We have a lack of livestock veterinarians here, so you’re pretty much on your own when things go wrong,” said Fox. “I get called by other local goat owners for advice and assistance frequently because we are so lacking in that area.”

According to Fox, showing goats is much more work than just raising them for fun or milk and cheese production. To

compete, goats must be registered with the American Dairy Goat Association and that means they cost more. The maintenance is much more involved as well. Most show breeders do not let the babies nurse off their moms. This is to protect the udder from damage. The goats are judged on both conformation as well as udder production and structure so they must be fed a diet to maximize milk production and body condition. “This can become very expensive as the hay that we need to increase milk production is not grown locally, and must be transported in,” said Fox. “They require disease testing yearly and cannot have horns; those must be removed. The benefit to being successful in showing is that you expand your sale clientele as your kids will now be in demand, and priced accordingly. I personally look at it as a way to promote my herd in other states and make the Lone Fox Farm name known” she added.

In Fox’s home is a hallway dedicated to all of the awards and ribbons won for her goats. “We have had five Grand Champion, three Reserve Champion and two Best in Show wins for granddaughter Cayleigh’s Lamancha. There has been one Grand Champion win for granddaughter Brianna’s Experimental doe, and ten Grand Champion, eight Reserve Champion, three Best of Show and two Best of breed (buck) wins for Nubians.

“Spring show wins are ribbons only, the fall shows which are usually done at fairs have premium money awards as well. This helps with feed and hay during the year,” said Fox.

Fox isn’t content to just keep things going as they are. She plans to continue to be successful in breeding the best quality of goat possible, and to keep producing soap and lotion products, as well as educate whoever wants to learn about farming. She also has a breeding pair of KuneKune pigs that are about to have piglets and several dozen chickens that produce a lot of eggs.

For anyone wanting to own and show goats, Fox has advice. “Start small and find a mentor who can help you during your journey,” she said. “A dairy goat can be so productive in many ways for a small homestead, and they come in many sizes and breeds. It’s very satisfying to produce your own milk, cheese and butter naturally,” Fox said.



PHOTO courtesy of Ashleigh Jacques
 Family pride. Fox’s family shows off their multiple ribbons won for their outstanding goats. Left to right is Cayleigh Jacques, Kim Balcum-Fox, Ashleigh Jacques (mother of Cayleigh and Brianna), and Brianna Jacques.

THE MCMILLAN FARM IS A THRIVING BUSINESS

By VICKI BROWN

Johnny McMillan has farming in his blood. Raised in Lodge, he works on farm land that has been in his family since 1948. His parents bought 11 acres, and on that land, his mother became the best-known hog farmer in the southeast. Eventually she stopped the business when her advanced age made it too difficult.

McMillan tried being a teacher in Colleton County for a while after attending USC, but it wasn't meant to be. He knew from his childhood that he didn't care for raising hogs, but he loved the land.

Now, on approximately 3,000 acres on Lodge Highway, McMillan plants feed corn from March 15 through April 15, and an intricate and delicate process begins.

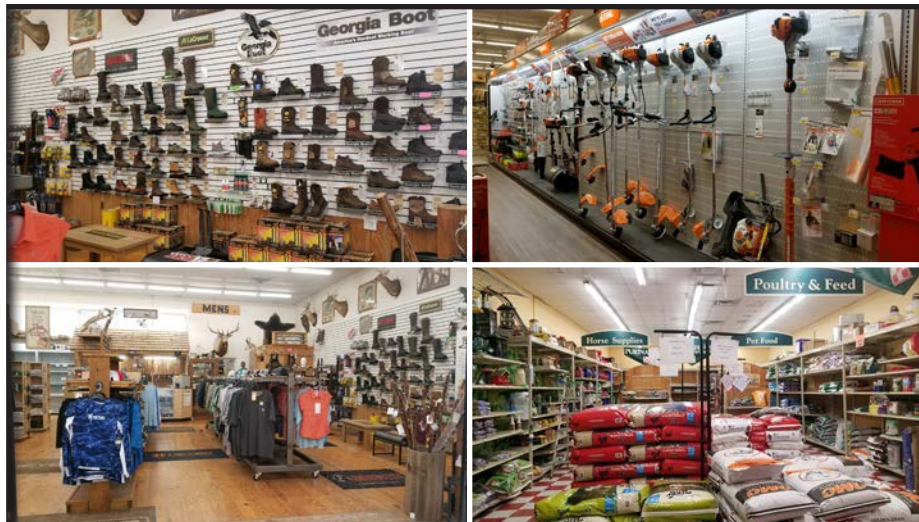
Around April 20 through May is when he drops cotton and peanut seed. Both have to be planted at the same time for a good harvest. Meanwhile, he is carefully taking stock of how the crops are progressing and judging whether or not they need fertilizer or water. The corn usually is ready in the middle of August, all depending on how dry and hot the weather has been. The feed corn is harvested and placed in bins. Next, the corn goes into the combine. The combine shells the corn and the kernels are placed on racks, dried in a large dryer, and



placed in bins for traveling. He owns his own semi, so he drives 100 miles to deliver the dried corn to another location where it is placed in grain bins, stored and later bagged for chicken feed. McMillan's bins can hold 100,000 bushels of grain. "I started with just two, and as the years have gone by, I've added more," he said.

From September to October, he harvests cotton and peanuts. In between, he plants random vegetables, lets some land rest, and uses the time for prescribed burning. We like to control burn the fields. It leaves nutrients and moist soil, and we plant right in there.

"Farming is not a job for lazy people," said McMillan. "Working 10-12-hour days are the norm, and that is with help from family. There have been times that we have had to work all night long."



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Another thing people don't know about farming is the expense. "The cost of seeds is going up just like everything else," said McMillan. "One bag of seed can cost around \$25,000 easily, and farm insurance in case there is bad weather or a disastrous harvest can cost over a hundred thousand dollars."

On a portion of his land he has a huge metal building with an enormous assortment of iron and metal objects, parts, and machinery laying around and stacked everywhere. A massive bush hog nearby waiting for an opportunity to ready the fields, and combines and pieces of combines as well as old and newer tractors sit outside the building. An old red sprayer needing work for a cracked boom is parked at the same location. This is where McMillan spends some of his time trying to work on farm equipment.

McMillan walks through his land pointing out equipment that he keeps on hand. "I don't throw away anything. I have learned to fix most farm equipment myself, and if a tractor or combine breaks down, I use it for parts for a newer one. I appreciate the old machinery....it's cheaper, and I know I can probably fix it," he said. So, he buys some equipment from auction houses and some he leases from companies or other farms. "It's funny to see the same tractor bought and sold over and over and end back up at the auction house. You get the idea that it isn't too reliable," he said.

Across one field he has a sprayer. The sprayer has a 90-100 foot boom that extends outward from the sides and sprays chemical or water on the growing plants. McMillan's son Ben will drive the huge sprayer tractor and "blow" or spray a 20 acre field in 15 to 20 minutes. It holds 800 gallons of water and runs

13 miles per hour. A new sprayer runs \$250,000 to \$350,000, so leasing or purchasing used equipment saves a lot of money.

But his pride and joy sits near the entrance to his repair/equipment parking lot...a newer computerized tractor with tinted windows, a colored monitor, music, heat and AC, and a plush seat with an accompanying pull down passenger seat. It's the Cadillac of tractors. "The day doesn't seem quite as long in one of these," laughed McMillan.

In spite of the hard work, expense, competition from larger conglomerates, unpredictable weather, and temperamental equipment, Johnny McMillan loves what he does, and he is happy his son, Ben, wants to continue the legacy started 73 years ago.



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