



Posted on Mon, Jun. 16, 2008

Burley is just a memory now

Bourbon farmers turn their full attention to crops for Farmers Market

By Beverly Fortune

BFORTUNE@HERALD-LEADER.COM

Nine years ago, tobacco farmers Carla and David Garey began helping their son John raise vegetables to sell at Lexington Farmers Market to pay his way through the University of Kentucky.

In 2004, after 18 years of raising burley, the Gareys quit tobacco and turned their full attention to crops they could sell at Lexington Farmers Market. "It was too much to handle tobacco and other crops," John said. "I reckon we didn't see tobacco was going to last."

Their 60-acre farm has gone from one that raised 27 acres of tobacco and 450 acres worth of tobacco transplants, to one that raises 190 different varieties of vegetables, strawberries, blackberries, blueberries and flowers. A flock of 450 free-range chickens and heritage-breed turkeys produce eggs and are sold for meat. The Gareys sell retail at Lexington's Farmers Market on Saturday and Sunday and at three markets in the Louisville area.

The Gareys' farm is among several that will welcome visitors on Saturday on the Lexington Farmers Market first tour of farms. Visitors will see how food sold at the market is raised.

A range of farms and crops will be represented on the tour, from raising honeybees, flowers and apple orchards, to making goat cheese and wine. There will be fields of vegetables, strawberries, cattle, chickens and turkeys.

Several farms have received tobacco settlement money earmarked to help diversify agriculture in Kentucky.

"They're different types of farms reaching into the agriculture economy in a variety of ways to replace a reliance on tobacco," said Hank Galbraith, president of Friends of the Lexington Farmers Market.

In 2000, the General Assembly committed to put half of the state's tobacco settlement money into agricultural development programs, "Basically to try to help wean us off tobacco income," said Bill Clary, spokesman for the state Department of Agriculture. But in the last couple of legislative sessions, a small portion of that money has been directed to rural infrastructure projects like sewers.

Kentucky received \$117 million in tobacco money in fiscal year 2007. "Rural development funds get half of that," said Joel Neaveill, chief of staff of the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy.

Since 2001, Kentucky has invested \$262 million in county-and state-level programs designed to "increase net farm income and expand and create new sustainable farm-based enterprises," Neaveill said.

The Gareys received two county grants, \$2,500 each, to buy irrigation equipment for their fields, greenhouse equipment and chicken feeders. "We've gotten some money, not as much as other people, but every little bit helps," John said.

John, 26, owns Instinctive Design landscape company and farms evenings and weekends. His father David works at Nonessen in Paris. About 18 months ago, Carla left the bank where she worked for 17 years to farm full time.

Selling at two farmers markets last year netted the family \$62,000. In 2003, they earned \$50,000 from eight acres of tobacco, plus raising transplants. That was a third of the farm's peak tobacco production.

But without the government price support program for tobacco that ended in 2005, Carla Garey said the risks for tobacco are too great and the rewards too small.

"We would not be doing as well because we no longer have a support price on tobacco," she said.

Last year they sold their tobacco setter. "When I said maybe we shouldn't sell it, David said 'We're not going back to tobacco,'" Carla said.

Two state grants amounted to "a major boost for us," said Kevan Evans, owner of Evans Orchard and Cider Mill in Scott County, who stopped raising tobacco in 1999 and planted apple trees. With a \$120,000 matching grant, Evans transformed his tobacco barn into a sales room with a walk-in cooler and built a cider mill where he makes cider for five other farms.

A few years later with a \$32,000 grant, Evans built a certified kitchen. His daughter, Jenny, 31, runs the farm cafe where she make pies from apples and berries raised on the farm.

"We're fully diversified," said Evans, who raises vegetables, blueberries, peaches, plus apples, and has agri-tourism activities in the fall with pumpkins, mums and hay rides.

Tobacco money has transformed the agricultural landscape in Jackson County, said Beth Tillery, owner of 290-acre Home Pickin's Farm in McKee, whose farm will be open for the tour. "Tobacco was a large part of people's lives. The settlement money gave them hope for doing other things."

Several farmers used grants to upgrade their beef herds by "improving genetics," Tillery said. The result is calves with higher birth weights, that grow faster with bigger muscles.

"You can see these improved calves from the road, just driving by," Tillery said. "You say, 'Wow, look at the muscle of that calf.' Before, people had never been educated on how to improve their herds. Now the difference is just awesome."

Lexington Farmers Market Tour of Farms

What: Self-guided tour of 13 farms that sell at the market. Lunch will be served at several farms for additional fee.

When: 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., June 21.

Where: Farms are spread across Central Kentucky. A map will be included with each ticket.

Tickets: \$10 for adults, \$5 for children under age 12. Purchase online or at 7 a.m. the day of the tour at the Friends of the Farmers Market booth at Farmers Market on Vine Street.

Online: www.lexingtonfarmersmarket.com.

Call: (859) 608-2655.

Reach Beverly Fortune at (859) 231-3251 or 1-800-950-6397, Ext. 3251.

© 2008 Kentucky.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kentucky.com>