



## The *New* American Farmer

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### Alex and Betsy Hitt, Peregrine Farm

Graham, North Carolina

#### Summary of Operation

- *Intensive vegetable production on about five acres of 26-acre farm*
- *1/4-acre highbush blueberries*
- *Sales to local farmers market, some restaurants and stores*

#### Problem Addressed

*Maximizing resources.* When Alex and Betsy Hitt purchased a small farm near Chapel Hill, N.C., they wanted to develop a small farm that relied on the two of them, primarily, for labor in a balanced system that both earned a profit and benefited the environment.

“Our original goals,” Alex says, “were to make a living on this piece of ground while taking the best care of it that we could.”

#### Background

Peregrine Farm is about 16 miles west of the university town of Chapel Hill. When they first bought the farm almost two decades ago, Alex and Betsy capitalized it an unusual way, selling shares to family and friends and working as employees of the corporation. Betsy has been farming full time since 1983; Alex, since 1990.

Part of the land is sandy loam bottomland, subject to occasional flooding; part is upland with a sandy loam over a well-drained clay subsoil. They gradually improved the farm with a 10 x 50 foot greenhouse, a small multi-purpose shed they use for washing, drying and packing, and four unheated high tunnel cold frames — mini-greenhouses that shelter young or delicate crops.

Their only labor other than themselves consists of a few part-time seasonal workers. They prefer to hire labor rather than use interns — though workers often come to learn — because it forces them to take a more realistic look at labor costs.

Alex and Betsy continue to refine their choices to meet their goals. For them, making a living doing work they enjoy and finding a scale that allows them to do most of it themselves are key aspects of sustainability. Over the years, the crop mix and enterprises at the farm have changed in response to their markets, their rotations, the profitability of specific crops and their personal preferences, but the basic goals have remained.

#### Focal Point of Operation –Streamlining for success

Peregrine Farm is an evolving operation, with Alex and Betsy continually examining the success of each operation and its place within the whole system. They stand out among small farmers for their clear-headedness, their planning process and their grasp of how to attain profitability in both markets and production.



Carolyn Booth

*“Each year has been the best year we’ve ever had,” says Alex Hitt, who aims for \$20,000 per acre split between vegetables and flowers.*

At first, the Hitts raised thornless blackberries for pick-your-own, but discovered they could make a better profit picking berries themselves and selling wholesale to local stores and restaurants. They replaced the thornless varieties with thorny ones in 1991 for an earlier harvest and sweeter taste.

Now the berries are gone, except for a small planting of blueberries, replaced by less labor-intensive, high-value flowers and vegetables. As they began to concentrate on farmers markets and specialty grocery stores, Alex became a vegetable specialist and Betsy became a flower specialist widely known for her expertise. They developed a reputation for high-quality lettuce, specialty peppers and heirloom tomatoes. Value-added products such as bread and preserves increased sales and profits at the

farmers market. Dried flower wreaths and fresh-cut bouquets sold well at both stores and the market.

To build the soil and minimize off-farm inputs, the Hitts developed a farm plan for their many crops that emphasizes long rotations. They typically start with a cool-season crop, followed by a summer cover crop such as soybeans and sudangrass, replaced by a fall season cash crop, then a winter cover. The rotation supports, and provides fertility for, many different vegetable, fruit and flower families, from leafy greens to leeks.

“We live and die by our rotation, Alex says. “We could sell many more heirloom tomatoes, but it would change the rotation and put things out of balance.”

To keep track of the intricacies of an operation that includes 57 kinds of flowers and 60-odd varieties of 20 kinds of vegetables in a 10-year rotation, they plan sequences in a spreadsheet program, where they can sort their data in many ways. For field plots, their system is less high-tech — rotation plans and crop histories are kept in a notebook and in weekly calendars.

Since 1997, they have erected four 16 x 48 foot unheated high tunnel cold frames and have plans to add two more. The pipe- and wood-framed tunnels, following the “Elliot Coleman model,” sit on the ground atop rails. Sliding the tunnels offers multiple production options including earlier production in the spring and extended harvest in the fall. For example, a vegetable tunnel might have tomatoes set out in March for a mid-June harvest, three weeks earlier than tomatoes on open ground, followed by a crop of melons.

“With a number of tunnels, we’ll be able to set up an effective rotation among the tunnels, although we’re still learning how to best use them,” Alex says. He is considering overwintering some crops, or abandoning the plastic covers and covering one with shade cloth to grow a crop of lettuce in the heat of late summer.

Recently, the Hitts ended most sales to grocery stores and concentrated on the more profitable and more enjoyable farmers market. Their value-added products have been streamlined to only a small number of bouquets for the market.

