

AG & NATURAL RESOURCES

Endangered Breeds, Permaculture, and Interns: “Retirement” at Broad River Pastures

Elbert County has been experiencing a trend in Agriculture which has been evolving for quite some time and represents many facets of farming. I've seen operations that focus on everything from cattle to vegetables; swine to pecans; and hay production to wine. I call it “Retirement Farming”. It's a second career so to speak. It involves folks who have had successful professional careers, mostly in other areas of the state or country and have now chosen Elbert County for “retirement”. I put that word in quotes because it is nothing close to what we might consider a typical retirement. One definition for “retirement” is: the action or fact of leaving one's job and ceasing to work. Have no doubt that this population of Elbert County has come to work.

One of the best examples of this “retirement” concept I have seen are the owners of Broad River Pastures, Cathy and Jon Payne. These “retirees” moved to Elbert County from a suburban life in Atlanta. Cathy, an educator, moved to the Athens area in 1970, obtained three degrees from UGA and wanted to return to the region. Elbert County seemed a great fit. Having purchased their property in 2010, the River Road farm is now home.

The concept behind Broad River Pastures is to “inspire others, help preserve heritage livestock, develop interest in new young farmers, and become a model of self-sufficiency.” The goal is to become a homestead model that will provide for their family as well as teach others. Principles of permaculture, eco-agriculture, and biodiversity are incorporated into their program.

One aspect of preserving heritage livestock involves the American Guinea Hog breed. Cathy and Jon have one of two rare strains of this breed that were recently returned to the gene pool. Cathy is currently in the process of documenting this rare breed in a book she is writing: “Guinea Hogs Lost and Found: The Amazing Grace of Breed Conservation.” In 2004 only 50 known hogs remained, and less than half of these had breeding capabilities. Thanks to the efforts of dedicated people like Cathy and Jon, the breed is currently recovering and thriving.

Gulf Coast Sheep, a rare wool breed that has adapted to environmental pressures including hot, wet climates that are generally not well-suited for wool sheep, are part of their heritage breed program as well. The American rabbit which is the third rarest breed and currently on the “critically endangered” list of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy can also be found on the farm.



In addition to their heritage breeding program, Cathy and Jon have an educational internship program at Broad River Pastures. Housing is provided, and the goal is to teach the younger generation about sustainable farming. Anyone interested in participating in this program can send a letter of intent to Cathy at broadriverpastures@gmail.com.

The Payne's are dedicated to passing along their experiences to those of us that don't fall into the “younger generation” category, too. So, if you want to learn more about collecting rain to water livestock and the garden *or* the art and science of composting to enrich the soil *or* the concept of rotational grazing, put April 16, 2016 on your calendar. Cathy and Jon are hosting a field day at their farm. You can get more details on this event at <http://georgiaorganics.org/goevent/broad-river-pastures-spring-farm-tour-2/>. Pre-registration is required and April 23rd will serve as a rain date.

I continue to be enlightened and impressed with agriculture in this community. The diversity it creates and the contribution it makes in our lives gives great reason to be thankful. So, as we enter into spring, and another growing season, let's all thank a farmer. Specifically, let's thank Cathy and Jon!

- Patrick Marcellino, Elbert County ANR Agent