After adding the tunnels, they took a look at their production cycle, and realized that they could make the same amount in less time if they concentrated on the earlier crops and on making slight improvements to the main-season crops. Now they are not planting any fall, cool-season crops and shut down their market sales October 1.

“We can quit six weeks earlier,” Alex says. “In the fall, it’s difficult to grow a good quality flower, and the fall vegetable crops were undependable — sometimes a good crop, sometimes not. It is both a business and a quality of life decision.”

By shutting down production early in the fall, the Hitts reduced their labor costs and were able to better prepare for the following year, especially the fall-planted flowers and the important winter cover crops.

“We wanted to reduce the dependence on outside labor and raise the crops we like best,” Alex says. “We’re actually getting smaller. It’s not so much the crops that we like best, even though that is part of it, but the crops that we grow well and do the best for us on this farm, with our personal ways of growing them.”

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### Economics and Profitability

Alex and Betsy keep financial and market records in a budget program, where they can easily compare income from specific crops. They are now meeting their economic goals, expecting each acre to give them \$20,000, and each high tunnel to bring in \$1,000 per crop, with about \$30,000 in total expenses. Half the income comes from vegetables, half from flowers.

“Each year has been the best year we’ve ever had,” Alex says, “except for one year when we made about \$200 less than the year before.”

For four years, the Hitts carried an organic certification for their vegetable crops, but recently, they decided to let it lapse. This was partly because they no longer sell to the wholesale buyers who wanted certification, but also to eliminate headaches.

“We were a split farm, with our vegetables certified and our perennials uncertified, and our buffers weren’t large enough,” Alex says. “It was also a record-keeping hassle, and getting worse with the national program. Also, the materials list tends to encourage you to think in terms of specific materials as solutions to problems, rather than to think holistically.”

Over the years, they have gradually bought out their 17 original investors and now own the farm free and clear.

### Environmental Benefits

Alex and Betsy follow organic practices except for occasional herbicides in their perennials. Above all, the Hitts’ farming emphasizes long rotations and use of green manure crops.

For the first few years, they were able to get horse manure from a nearby farm, but when that source dried up, they began using

green manures in a long rotation system. Other than some mineral amendments and a few loads of prepared compost trucked in a few years ago to give a quick boost to new plots on areas of heavy upland soil, their fertility plan has relied on 10-year rotations. Such cycles include several green manure combinations: for summer, either soybeans and millet or cowpeas and sudangrass, and for winter, oats and clover or hairy vetch and rye. The cowpea/sudangrass and vetch/rye combinations are harder to turn in and slower to break down, so they save them for when they have a later crop with a longer window open for the cover crop. If time between market crops permits, they will use several cover crops in succession.

Their dedication to cover crops helps keep nutrients in the soil. The only off-farm soil amendments they now use are lime and occasional P and K applications — if warranted by soil tests. They also apply soybean meal for supplemental N if they feel that the cover crops will not give them enough.

### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

The Hitts, especially Alex, have reached dozens of other farmers through involvement with the sustainable agriculture community at the state and regional level. For years, Alex has served on the Southern Region Administrative Council for the SARE program and has worked with the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, their regional organic/sustainable farming membership organization. Alex teaches for the local community college’s Sustainable Farming Program.

They have always served on the board of the Carrboro Farmers Market, but recently, Alex joined the board of directors of Weaver Street Market, Carrboro’s cooperative grocery store and one of their few remaining wholesale outlets. “We’re realizing that Carrboro is our town and the market is our

life,” he says.

Even more locally, they have earned the respect of their neighbors. “Now they don’t think we’re crazy,” Alex says. “We’re still farming after 20 years, and few of them are.”

### Transition Advice

“If possible, start small,” Alex says. “Learn your land, where the wet spots and frost pockets are. Learn the market. Plan for expansion, particularly when you design your rotations. Learn to work with the time scale. In a sustainable system, the time scale is huge — many years. You need to have made decisions about your cover crops or rotation long before you actually plant a crop.”

### The Future

Alex and Betsy will continue to fine-tune their operation to build and maintain income, reduce labor, and increase quality of life.

Alex wants to test using compost tea to control diseases such as early blight on tomatoes and mildew and leaf spot on zinnias. They use worm castings in their transplant mix, so Alex is considering doing vermicomposting for that and for compost tea. They also are considering more no-till. Alex wants to find a small, narrow, no-till seed drill to give them more flexibility.

“We’re dependent on cover crops, and we need to make sure we get them in perfectly,” he says.

■ *Deborah Wechsler*

### For more information:

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